

Indian Society: Sociological Perspectives
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Week-02
Lecture-06

Orientalism and the Politics of Knowledge Production II

Welcome back to the class. We are continuing our discussion on this book, on this very important book, Orientalism written by Edward Said. So, in the previous class, we had a very brief introduction to this important scholar Edward Said. We had a very brief sketch of his biography, the kind of very active academic and political life that he led. And also, we started reading this introductory chapter of this monumental book. So, I hope you remember the points that we discussed.

He is understanding or in a very novel in a very creative way, he argues that the whole body of knowledge that is created about the East by the Westerners need to be seen as a discourse. It is seen as a discourse. And when he invokes Foucauldian idea of discourse, it talks about a kind of a particular kind of narrations with particular kind of consistency and these discourses being very heavily intertwined with power relations. So, that very creative and novel reading of this orientalist knowledge that was produced so far was quite provoking and it was quite refreshing as well.

And that is the reason why this book Orientalism created quite lot of controversy during that particular time and even now it continues to be one of the most influential works in a host of fields including literary theory, literature, sociology, history, anthropology, culture studies and so on. So, in the previous classes we saw that how he expresses his in-depth at-ness, his theoretical in-depth at-ness to two very important figures, Michel Foucault and Antonio Gramsci. And so let us continue with the same chapter introduction and also again a very important or even more provocative argument is that the very purpose of understanding or depicting an oriental like this was basically for the Occidental people or basically for the Westerners to create another which would actually help them to create a kind of a more comfortable image of the self for themselves. So, that is the point that we discussed I think towards the last part of the class last week. It is also tries to show that the European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self.

This is a very, very provocative argument. Now let us get back to the second section of his introductory chapter which brings up many of these arguments with more clarity. So,

he is trying to explain what is that Orient that he is trying to analyze or how does he understand the kind of a, how does he characterize the kind of body that is already created by the scholars from the West. So, he talks about how I have begun with this assumption that Orient is not an inert fact of nature and by now it must be clear that he does not agree or he does not buy the argument that the Westerners simply came and they explained a kind of an inert fact that was lying for them to explain and then elaborate. It is not merely there just as the Occident itself is not just there either.

We must take seriously because Vico's great observation that men make their own history that what they can know is what they have made and extended it to geography as both geographical and cultural entities to say nothing of historical entities such as locales, regions, geographical sectors as Orient and Occident are man-made. So, therefore as much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, an imagery, a vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in for the West. The two geographical entities they support and to an extent reflect each other. So, it is not an inert idea or it is not a kind of a simple geographic region that was simply there for the Westerners to come and then explore about it, to explain about it, to explicate about it but they are a part of a much larger construct. Having said that one must also go on to state a number of reasonable qualifications.

In the first place it would be wrong to conclude that the Orient was essentially an idea or a creation with no corresponding reality. This is the first qualification that he puts into place. So, he argues that he does not mean to say that the Occident, the Orientalists or the Western scholars simply created a huge amount of body out of nothing. Or in other words it was not a creation of fiction, it has no corresponding relation with the fact or idea, with the fact or reality or anything. It was not a kind of a work of fiction or it was not essentially an idea without having any correspondence with other thing or creation with no corresponding reality.

When Disraeli said in his novel, *Tancred* that the East was a career, he meant that to be interested in East was something bright young Westerners would find to be an all-consuming passion. He would not be interpreted; he should not be interpreted as saying that the East was only a career for the Westerners. So, he is elaborating that particular point. Now, but the phenomenon of Orientalism as I study it here deals principally not with the correspondence between Orientalism and Orient, but with the internal consistency of Orientalism and its ideas about the Orient, the East as a career, despite or beyond any correspondence or lack thereof with a real Orient. Now, this is a very important argument.

So, he is making this argument very clear that he is not trying to explain what the real

Orient is. That is beyond his obligation, that is beyond his point of interest. He is not trying to understand what exactly is the Orient and how and whether the Westerners really understood that reality completely, whether did they depict it completely, did they represent this reality completely. These are not his concerns, rather his concerns are different. So, the phenomenon of Orientalism as I study here, deals principally not with the correspondence between Orientalism and the Orient, but with the internal consistency of Orientalism and its ideas about the Orient, despite or beyond any correspondence or lack thereof with the real Orient.

So, he is only interested in, in a sense even while the scope of the book is so broad, conceptually, theoretically it is very clear. He is only trying to understand how Orientalism as a consistent body of knowledge was evolved and how it had a very deep internal consistency. And this internal consistency may or may not have any correspondence with the real Orient. And again, because this real Orient is something, is a very problematic term, which even, even, even, you know, Said will find it very, very problematic because what is the real Orient? How do we depict the real Orient is a very problematic question. So, he is not looking into that, neither is he trying to endeavor to, to, to, to explain what the real Orient is.

Rather he is interested only in trying to understand how there has been a very, very specific form of discourse emerged with the astonishing amount of internal consistency and how this internal consistency, you know, created an image about a very, very concrete form of Oriental societies in this part of this geography. So, but with the internal consistency of Orientalism and ideas about the Orient, the East as a career, despite or beyond any correspondence or lack thereof with a real Orient. Now, a second qualification is that ideas, cultures and histories cannot seriously be understood or studied without their force or more precisely their configurations of power also being studied. And this is a, again a very, very important point that he is making it very clear because the moment you say that you are trying to depict, you are trying to understand something as a discourse, then it is assumed that you are also trying to understand the kind of a power relations involved in the construction of that kind of a discourse. And now, you know, it is taken for granted.

Now, anybody who reads about discourses or discourse analysis understands this particular argument. But when say during 80s, early 80s when Said was publishing this book or when Foucault's work was becoming popular, this was not a very, very, very commonsensical argument or this was not a very popular argument. So, the second qualification is that ideas, cultures and historic and histories cannot be, cannot seriously be understood or studied without their force or more precisely their configurations of power also being studied. So, how certain cultures, certain ideas and histories emerge,

sustained and perished or proliferated? These questions cannot be understood without understanding the kind of power relations involved in it. To be, to believe that orient was created or as I call it, orientalized and to believe that such things happen simply as a necessity of the imagination is to be disingenuous.

The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of complex hegemony and is quite accurately indicated in the title of K.M. Panikkar's classic *Asia and West Dominance*. So, this is again a very important point that he brings to the fore. He is bringing the concrete historical processes.

He is bringing the concrete historical process, especially that of the colonialism of the European countries over the non-European, especially the Eastern and African societies in this case, specifically that of the Middle East. And then tries to explain that this particular domination, this geopolitical domination has to be placed in the center stage and only then, only then the kind of an artistic expression, so creative expressions will begin to make sense. You cannot disassociate or you cannot separate this geographical domination or political domination from the kind of artistic creations made by the people who dominated over another culture. So, to believe that the orient was created or as I call it Orientalized and to believe that such things happen simply as a necessity of imagination, only purely as a work of your imagination, as a work of your creativity, he calls it to be disingenuous. The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of complex hegemony and is quite accurately, so he is talking about the Western domination.

So, this is a very, very central point and again as I, let me repeat that, this was a very unusual way of studying literature or studying art forms during that particular time. This brings us to a third qualification, one ought never to assume that the structures of orientalism is nothing more than a structure of lies or a myth or of myths which were the truth about them to be told would simply blow away. So, this again he argues that it is not a very, it would be very naive to believe that these are creations of figments of your imagination, and these will simply be invalidated if somebody were to prove that these are based on unfounded claims and unfounded substances. He says it will not, simply because these creations have a material condition, these creations have an ideological background, these conditions have the specific geopolitical context, histories which resulted in the domination of the East by the Westerners. And given that history of domination, given that history of hegemony, this artistic or scholarly creations will not simply disappear.

One ought never to assume that the structures of orientalism is nothing more than a structure of lies or myths which were the truth about them to be told would simply blow

away. This is again, I myself believe that orientalism is more particularly valuable as a sign of European Atlantic power over the Orient than it is a veridic discourse about the Orient, which is what in its academic or scholarly form it claimed to be. So, this is a very, very central point that he talks about. He is bringing that geopolitical equation, the history of geopolitical dominance to the fore. Nevertheless, what we must respect and try to grasp is the sheer knitted together strength of orientalist discourse.

It is very close ties to the enabling socio-economic and political institutions and its redoubtable durability. So, how this discourse which were products of artistic or scholarly imagination and creative work, how they were so resolute in terms of their knitted togetherness of this orientalist discourse. It is very close ties to the enabling socio-economic and political institutions and its redoubtable durability because they have been powerful, they have been durable, they have been extremely vibrant all these decades. After all, any system of ideas that can remain unchanged as teachable wisdom in academies, books, congresses, universities, foreign service institutes from the period of Ernest Brennan in the late 1840s until the present in the United States must be something more formidable than a mere collection of lies. Orientalism therefore is not an airy European fantasy about the Orient, but a created body of theory and practice in which for many generations there has been a considerable material investment.

So, he is bringing this particular point why this discourse has been so persistent, it has been so consistently powerful over these years because it has a, there has been a considerable material investment in the creation as well as sustenance of this particular orientalist discourse. Continued investment made with orientalism as a system of knowledge about the Orient and accepted grid for filtering through the Orient into the Western consciousness just as the same investment multiplied, indeed made truly productive, the statements of proliferating out from orientalism into general culture. So, he says that this material investment played a very systematic role in presenting and allowing very specific forms or specific images of orientalism into the consciousness of the West. Just as that the same investment multiplied, indeed made truly productive, the statements proliferating out of the orientalism into the general culture. So, he understands it as a, as a well-orchestrated system of producing and sustaining, producing and perpetuating a particular image about the Orient into the lives of the Western lives and into that of the general culture.

Gramsci has made useful analytical distinction between civil and political society in which the former is made up of voluntary or at least rational and non-coercive affiliations like schools, families, unions, the latter of state institutions, the army, the police and the central bureaucracy whose role in the polity is direct domination. So, here he is invoking Antonio Gramsci, a very important Marxist scholar who was tortured and killed during

the Mussolini's regime in Italy and he died while he was in the prison and the kind of notes that he wrote during his prison stay was found out later and it was published much later and that is very, very, very famous known as the Prison Notebook published by, written by Gramsci. So, here Gramsci's contribution is something very seminal in terms of expanding or even revising quite a lot of Marxian understandings about civil society, about hegemony, about how power works or how the revolution did not happen the way Marx prophesied or the centrality of culture in this whole larger enterprise of revolution. So, Gramsci is a very, very important scholar, very, very important scholar in understanding or even using Marxian framework to the more recent transformations and social changes. So, Gramsci makes a usual distinction between the civil and political society.

So, civil society is again a very common term but in political theory civil society is a very, very fascinating subject. Quite a lot of theories about civil society, for example, there are quite a lot of liberal positions which believe in the possibilities and potentials of civil society. So, civil society is generally seen as a space between your, between the state and your personal life which is composed of voluntary organizations which are characterized by a true spirit of public sphere where you enter in rational discourses with each other. But Marxists are usually kind of dismissive of civil society because they would say that this civil society is nothing, but a product of the economic relations and they believe that in a capitalist society, civil society cannot be of anything significance because it is shaped and nurtured and sustained by the interest of the capitalist class. So, I am not going into that debate, but it is a very, very important theoretical construct.

So, Gramsci talks about these two spheres, one is the civil society sphere, second one is the political society sphere. The political society sphere is the one which is directly related with the political institutions like army, judiciary, then bureaucracy, the state which uses political power and specifically the mechanisms of domination for ensuring its governance, made up of voluntary or at least rational and non-coercive affiliations like schools, families, unions and the latter. So, civil society is composed of things what we consider typically as apolitical or non-political, including families, unions, schools, and other kind of voluntary organizations. Culture of course is to be found operating within civil society where the influence of ideas of institutions and of other persons work not through domination but by what Gramsci called as consent. So, when you talk about culture usually you do not associate culture with that of the state or the state apparatus but you think that the culture is in the domain of the civil society where the transmission, cultural transformations happen basically through the interplay of these actors in the civil society sphere.

In any society, not totalitarian, then certain cultural forms predominant over others, just

as certain ideas are more influential than others. The forms of this cultural leadership is what Gramsci has identified as hegemony, an indispensable concept for any understanding of cultural life in the industrial West. It is a hegemony or rather the result of a cultural hegemony at work that gives orientalism its durability and strength I have been speaking about so far. So, he is arguing that in every society which is not a totalitarian society even though in any non-totalitarian societies, there are specific cultural forms would appear very normal, they would appear very natural and they would have the ability to nurture itself, you know, predominate itself over other descending forms and they would be the most official, they would be most accepted and seen as natural by the majority of the people. And this is actually certain cultural forms predominant over others, just as certain ideas are more influential than others.

The form of this cultural leadership is what Gramsci has identified as hegemony, an indispensable concept. It is the hegemony or rather the result of a cultural hegemony at work that gives orientalism the durability and strength that I have been speaking about so far. So, he argues that there is a kind of a particular cultural hegemony at work and this hegemony, it might appear quite normal to even to the people that it subjects itself to, even to the people who are subject to authority or power, this particular cultural construct might appear very natural, very given, very ordinary and very usual thing. And that is the ability because it has the ability to make you consent. It has the ability to make you consented to this kind of a cultural construction and it does not really invoke physical use or violence at all the time.

That is the significance that Gramsci is talking about. Orientalism is never far from what Danes, he has called as the idea of Europe, a collective notion of identifying as Europeans as against those non-Europeans as indeed it can be argued that the major component of European culture is precisely what made that culture hegemonic both in and outside Europe. Now, what is this idea? The idea of European identity as superior one in comparison with all non-European peoples and cultures. There is an addition of the hegemony of European ideas about the Orient themselves reiterating European superiority over the Oriental backwardness usually overriding any possibility that a more independent or more skeptical thinker might have had different views on that matter. So, this he argues that there is a very important hegemonic understanding about the superiority of the West over the rest of the people.

And this particular superiority has assumed the character of a hegemony, and it is unquestioned in the Western world, and it is also kind of unquestioned or it is made unquestionable in other part of the society through a host of other points. So, the idea of European identity as superior one in comparison with all non-European peoples and cultures. There is in addition to hegemony of European ideas about the Orient themselves

reiterating European superiority over the Oriental backwardness. Usually overriding the possibility that a more independent or a more skeptical thinker might have had a different view on that matter. And when you talk about hegemony, it gives a kind of a complete blanket control over your imaginations and your ideas.

In a quite constant way, Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible positional superiority which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationship with the Orient without ever losing him the relevant relative upper hand. So, this hegemony according to Gramsci always keeps the Westerner over a relatively upper position and it is a flexible position superiority which always ensures that the Westerner is always on the top of that. And why should it have been otherwise, especially during the period of extraordinary European ascendancy from the late Renaissance to the present. The scientist, the scholar, the missionary, the trader, all the soldier was in or thought about the Orient because he could be there or could think about it with very little resistance on the Orient's part. So, you realize that over the last several centuries a colonialist in the garb of a scientist, in the garb of an administrative, administrator, a bureaucrat or a teacher or a writer simply could be there facing least amount of resistance either physically or ideologically or culturally from the native population.

Because that is how colonialism kind of pervaded the whole system, that is how this resolute system of ideas kind of spread across the place and that is what he says that Orientalism worked through the, Orientalism worked as a hegemonic influence. Under the general heading of knowledge of the Orient and within the umbrella of the Western hegemony over the Orient during the period from the end of the 18th century, there emerged a complex Orient suitable for the study in the academy, for display in the museum, for reconstruction in the colonial office, for theoretical illustrations in anthropological, biological, linguistic, racial and historical thesis about mankind and the universe for instance of economic and sociological theories of development, revolution, cultural, personality, national or religious character. Additionally, the imaginative examinations of things Oriental was based more or less exclusively upon a sovereign Western consciousness out of whose unchallenged centrality an Oriental would emerge first according to general ideas about who or what was an Oriental, then according to detail logic governed not simply by the empirical reality but by a battery of desires, repressions, investments and productions. Very, very elaborate descriptions. So, this is the central argument in this second part of this introduction and where he again re-emphasizes the argument of looking at Orientalism as a discourse and brings in Foucault and then Gramscian idea of hegemony.

So, let us stop here and I will continue with the last section, the third section in the coming class. Thank you.