

ASSESSING THE PERSPECTIVE OF ORIENTALISTIC SCHOLARSHIP OF ISLAM

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Abstract

In this article, an effort has been made to find out the answers of the two basic and fundamental questions; first, is an Orientalist to be a Western scholar can justify his academic antagonism against Islam or to what extent he can perform his scholarship without prejudice? Secondly, as the Muslims around the globe, have their inner strong belief in Islamic teachings and hence, they show their reverence while dignifying the stature of their religious dogmas, in the same sequence, an Orientalist, being a Jew or a Christian could be declared as an impartial in his critical approach towards Islam?. It is very well known that Orientalism is an old phenomenon historically, noticeable with some marvelous contributions to Islamic studies and Arabic literature. However, to Muslim circles, Orientalism normally blemished with obvious or concealed antagonism. Prejudice, misconstruing the Islam and redundant comments regarding Qur'ān and Sunnah, occasionally reach the point of ludicrousness.

Key words: Orientalism, Islamic Sources, Methodology, Textual Corpus.

SKETCH OF ORIENTALISM

In ancient Arabic literature the term Orientalism is not found and it has not been used in its present meaning among Arabs. Basically, this term has been produced and fabricated by Western scholars and it refers to the science in which people acquire expertise in Eastern languages, literature and social rites and rituals. However, in Arabic "*Mustashriq*" is a western scholar who shows his grave interest in Eastern studies, literature, and societies. According to Zulfu Madina, the meaning of *Mustashriq* can be

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more confined to a western researcher who takes interest in the study of Islam, Islamic civilization, social activities and its languages⁽¹⁾.

Edward Said has declared Orientalism as an integral part of European culture and civilization that puts strong influence on imaginations, theories and approaches of its people in various forms. For this, we may find a broader definition of Orientalism. According to him, he says:

“I will be clear to the reader (and will become clearer still throughout the many pages that follow) that by Orientalism I mean several things, all of them, in my opinion, interdependent. The most readily accepted designation of Orientalism is an academic one, and indeed, and indeed the label still serves in a number of academic institutions. Anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient and this applies whether the person is an anthropologist, sociologist, historian, or philologist either in its specific or its general aspects, is an Orientalist, and what he or she does is Orientalism. Compared with *Oriental studies or area studies*, it is true that the term *Orientalism* is less preferred by specialists today, both because it is too vague and general because it connotes the high-handed executive attitude of nineteenth-century and early –twentieth- century European Orientalism. Nevertheless books are written and conferences held with ‘the Oreient’ as their main focus, with the Orientalist in his new or old guise as their main authority. The point is that even if it does not survive as it once did, Orientalism lives on academically through its doctrines and theses about the Orient and the Oriental”⁽²⁾.

Dr. Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd Ghorāb, an Arab Muslim scholar, has mentioned several definitions of Orientalism in his work “*Ru’yah Islamiyyah Lil Istishrāq*”, where he comprehensively deduces the conclusion out of all the discussion he made. He points out that westerner’s impartial research study of Eastern history, civilization, religions, languages, political and social system, resources and future benefits on the bases of ethnic superiority and to get political control over the eastern countries is called Orientalism³. Almost similar assertion has also been made by Edward Said that clears the role and objective of this movement:

To speak of Orientalism therefore is to speak mainly, although not exclusively, of a British and French cultural enterprise, a project whose dimensions take in such disparate realms as the imagination itself, the whole of India and the Levant, the Biblical texts and the Biblical lands, the spice trade, colonial armies and a long tradition of colonial administrators, a formidable scholarly corpus, innumerable Oriental "experts" and "hands", an Oriental professorate, a complex array of "Oriental" ideas (Oriental despotism, Oriental splendor, cruelty, sensuality), many Eastern sects, philosophies, and wisdoms domesticated for local European use the list can be extended more or less indefinitely⁽⁴⁾.

THE ORIGINS OF ORIENTALISM

At the origin of the game of opposing essentializing attitudes between the "West" and "Islam" there is an obvious phenomenon: the preliminary construction of a Self-Other polarity in mediaeval Christian Europe, due to the experience of a menacing, neighbouring "world of Islam." A similar, specular construction also characterized the opposite side, reinforced, since the era of the Crusades, by signs of a possible reverse in the power relationship between the two worlds, which was, up to that moment, favourable to Islam. We can admit that in this pre-modern stage Other-constructions are still defensive, not broadly instrumentalized and still tightly dependent on the protection of a Self defined by the past. But the dichotomization of the broader universe of experience, which led Christian Europe to conceive Islam as an anti-Christian apostasy⁽⁵⁾, was about to acquire a new meaning as Europe began to perceive itself as bound to a fate of progress, evidenced by its growing power in controlling nature, territories and, eventually, enemies⁽⁶⁾.

Edward said presented three different approaches about orientalism in view of academic discipline. His comments are very important in regard reality of orientalism.

“The three definitions as expounded by Said illustrate how Orientalism is a complex web of representations about the Orient. The first two definitions embody the textual creation of the Orient while the latter definition illustrates how Orientalism has been deployed to execute authority and domination over the Orient. The three are interrelated,

particularly since the domination entailed in the third definition is reliant upon and justified by the textual establishment of the Orient that emerges out of the academic and imaginative definitions of Orientalism.”⁽⁷⁾.

POWER BETWEEN THE OCCIDENT AND THE ORIENT:

The true contribution of Edward Said is that He pointed out the limits of orientalist workings. His approaches regarding orientalist exposure are up to the mark.

“An integral part of Orientalism, of course, is the relationship of power between the Occident and the Orient, in which the balance is weighted heavily in favour of the former. Such power is connected intimately with the construction of knowledge about the Orient. It occurs because the knowledge of ‘subject races’ or ‘Orientals’ makes their management easy and profitable; ‘knowledge gives power, more power requires more knowledge, and so on in an increasingly profitable dialectic of information and control’. The knowledge of the Orient created by and embodied within the discourse of Orientalism serves to construct an image of the Orient and the Orientals as subservient and subject to domination by the Occident. Knowledge of the Orient, because generated out of strength, says Said, in a sense *creates* the Orient, the Oriental and his world”⁽⁸⁾.

THE LATEST PHASE OF ORIENTALISM

The latest phase of Orientalism corresponds with the displacement of France and Britain on the world stage by the United States. Despite the shifting of the centre of power and the consequent change in Orientalizing strategies, the *discourse* of Orientalism, in its three general modes, remains secure. In this phase, the Arab Muslim has come to occupy a central place within American popular images as well as in the social sciences. Said argues that this was to a large extent made possible by the ‘transference of a popular anti-Semitic animus from a Jewish to an Arab target ... since the figure was essentially the same’. The dominance of the social sciences after the Second World War meant that the mantle of Orientalism was passed to the social sciences”⁽⁹⁾.

To maintain a view of Orientalism as a discourse is to give it a focus that opens up gaps in its coverage. Placing the beginnings of Orientalism, as late as Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt rather than in the

eighteenth-century upsurge of interest in the Indo-European languages better suits Said's demonstration of European power in the discourse⁽¹⁰⁾.

Furthermore, Edward Said presented true patron of orientalist intellectual status.

“For these and many other reasons, *Orientalism* immediately stimulated and continues to generate responses from several quarters and with varying degrees of hostility. The vigour and range of these criticisms reveal how profound the influence of the book has been. But the nature of the criticisms has invariably tended to confirm Said's claim about the constricted nature of intellectual work in the academy: its ‘theological’ and exclusionary specialization, its disciplinary confinement, its tendency towards caution and its retreat from the human realities of its subject matter”⁽¹¹⁾.

EVALUATION OF ORIENTALISTS' CONTRIBUTION:

As far as the modern Orientalistic endeavors are concerned, these have to a great extent been able to liberate themselves from the manacles of medieval chauvinism, unjustified deformation and open hostility, the overall unsympathetic attitude of Orientalists to Islam; yet its fundamental sources have not changed absolutely. The rude attacks on Islam and its fundamental sources have given a way to subtle techniques of research and interpretation, and the open criticism of Islamic history and its culture has now been clothed into modern apparel of objective study and paraphernalia of academic disciplines. It is not uncommon that in many of the writings of great Orientalists of modern times one finds reappearance of the hoary story of Judo-Christian origin of Islam and portrait of Islam as a religion of immoderation, narrow-mindedness, intolerance and aggression. With few exceptions, the modern breed of professional Orientalists, in imitation to their predecessors, directly or indirectly continue to present deformed picture of Islam to their students and do not hesitate in extending their distortion and misrepresentation to many of their so-called masterly writings on Islam and Muslim history. Some of them present a fossilized and mummified version of Islam which belongs to the bygone time and has no relevance to the present age. While some others study Islamic history and literature with prejudiced mind and

preconceived notions to present frightening picture of Islam which is more likely to cause revulsion than understanding in the Minds of the readers. Still some other have been commissioned for or taken themselves the job, as it were, of a sanitary inspector to report about the drains and cesspools of an otherwise lush green garden with its beautiful green lawns, flower beds and magnificent landscapes. Since they are not concerned with the beauties of the garden, they present a stinking picture of the garden of Islamic history from the mission of the Prophet to the engineered downfall of the Caliphate and the modern wave of global Islamic resurgence. They select some isolated evidences, magnify them out of proportion, piece them together like a jigsaw puzzle and present an astonishingly different picture of Islam which has hardly any relevance to the Islam believed and practiced by millions of Muslims in the world.¹² For the same reason, in the Muslims' view, Orientalism is an 'intellectual weapon' of Christianity and the West for weakening Islam by way of blurring Islamic doctrines and disconnecting Muslims from Islam⁽¹³⁾.

Ever since the colonial period the Western Universities have monopolized the teaching of Oriental Studies and have been attracting Muslim students to study Islam and receive higher education under the guidance of Western Islamic scholars. Consciously or unconsciously, most of these Western educated Muslim scholars have developed a habit of looking at their religion through the eyes of their Western teachers and of communicating the same distorted image of Islam to Muslim students in their own countries as well. It is not surprising when one finds a Western trained Muslim scholar like Syed Hossein Naṣr complaining that the prejudice and misunderstanding of Western Orientalists is 'wrecking intellectual havoc among many modernised Muslims'. It is therefore alleged not without justification that since what is taught and published by the Orientalists is not free from prejudice and hostility, they bear great moral responsibility for indoctrinating their many immature and defenceless Muslim students. In addition to this they also have a large share in the disillusionment with Islam, scepticism, moral and spiritual apathy and the overpowering urge of modernism found in the ruling elite of Muslim countries today⁽¹⁴⁾.

INCEPTION OF ORIENTALISTIC ORGANS:

It is interesting to note that in 1901, one of the prestigious organs of the colonial press, the fortnightly “Questions Diplomatique at Colonials of France” conducted a comprehensive investigation of the prospects of Islam in the 20th century. All the leading Orientalists of the period were invited to deliberate on the issue. The French Orientalist Carra de Vaux, who has contributed many articles in the Encyclopaedia of Islam 1st edition, passionately advocated for ‘*segmenting the Muslim world*’ and weakened Islam by encouraging nationalism and heresies so that it becomes incapable of great awakening. He wrote:

I believe that we should endeavour to split the Muslim world, to break its moral unity, using to this effect the ethnic and political divisions..... Let us therefore accentuate these differences, in order to increase on the one hand sentiments of nationalism and to decrease on the other that of religious consciousness of the *ummah* among the various Muslim races. Let us take advantage of political conditions...in one word let us disintegrate Islam, and make use, moreover, of Muslim heresies and the *ṣufī* orders⁽¹⁵⁾.

Although this was suggested eight decades ago, the echo of such sermons can still be found in the treatment of Islam and the Muslim world by many Orientalists, pseudo-Orientalists, policy makers and administrators. It will not be out of interest to note that according to one estimate, between 1800 and 1950 some 60,000 books on Islam have been published from the West⁽¹⁶⁾.

PROBLEMS OF ORIENTALISM:

The deficiencies of the Western scholars while delving into the textual study of the Qur’ān and their views derived from two major quandary aspects:

- Sources
- Methodology

Most of the scholars of Islam and its textual history depend on manuscript sources, largely Arabic chronicles, even though they have not subjected them to sophisticated criticism⁽¹⁷⁾. Although they disdain

chronicle paraphrases like those of the pioneering scholar William Muir, many recent scholars have in fact added only vigorous skepticism. Because manuscript sources are relatively plentiful and deceptively straightforward, they have been relied upon as the evidential core; because they are largely literary and historical, they have been criticized by philological and chronological methods. Consequently linguistic, not theoretical, expertise has continued to be the *sine qua-non* for writing Islamic history, even though the work of scholars without language skills, often in fields other than history, has contained potential contributions⁽¹⁸⁾. Dependence on such sources has recently narrowed the range of topics studied and has discouraged the use of other disciplines' methods, which are also often relevant to non-political or chronological subjects. In short, the limitations of the sources and of their handling by scholars have produced a paucity of even the simplest use of the data and insights of other disciplines. Often when they are used, they are used poorly--without an understanding of the disciplines from which they come and with usual characteristic of Orientalism.

Passing remarks of non-philological, non-historical, indeed non-Islamic scholars have or could have cut away many of the myths which have encrusted the field. Two examples, connected with Muhammad and with the Qur'an, the former from Slater's recent sociological work and the later from Frye's slightly older work on the theory of literary criticism, will help illustrate this point⁽¹⁹⁾.

MAJOR OBJECTS OF CRITICISM:

Most scholarship on the origins of Islam, except for a few anthropologically oriented works, has centered on Muhammad and Qur'ān. Of course, most primary sources focus on Muhammad's experiences, and such a focus reflects the individualistic assumptions of modern European and American culture⁽²⁰⁾. But Slater looks at prophecy from the point of view of the group that "extrudes" the prophet and then must make a place for him and incorporate his outre experiences. In so doing, he suggests new lines of questions about the origins of Islam. He also unintentionally begins to explain many issues unresolved by the Muhammad-centered approach, such as the complexity of Meccan reaction and the social significance of stories about prophets contemporary

with Muhammad⁽²¹⁾.

It is ironic that Islamic studies seem to be returning to their beginning a kind of "Orientalism", before they have run the gamut of reaction to it. "Islamic history" as a discipline is relatively new, a product of many individuals' disenchantment with what they felt to be the undisciplined sloppiness of orientalists, most of whom were felt to have begun with language study and never to have mastered the fields in which they later dabbled. I hope that interdisciplinary Islamic studies will not be the only topics of orientalism at large, but rather elaborating on subjects like the Dār al-Islām or related culture which takes advantage of what each of the specializations has to offer without sacrificing the dream of the seamless web of knowledge⁽²²⁾.

APPROACHES TO ORIENTALISM:

Approaches can be determined through several means but the most appropriate way is to define first, through this organ we may be in a best position to explore aims and objectives. However, Orientalism can be defined simply with just a meticulous study of its old historical status. This historical study will assist us to identify its boundaries, limits and characteristics without any obscurity.

THE CRUSADES ANTAGONISM:

It is without doubt that, with the various crusade's increased antagonism against Islam, it at the same time played an important role in the mis-understanding of Islam; more so, in the Western World. As Maulana Abul Ḥasan 'Alī Nadwī has rightly pointed out:

The Crusades in their wake, the clergy and the missionaries and those European authors, who neither had a bent for research nor possessed religious values, were mainly responsible for keeping Europe estranged from and antagonistic to Islam i.e. the Qur'ān and its Prophet. They have presented both the Prophet and his Message in shockingly hideous colors as a result of which astonishingly false and baseless talks have gained currency about them⁽²³⁾.

Although antagonism against Islam spread on one hand, Islam too made inroads for deeper in the hearts of Eastern and Western Europe. When

the Crusades returned from the Muslim Lands, they brought with them the happy memories of the advanced culture of Islam. This was especially so in respect of art, architecture, the traditional garb, and other aspects of life generally. This influenced the minds of Europeans so much that even the architectural edifices of churches took on an Islamic character. Arabesque and decorative motifs were developed closely resembling those of Muslims. However, misinformation continued to be disseminated. This is evident from what Maulana Abul Ḥasan ‘Alī Nadwī says, "*Even to-day many a zealous western author refers to and repeats these accusations, though with novel techniques and from new angles*"⁽²⁴⁾.

Books written by non-Muslims or references to Islam made by them are often derogatory to the personality of the Prophet (PBUH), the Revelation, the Holy Qur’ān as well as the *aḥādīth*. They searched out offensive remarks made by the *munaḥfiqūn* [hypocrites], the pagan Quraishite chiefs, the Jews and Christians of the Prophet's (S.A.W.) time and magnified them. Some of these plots against Islam are mentioned in the Qur’ān itself which they picked out and used out of context. It is also true to state that hypocrites had fabricated false charges against the Prophet (S.A.W.) and the *ummah* in its formative period with the object of bringing the spread of Islam to an end. A *Masjid Dirār*, 'the mosque of mischief was built especially for this purpose where false propaganda was dished out against the early Muslims and Islam.

In the later period of Islamic history, the European writers saw Islam and Muslims from a different perspective: that of the behavioral pattern of the Turks, who were by then virtual rulers of certain parts of Europe. Abul Ḥasan ‘Alī Nadwī has observed, "*whenever there was occasion for Europe to ponder over Islam, the Ottomans were before her as its [Islam's accredited and sole representatives on the Continent.*"⁽²⁵⁾. The misbehavior of the Ottomans was seen as the erroneous practices of Islam. If they [the Ottomans] involved themselves in the aberrations of their time, then, Islam too, was tainted.

Various innovations as well as other un-Islamic ideas were regarded as a reflection of the tenets of Islam. Their perceptions were formed primarily from the manner in which the Ottomans reflected what purported

to be Islamic behaviour. Consequently, their appraisal of Islam was incorrect, if not, downright false⁽²⁶⁾.

However to Muslims, this appraisal is downright false and suspicious descriptions and slander about Islam. According to Daniel, suspicion and misunderstanding which had been shaped in that period, basically, still remains in place for the majority of Europeans. He notes:

The earliest Christian reactions to Islam were much the same as they have been until quite recently. The tradition has been continuous and it is still alive. Naturally, there has been variety within the wider unity of tradition, and the European (and American) West has long had its own characteristic view, which was formed in the two centuries or so after 1100, and which has been modified only slowly since⁽²⁷⁾.

Keeping in view the perspective of Orientalism, it can easily be derived that their approach has been once again derailed in the field of religious research.

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2. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, (London: Penguin, 1977), p 2; however, there is an immense criticism on Said’s definition of Orientalism, as Fred Halliday comments that the term ‘*Orientalism*’ itself is contestable: we should be cautious about any critique which identifies such a widespread and pervasive single error at the core of a range of literature. There is what, in philosophic terms, can be termed the search for the expressive totality, or, in more mundane language, the root of all evil. Over the last twenty years we have had a long list of these-economism, humanism, eclecticism, historicism, empiricism and so on. More recently we have Eurocentrism, ethnocentrism, foundationism. ‘*Orientalism*’-while it can be used in a precise way, as I have tried to do above-may be open to such a promiscuous application. Orientalism in Said’s usage acquires an almost metaphysical power to pervade very different epochs and genres of expression; in so doing it loses analytic or explanatory purchase. See for detail Fred Halliday, ‘*Orientalism*’ and *Its Critics*, British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, Vol. 20, No. 2, 1993, p.158.
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