

Indian Society: Sociological Perspectives
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Orientalism and the Politics of Knowledge Production III

Welcome back to the class. We are continuing with Edward Said's book Orientalism and we are looking at its introductory chapter. So, this is the part 3 of this chapter and let us begin. I mentioned three aspects of my contemporary reality. I must explain and briefly discuss them now, so that it can be seen how I was led to a particular course of research and writing. So, you know that this book was quite unconventional in various respects in terms of its approach, in terms of very overt political position it adopted and of course in terms of the rigorous theoretical and empirical analysis that he presents in his work.

But there are very three important factors that make Edward Said adopt this particular way of writing the book and his ideological position and these are worth going in detail. So, the first one is the distinction between pure and political knowledge, and this is a very very fundamental and interesting argument. It is very easy to argue that knowledge about Shakespeare or Wordsworth is not political whereas knowledge about contemporary China or the Soviet Union is. Now, what he is talking about in this particular section, the distinction between pure and political knowledge, he is taking on a long-held belief that certain things can be studied objectively.

So, this is a claim of science basically and this is how positivism emerged. Positivism especially in the field of science did not really factor in the researcher as an individual. It argued that it has devised various methodological and theoretical promises that would allow an observer to observe things in isolation and then analyze them, make experiments about it, validate them, and then come up with a kind of a reality. So here the personal or individualistic or cultural features or cultural characteristics of the observer or the scientist is immaterial. So, that is why it was celebrated the positivist turn in science as well as in social sciences was celebrated as the most objective way of understanding certain things.

It was assumed that the researcher would not be influenced or impacted by cultural, ideological, or political factors. And that is why science assumed the kind of significance that it has because it is supposed to be telling about the truth, it is supposed to be telling about the reality uninfluenced by host of other factors. And this particular positionality of

positivism heavily influenced social sciences especially sociology as well. And those who have studied sociology you know that earlier sociology was imagined as a positive science. Sociology was imagined as a science that is modeled exactly after a natural science.

That is why Auguste Comte even called sociology as social physics. So, that is how it was actually understood. Now Edward Said finds issues with that argument and he questions the conventional argument that certain topics can be more political while certain other topics are apolitical. For example, he gives the example of a discussion on Soviet Union's economy or Soviet Union's military can be easily deemed as politically loaded. Whereas certain other topics like say works, work of literature by Shakespeare or Wordsworth can be, is usually seen as apolitical because there is nothing political about it.

There is nothing, no overt political connotations are present in those work. And he is questioning, he is challenging this binary. He is challenging this popular understanding that certain fields of enquiry are inherently political while certain other fields of enquiry are inherently non-political or apolitical. So, nevertheless, the determining impingement on most knowledge produced in the contemporary West, here I speak mainly about the United States is that it be non-political that is scholarly, academic, impartial, above partisan, or small-minded doctrinal belief. So, this is again, he is saying that there is an institutional requirement or there is a general requirement or demand to produce things that are not so called or kind of corrupted by political, interest and political factors.

So, that the knowledge that is produced be non-political that is scholarly. So, non-political is equated with scholarly immediately and anything political is seen as non-scholarly, impartial, above partisan, or small-minded doctrinal belief. One can have no quarrel with such an ambition theory perhaps, but in practice the reality is much more problematic. So, he is very systematically tearing down these assumptions that certain fields of knowledge are free from political interference or political and certain forms of knowledge productions are completely apolitical. No one has ever devised a method for detaching the scholar from the circumstances of life, from the fact of his involvement, conscious or unconscious, with a class, a set of belief, a social position or from the mere activity of being a member of a society.

So, this is a very, very fundamental point. The assumption that earlier people had that the observer of the science, scientist is completely detached, he can, or she can detach himself or herself from the object of her study, this he says is impossible. This is impossible because no one has ever devised a method for detaching the scholar from the circumstances of life, from the fact of his involvement, conscious or unconscious, with a

class, a set of belief, a social position or from the mere activity of being a member of a society. This continues to bear on what he does professionally even though naturally his research and its fruits do attempt to reach a level of relative freedom from the inhibitions and the restrictions of brute everyday reality. There is such a thing as knowledge that is less rather than more partial than the individual who produce it.

Yet this knowledge is not therefore automatically non-political. So, he is saying that even while there could be gradations or variations in terms of how far a person's own life circumstances impact upon his or her knowledge that is produced, he says it is only a matter of degree. Whether discussions of literature or of classical philology are fraught with or have unmediated political significance is very large question that I have tried to treat in some detail elsewhere. What I am interested in doing now is suggesting how the general liberal consensus that true knowledge is fundamentally non-political and conversely that overtly political knowledge is not true knowledge obscures the highly, if obscurely organized political circumstances obtaining when knowledge is produced. This is again a very, very central thesis of Edward Said.

So, he is questioning this fundamental assumption that overly politicized knowledge or political knowledge is not true knowledge. So, what I am interested in doing now is suggesting how the general liberal consensus that true knowledge is fundamentally non-political and conversely that overtly political knowledge is not true knowledge obscures the highly, if not obscurely organized political circumstances obtaining when knowledge is produced. So, he is focusing on the political circumstances that facilitates the kind of production of knowledge in many contexts. No one is helped in understanding this today when the adjective political is used as a label to discredit any work for daring to violate the protocol of pretended supra-political objectivity. We may say first that civil society organizes a gradation of political importance in the various fields of knowledge.

To some extent the political importance given a field comes from the possibility of its direct translation into economic terms. But to a greater extent political importance comes from the closeness of a field to ascertainable sources of power in the political society. So, he elaborates that point in a very, very detailed manner. My point here is that Russia as a general subject matter has political priority over nicer distinctions such as economics and literary history because political society in Gramsci's sense reaches into such realms of civil society as the academy and saturates them with significance of direct concerns to it. So, he talks about how the political society determines or influences to a large extent and defines a contour of its hegemony so that certain themes appear as naturally political while certain other themes appear as non-political.

I do not want to press all this any further on general theoretical grounds. It seems to me

that the value and credibility of my case can be demonstrated by being much more specific in the way. For example, Noam Chomsky has studied the instrumental connection between the Vietnam War and the notion of objective scholarship as it was applied to cover the state sponsored military research. Now, because Britain, France and recently United States are imperial powers, their political societies impart to their civil societies a sense of urgency, a direct political infusion as it were where and whenever matters pertaining to their imperial interest abroad are concerned. I doubt that it is controversial for example to say that an Englishman in India or Egypt in the later 19th century took an interest in those countries that was never far from their status in his mind as British colonies.

To say this may seem quite different from saying that all academic knowledge about India and Egypt is somehow tinged and impressed with, violated by the gross political fact and yet this is what I am saying in this study. A very, very provocative statement that he is talking about. So, he is arguing that the bare political facts of huge consequences, of huge significance like a political domination or imperial domination of a country over other. This gross political fact can have multiple consequences. Multiple consequences starting from very observable acute forms of physical repression to much more unnoticeable sophisticated justifications and intellectual dominance over the native population.

And many times this intellectual domination very nuanced, very subtle, very indirect would not be even seen as a product of this particular economic or this particular political and imperial domination over the native population. So, let us again see what he is saying. I doubt that it is controversial for example to say that an Englishman in India or Egypt in the later 19th century took an interest in those countries that was never far from their status in his mind as a British colonies. It appears quite natural for a British to find interest in any of its colonies whether it is in Africa or in Egypt or in India because that was their colony, and everybody would agree that it is not a controversial statement. This is to say this may seem quite different from saying that all academic knowledge about India and Egypt is somehow tinged and impressed with, violated by this gross political fact and yet that is what I am saying in this study.

So, he is making that very provocative statement that every Englishman, whoever took interest in the study of these things were a direct beneficiary or they took interest precisely because of the fact that these countries were their colonies and this is a, and you know these two ways of presenting statements, these two ways of conveying arguments have different ideas or different connotations but he is standing by this thing and this is what I am saying in this study of Orientalism. For if it is true that no production of knowledge in the human science can ever ignore or disclaim its other s

involvement as a human subject in his own circumstances then it must also be true that for a European or an American studying the Orient there can be no disclaiming the man's circumstances of his actuality that he comes up against the Orient as a European or American first, isn't it? As an individual second and to be an European or an American in such a situation is by no means an inert fact. It meant and means being aware however dimly that one belongs to power with definite interest in the Orient and more important that one belongs to part of the earth with a definite history of involvement in the Orient almost since the time of Homer. So, this he is bringing again into the center the unforgettable fact, the unforgettable fact for a European or an American that because of the very identity of being born as a European or American which he can do nothing about, which he can do nothing about irrespective of whether he wants or he does not want, irrespective of the volition that particular positionality, that particular fact has imbued with quite a lot of cultural significance and the stories of domination over the other and that he traces back to the time of Homer. Put this way, these political actualities are still too, undefined and general to be really interesting.

Anyone would agree to them without necessarily agreeing also that they mattered very much. For instance, Flaubert as he wrote *Salambo* or H.A.R. Gibbs as he wrote *Modern Trends in Islam*.

The trouble is that there is too great a distance between the big dominating fact as I have described it and the details of everyday life that govern the minute disciplines of a novel or a scholarly text as each is being written. Therefore, Orientalism is not a mere political subject matter or field that is reflected passively by culture, scholarship or institution, nor is it a large and diffuse collection of texts about the Orient, nor it is a representative and expressive forms of nefarious western imperialist plot to hold down the Orient world. It is rather a distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical and philological texts. It is an elaboration not only of a basic geographical distinction, the world is made up of two unequal halves, Orient and Occident, but also a whole series of interests which by such a means as scholarly discovery, philological reconstruction, psychological analysis, landscape and sociological description. It not only creates but also maintains, it is rather than expresses a certain will or intention to understand.

In some case to control, manipulate, even to incorporate what is a manifestly different or alternative and novel world. It is above all a discourse that is by no means in direct correspondence with relationship with the political power in the row, but rather is produced and exist in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power, shaped to a degree by the exchange with power political, as with a colonial or imperial establishment, power intellectual, as with the reigning science like comparative

linguistics or anatomy or any of the modern policy science, power cultural, as with orthodoxies and canons of taste, text, values, power moral, as with ideas about what we do and what they cannot do or understand as we do. Indeed, my real argument is that Orientalism is and does not simply represent a considerable dimension of modern political intellectual culture and as such has less to do with Orient than it does with other world. You know this is a fascinating paragraph, a lengthy, very lengthy sentence, but full of very provocative, mind boggling ideas and arguments. So, he kind of summarizes the vast breadth of of oriental interventions in the colonies, especially in their during the construction of orientalist knowledge and talks about how their involvement as scholars, how their involvement as administrators and colonial masters as bureaucrats really created a discourse.

So, beyond the, you cannot understand orientalist construction about the eastern societies without the help of a discourse. So, let us again go through it again. See, it is rather a distribution of a geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economical, sociological, historical, and political texts. So, this is a fundamental argument as we just saw that no scholar from Europe or America can escape this factual point that he is a product of this colonial power relation that places always him in relational superiority with the Orient. And that is whether he or she wants it or not, is interested in or not, it is already always given.

So, this it is a distribution of a geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical and philological texts. It is an elaboration not only of a basic geographical distinction that there is two halves, one is oriental, the other one is oxidant into unequal halves, oriental, oxidant, but also a whole set of interest which by such means as scholarly discovery. So, it produces a kind of specific forms of interest and this specific form of interest which he also talks about a certain will or intention to understand is again a Foucauldian understanding. He talks about how you have a will to understand and that will understand has to do with a kind of a specific power relations in which it operates. You cannot have a will to understand somebody who is already always very powerful than you, that simply does not work.

So, into but also whole set of interest which by means as scholarly discovery, philological reconstruction, psychological analysis, landscape and sociological description, it is not only creates, but also maintains, it is rather than expresses a certain will or intention to understand. In some cases, to control, manipulate, even to incorporate what is manifestly different or alternative and novel ways. It is also above all a discourse that is by no means in direct corresponding relationship with a political power in the row, but rather is produced and exists in uneven exchange with the various kinds of power. So, this relative superiority, this colonial enterprise is not only, it not only appears in its

most direct raw form of power which speaks about direct domination and control and violence, but also a whole set of indirect forms of power, but various kinds of power shaped to a degree by the exchange with political power as with colonial or imperial establishment into other forms of power which is power political with a colonial or imperial establishment which is again more naked, which is more direct, easy to observe and power intellectual as with reigning science like comparative linguistics or anatomy or with the modern policy science. So, power intellectuals again your theories, your complicated convoluted theories which again has a very scientific garb, scientific outlook, but always works with the kind of an ulterior motive and power cultural as with orthodoxies and canons of taste, text values.

Okay, the cultural power which tells you about how your etiquettes are different, what are the kind of a table manners, what are the kind of other cultural orthodoxies that are considered to be high class compared to that of the low class. So, if you look into that cultural presentations, cultural distinctions, these distinctions are very, very clear. What are the features of high culture? What are the features of this low culture and how this distinction is always made? How certain text and values and canons of taste and music and entertainments are kind of divided into these two extremes, one belonging to the aristocratic upper class sentiments and sensibilities, the other to the popular lower class, working class sensibilities. And power moral as with the ideas about what we do and what they cannot do or understand as we do. So, again a huge moral understanding that we are being morally superior or morality in terms of violence, in terms of sexuality, in terms of a host of other things are already always superior to others.

Indeed, my real argument is that Orientalism and does not simply represent a considerable dimension of modern political intellectual culture and as such has less to do with the Orient than it does with our world. So, as we mentioned, he again and again reiterates that Orientalism was indeed a project for the Occident peoples. It was not for the Orientals, it was not for talking about them, but it served an ulterior purpose of making it clear, for making it very clear to ourselves what we really are. Yes, so these paragraphs he gives quite a lot of explanations, illustrations rather. Perhaps it is true that most attempts to rub cultures nose in the mud of politics have been crudely iconoclastic.

Perhaps also the social interpretations of literature in my own field has simply not kept up with the enormous technical advances in the detailed textual analysis. But there is no getting away from the fact that literate studies in general and American Marxist theorists in particular have avoided the effort of seriously bridging the gap between the super structural and base level in textual historical scholarship. On another occasion, I have gone so far as to say that the literary cultural establishment as a whole has declared the serious study of imperialism and cultures of off limits. Very, very important. It is a

damning critic or passing a verdict against the existing scholarly or academic trends.

So, but there is no getting away from the fact that literary studies in general and American Marxist theories in particular have avoided the effort of seriously bridging the gap between the super structural and the base levels in textual historical scholarship. So, they have, he would argue that they have kind of kept away, consciously kept away the implication of the serious study of imperialism and culture of limit. Here it seems to me there is simple two-part answer to the given at least so far as the study of imperialism and culture is concerned. In the first place, nearly every 19th century writer and the same is true enough for the writers in earlier period was extraordinarily well aware of the fact of empire. This is a subject not very well studied but it will not take a modern Victorian specialist alone admit that the liberal cultural heroes like John Stuart Mill, Arnold, Carles, Newman, Macaulay, Ruskin, George Eliot and even Dickens had definite views on race and imperialism, which are quite easily to be found at work in their writings.

So, even a specialist must deal with the knowledge that Mill, for example, made it clear in all liberty and representative government that his views they could not be applied to India. He was an Indian office functionary for a good deal of his life after all because the Indians were civilizationally if not racially inferior. So, he is bringing in a host of scholars, many of whom were the champions of European enlightenment argument and then talks about their very racial under beliefs or very very racial, you know, mindsets that many times they even did not bother to cover up. The same kind of paradox is to be found in Marx as I try to show in the book. In the second place, to believe that politics in the form of imperialism bears upon the production of literature, scholarship and social theory and history writing is by no means equivalent to saying that the culture is therefore a demeaned or denigrated thing, quite the contrary.

My whole point is to say that we can better understand the persistence and the durability of saturating hegemonic systems like culture, when we realize that their internal constraints upon writers and thinkers were productive, not unilaterally inhibiting. So, this is again a very Foucauldian idea, how the power can be productive. Usually, power is understood as something limiting in certain things, it is seen as restrictive, but Foucault comes up with this brilliant argument that the power can be productive, power can produce certain kinds of things. So, my whole point is to say that we can better understand the persistence and durability of saturating hegemonic systems like culture, when we realize that their internal constraints upon writers and thinkers were productive, not unilaterally inhibiting. So, how the culture, the kind of a durability of saturating hegemonic systems like culture and imperialism, how they were productive among these people.

This is the idea that Gramsci certainly and Foucault and Raymond Williams in their very different ways have been trying to illustrate. Even one of the two pages by Williams on the use of the empire in the long revolution tells us more about 19th century cultural richness than many volumes of hermetic textual analysis. So, therefore I study orientalism as a dynamic exchange between individual authors and the large political concerns shaped by three great empires, British, French, and American in whose intellectual and imaginary territory the writing was produced. What interests me most as a scholar is not the gross political verity, but the detail as indeed what interest us in someone like Lane or Flaubert or Renan is not the indisputable truth that Occidental are superior to Orientals. But the profoundly worked over and modulated evidence of this detail worked within the very white space opened up by that truth.

Again illustrations. The kind of political questions raised by Orientalism then are as follows. What other sorts of intellectual aesthetics, scholarly and cultural energies went into making of an imperialist tradition like the Orientalist one? How did philology, lexicography, history, biology, political and economic theory, novel writing and lyric poetry comes into the service of Orientalism broadly Imperialist views of the world? What changes, modulations, refinements, even revolutions take place within Orientalism? What is the meaning of originality, of continuity, of individuality in this context? How does Orientalism transmit or reproduce itself from one epoch to another? In fine, how can we treat the cultural historical phenomenon of Orientalism as a kind of willed human work, not of mere unconditioned rationation in all its historical complexity. Detail and worth without at the same time losing sight of the alliance between cultural work, political tendencies, the state, and the specific realities of domination. So, these are the, he is bringing in a set of questions, a series of questions that were hardly asked in that particular time. Looking into how this whole enterprise of colonial imperialism directly and indirectly influenced all these intellectual enterprises starting from political analysis to writers to painters to philosophers to philologists to sociologists to everybody who had some interest in this particular group.

My argument is that each humanistic investigation must formulate the nature of that connection in the specific context of the study, the subject matter and its historical circumstances. So, that is the very forcefully argued point about the impossibility of the distinction between pure and political knowledge. So, two points, one is this division is impossible. Second, there is nothing wrong with this division that true knowledge need not be apolitical and apolitical knowledge need not be true knowledge and one has to, one cannot escape from the kind of a larger historical realities and situatedness in which one engages with the world and you must be truthful, one must be truthful and open enough to unpack that direct and indirect influences that made a scholar write in particular manner. And once you do that, you will see quite a lot of patterns, you will see

quite a lot of consistencies, you will see quite a lot of very specific ways that have influenced their intellectual and creative mind.

And he believes that as a literature, you know, as a professor of literature, as an intellectual, it is his duty to unpack those influences. So, I think that is one of the last section, second and third points of this essay, we will discuss in the coming class. Thank you.