Edward Said's Orientalism

A Critique of Western Cultural Hegemony

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Dr. Jai Singh

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AKHAND PUBLISHING HOUSE
DELHI (INDIA)

Published by



AKHAND PUBLISHING HOUSE

Publisher, Distributor, Exporter having an Online Bookstore

Head Office : L-9A, Ist Floor, Street No. 42,
Sadatpur Extension, Delhi-110094 (INDIA)
Phone No.: 9968628081, 9555149955 & 9013387535
E-mail : akhandpublishing@yahoo.com,
akhandpublishinghouse@gmail.com
Website : www.akhandbooks.com

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© Author
Ist Edition 2019
ISBN 978-93-88998-64-2

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Printed in India

Published by Jhapsu Yadav for Akhand Publishing House. Cover Designed and Laser Typesetting at VM Graphic and Printed at VM offset Printers, Delhi.

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FOREWORD

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) is, no doubt, a landmark in Postcolonial studies. His postcolonial perspective originates from his experience as a Palestinian intellectual who interrogates the Western hegemony of the rest. One can easily discover the influence of Aime Cesaire, Frantz Fanon and many other thinkers whose discourses have shaped Said's thinking on colonial and postcolonial perspectives. Though extensive studies have been taken up on Said's concepts of orientalism and imperialism with a view to providing significant insights, a sensitive reader of the discursive critical practices deployed in their interpretations may not find them unintelligible as Jean Khalfa and Robert J. C. Young provide new insights to a reading of *The Wretched of the Earth* and *Black Skin, white Masks* from the psychiatric and political writings of Frantz Fanon in their new study *Frantz Fanon: Alienation and Freedom* (2018) translated into English by Steven Corcoran. Apparently in *Culture and Imperialism* as a postcolonial theorist Said sees as cribbed and cabined by complex ways of Imperialism as Raymond Williams scintillating study of culture in his *Culture and Society* base on materialist culture from a Marxist point of view.

This is to point out that Jai Singh's reading of the complex ways of postcolonial social, economic, cultural

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and ethnographic hegemony enunciated by Said is shaped to a certain extent by Foucault's and Gramsci's ideas on power, knowledge and hegemony. He refers to several epistemological systems enunciated by thinkers such as Theodore Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Guattari to develop his argument. Said's initial and everlasting preoccupation is Palestinian problem. He never compromised with the notions of freedom put forward by the Western nations' Pacts and Agreements. In his works, he expended this idea to study methodologically East and West relationships.

The unique quality of Said's discourse on orientalism is that it impinged the consciousness of an army of postcolonial theorists. Jai Singh's critique is rich in elucidating the structural complexities embedded in Said's *Orientalism*. Though Jai Singh's focus is mainly on Said's *Orientalism* as it is an iconic text, his discussion brings in the whole matrix of Said's intellectual thought. The discussion in this book engenders further thought as it criss-crosses structuralist, poststructuralist, postcolonial and Deconstructive discourses. The magnitude of Said's work has a centrifugal force. Jai Singh's book will be useful for both students and scholars.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I express my deep sense of gratitude to my MPhil supervisor Dr. Rajbir Parashar, Professor, Department of English, R.K.S.D. College, Kaithal (Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra) for introducing me to the field of contemporary theory that helped me work on this book. I am also thankful to him for critically evaluating the initial drafts as well as final drafts of the manuscript and providing valuable inputs.

I am highly indebted to Professor T. Nageswara Rao, Department of Indian and World Literatures, The English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad who has always inspired me to think critically, write and publish. I am also indebted to him for critically evaluating the final draft, suggesting improvements and writing "Foreword" to this book.

I am thankful to Professor B.S. Dahiya, Former Vice Chancellor, Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra, for all inspiration and appreciation that I got from him.

I express my thanks to Dr. Subhash, Professor, Department of Hindi, Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra, for all the help and inspiration I got from him.

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I also thank Ranjana Bhatnagar, Director, American Information Resource Center, New Delhi; Ann Kumaraswamy, Librarian, Indo-American Centre for International Studies, Hyderabad, Mr. Suresh Naidu, Librarian, R.K.S.D. College, Kaithal (Evening Session), Mrs. Radha, Librarian and Mrs. Nirmal, Assistant Librarian, C.I.S.K.M.V (Fatehpur) Pundri, Kaithal in finding books on this topic.

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1

INTRODUCTION

Edward W. Said (1935-2003) is a well-known name in the field of critical thinking in the contemporary age. His name is now synonymous with postcolonial theory. At the time of his death, he was a world famous writer and thinker. He was born in a prosperous Palestinian family in Talbiyah, a section of West Jerusalem, Palestine. His father, Waide "Bill" Ibrahim (American name: William A. Said) was an Episcopalian, while his mother, Hilda Musa was a Baptist. He got his primary education in a school of colonial legacy in Egypt. Despite being an intelligent student, he could not adjust himself in the environment of colonial education. This colonial education had immense impact on Said's study of Orientalism as he himself recorded:

> Much of the personal investment in this study derives from my awareness of being an "Oriental" as a child growing up in two British colonies. All my education in those colonies (Palestine and Egypt) and in the United States, has been Western, and yet that deep early awareness has persisted. (Said, 1978:

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In 1948 when Israel came into existence, he was just 12 years old. Like many other families, they also became homeless. Rest of his childhood was spent in Lebanon and Egypt. Later on, he went to the U.S.A. for further studies. This up-rootedness proved a turning point in the formation of his mindset and has had a long-lasting impact on his ideas. He could never forget these experiences as he himself accepted, "I would describe my life as a series of departures and returns. However, the departure is always anxious. The return always uncertain Precarious" (Said, 2004: 456). These experiences compelled Said to see the modern Western culture as a creator of exiles. It shaped his philosophical understanding of history and culture. He attained a new outlook that refuses to accept the prevalent readings of texts, cultures and identities. Sankaran Krishna in his "In one Innings" highlights this peculiar quality of Said in the following words:

> Said contrapuntally rereads certain emblematic and canonical texts of Western literature, music and theater to demonstrate the implicit spatialization that allowed for their emergence and for their consolidation as canonical. He takes the idea of worlding as an act of assembling a whole world behind each text, a global set of possibilities that underlie them, and shows how differently these canonical texts can be read and appreciated when one places them in a genealogy that is attendant to questions of imperialism, displacement, conquest, exploitation, and the differential accumulation of wealth, status, and privilege "elsewhere" – an elsewhere that never seems to merit

> explicit elaboration in a self-referential metropolitan world. (Krishna, 2002: 174)

Said advocated the need of a contrapuntal perspective – a method of thinking which interprets experiences that are discrepant. He abandoned the unified approach that goes by the master narrative. On the other hand he adopts a technique where marginal and apparently contradictory narratives battle. The contrapuntal reading is influenced by a hermeneutics of suspicion. He shattered the notion of universal values, which claims Western culture as a source of "sweetness and light." To him this concept is the root cause of the cultural hegemony of the West. Therefore he could not speak in "favour of an abstract universalism, because it's usually the universalism of whoever happens to be most powerful" (Said, 2000: 390). He questions the logic of universalism in the Western discourse and demonstrates how to reread the Western literary texts in historical context. He confronted the problem of cultural politics with an unprecedented boldness and intellectual freshness. However, this critical insight does not come to him all of a sudden. Rather up to the age of thirty, he was confined to the academic pursuits. However, the Arab-Israel war of 1967 shook him. He saw the terrible conditions of Arab refugees very closely. He described this experience as, "Israel's war of Independence was a catastrophe for Palestine: two-thirds were driven out of their homes and country, many were killed, all their property was seized, and to all intents and purposes they ceased to exist as a people" (Said, 2000: 544). Said picked up the difficult task of bringing truth and light to the Palestinian cause in the United States. His role became even more prominent when the images and

narratives of the Palestinian struggle were misrepresented as hateful stereotypes by the Euro-American media. According to Aijaz Ahmad, commitment to the Palestinian cause has a formative influence on Said's intellectual framework. He says:

> Edward Said is not only a cultural critic, he is also a Palestinian. Much that is splendid in his work is connected with the fact that he has tried to do honour to that origin; and he has done so against all odds, to the full extent of his capacity, by stepping outside the boundaries of his academic discipline and original intellectual formation, under no compulsion of profession or fame, in no pursuit of personal gain – infect, at frightening risk to himself. (Ahmad, 1992: 160)

As stated by Aijaz Ahmad, it is true that the Palestinian experience is of great emotional and intellectual importance to Said. Though Said advocated the Palestinian cause, he never abandoned a vision of peace and negotiation between Israelis and Palestinians. He was the first to recognize the irony that the Palestinians had been rendered into exile by another people of "exile". He believed that a mutual recognition of their respective histories and narratives could lead to a sustainable solution to this burning problem of Western Asia. The impact of this experience is quite conspicuous in Said's case. It evoked in his mind a sense of history that works through subtle forms of power and politics.

Said is known throughout the world as a committed intellectual. He endeavoured to transform existing relations and concepts in the field of cultural studies. His path-breaking contribution to cultural studies brought major changes in the understanding

of humanities and the social sciences. His intellectual presence continued to transcend the limited concerns of American academy. As a humanist and staunch-liberal, he was an activist who worked courageously for justice. He fearlessly spoke truth to power. He maintained his engagement with people, culture and politics all over the world. His intellectual life was basically a bold exhibition of human spirit working tirelessly against the most oppressive system of his times. It was his inner urge to decode the cultural subtleties of underground politics of dominant classes and rulers. It became his central concern and main impetus in his life-long intellectual journey. Even attacks of vicious and personal kind could not unsettle his ideological pursuits.

Said was sure that power relations govern human activities. He provided an insight into the twists and turns between theoretical interests and social commitment. He exposed the entanglement and state policy of cultural production. Throughout his life, he fought against the power of state as Paul Bove states "Said was nothing if not committed to the power of resistance and optimism that human struggles for freedom can be achieved" (Bove, 2005: 404). The works of Said revolve around his struggle against oppression. The most significant thing is that his views are applicable to as diverse contexts as the plurality and diversity of the world offers.

Though Albert Memmi, Frantz Fanon and Aime Cesaire opened the field of postcolonial discourse, Edward Said revolutionized it. V.I. Lenin's *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* (1916) is one of the earliest works in the field of postcolonial

study. However, Fanon was the first major cultural theorist who pointed out the cultural motives and the psychological effects of colonialism. Later on Mannoni's work on the *Psychology of Colonialism* (1956) became a central text in this area. Edward Said's *Orientalsim* (1978) and Bill Ashcroft et al's *The Empire Writes Back (1989)* established the postcolonial theory as an institutional enterprise. This theory is an attempt to uncover the colonial ideology in European texts about the "other" which generally means the native, and the non-European. It highlights colonialism's strategies of marginalizing the natives. Beneath its political and economic designs, imperialism is a cultural project also. Commenting upon this aspect of imperialism, Said says, "…the practice, the theory, and the attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory; "colonialism," which is almost always a consequence of imperialism, is the implanting of settlements on distant territory" (Said, 1993: 9). This perspective on imperialism and its power structures challenges the established notion of colonial relations. Colonial powers use various means ranging from political control to cultural dependency. Michael Doyle in this regard says, "Empire is a relationship, formal or informal, in which one state controls the effective political sovereignty of another political society. It can be achieved by force, by political collaboration, by Economic, social or cultural dependence" (Doyle, 1986: 45). Imperialism is not merely an advancement or extension of geo-political influence. Rather it is a subtle process to perpetuate the rule by creating its own epistemology. It has been effected by the colonial powers "through politics, educational systems

patterned to create the Western hegemony…." (Walia, 2003: 24) moreover, before the advent of postcolonial theory, "there was a conspiracy of silence around the colonial truth, whatever that might be" (Bhabha, 1990: 203). This silence gave birth to colonial otherness. Edward Said broke this silence and showed how literature and culture are related to the economic and political conditions of the age. There is a definite correlation between the socio-economic conditions and the aesthetic works produced. The ideology, class and economic substructure directly influence literature and art. Literature is closely related to society. It reflects as well as shapes the complex ways in which ideas and material conditions interact. Literature is a product of and intervention in particular moments of history. Since change in the social, economic and cultural conditions is inevitable and is bound to affect the relations of power and the way in which they are inscribed in texts. In this way, truth is institutionally created. Language itself is socially constructed and is always a potent means of cultural politics in a given historical context. Therefore, art and literature seek to implement the ideology of the ruling class, which can be described as the "system of beliefs and assumptions – unconscious, unexamined, invisible which represents the imaginary relationships of individuals to their real conditions of existence" (Althusser, 1971: 162). Human consciousness, which consists of the beliefs, values, and ways of thinking and feeling through which human beings perceive, and with the help of which they explain, what they take to be reality, is shaped by the ideology. This ideology in itself is the product of the position and interests of individuals located in particular classes.

In any historical era, the dominant ideology embodies, and serves to legitimize and perpetuate its own interests. It manifests itself in different ways in the discourse of all institutions of an era. It operates covertly to form and position the users of language as the subject in a discourse. It subjects and subordinates them to the ideological interests of the ruling class. Thus, the traditions and values, which literary texts recommend as standard, are always the traditions and values that the ruling class seeks to impose upon society for its own benefit. This imposition is effected by creating imaginary relationships between the ruler and the ruled.

The ideological methods of establishing hegemony in a particular system are always multi-layered. Edward Said's *Orientalism* is primarily a reconsideration of the widely accepted forms of East-West relationship. Through his readings of literature, he has tried to expose the cultural constructions of this unseen side of unequal relationship. It may be pertinent to observe that Said has actually unsettled the notion of "East" and "West" for once and all. His writings reveal how the West continues to maintain its dominant position not only through acts of coercion but also through the cultural agency of language, literature and arts. Hegemony is a practice of the material and ideological instruments that the dominant classes employ to maintain their power and supremacy over others.

Hegemony is comparatively a recent term. However, in Marxist criticism and historical studies on culture and politics, it has been used quite