

Indian Society: Sociological Perspectives
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Orientalism and Its Critics

Welcome to the class. In the previous classes, we have engaged with Edward Said's Orientalism, a path-breaking work which had contributed to the emergence of certain important lines of scholarship in social sciences and humanities in the post 1980s. Of course, like any ambitious and influential scholarly works, Orientalism has also received a lot of admirers as well as critics. And since you are familiar with the work of Said and his arguments, what I have in my mind today is to introduce some of the important criticisms received by Orientalism. You can find a lot of works that have critically engaged with Orientalism and in my opinion, some of the important criticism and very interesting criticisms too come from the Marxist school of thought. Among them, two scholars demand our serious attention, Sadiq Jalal Al Azm and Aijaz Ahmad.

Sadiq Jalal Al Azm is a Syrian Marxist philosopher and Aijaz Ahmad is one of the foremost Marxist thinkers who passed away recently. So, in this class, I will be briefly revisiting the core arguments and larger significance of Said's Orientalism and the criticisms the work has received from the Marxist scholars. So, what is Orientalism? Said has argued that one can find Orientalism at three levels and you must be remembering this as you have engaged with the introduction of Orientalism in great detail. So, he identifies Orientalism at three levels.

First, as an academic discipline or as a knowledge base created through anyone who teaches, write about or research about the Orient. And second, as in Said's own terms, Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the Orient and the Occident. And I am sure I do not need to explain this again as we have discussed this in detail in the previous classes. And again, the third definition of Orientalism, according to Said, is the practical action done over the Orient politically, ideologically, militarily and scientifically. And you must be remembering Said arguing in the introduction that this kind of Orientalism is a western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the East.

I don't think I need to explain these arguments again and again as you have already gone through these points in detail in the previous classes. So, what are we focusing here today

is the larger significance of Said's work or what he has been trying to achieve through these arguments. See, Said explicated how a particular body of knowledge that is Orientalism contributed to the spread of European colonial rule and how its influence has extended to every other domain connected to imperialism, colonial history, race, and political identity. So, in one sense, he is trying to conceptualize the relationship between western imperialism and Orientalism. Then what is this relation? Vivek Chibber in his essay, *The Dual Legacy of Orientalism* points out that there are two arguments in Said's work about the relationship between western imperialism and Orientalism.

And the first argument is coming from a quite familiar line of reasoning. It describes Orientalism as a rationalization for colonial rule. And you know this, it means that Orientalism as an ideology has emerged as a rationalization or justification for colonial rule. And Said traces the origin of this form of Orientalism to the 18th century. It emerged with what is popularly known as the Second British Empire that continued till the Cold War era when United States has displaced the British as the global hegemonic power.

And during these centuries between 18th century to late 1940s, Orientalism flourished as a body of knowledge that not only described and systematized how the East was understood, but it was also used to justify the colonial domination in the East. So how did they do it? Conceptualizing the Orient and the colonial subject as uncivilized, irrational, and non-modern, a quintessential other of the civilized, rational and modern West, it argued, the discourse of Orientalism argued that colonialism is here to civilize the Orient. The colonialism is here with a burden, the burden of white man. So doing so, the discourse of Orientalism absolved imperialism of their, you know, all the violences they have unleashed in the colonial countries, because it is their civilizing mission. It is the white man's burden to civilize the uncivilized, rational and non-modern Orient.

So this argument is quite familiar to us, and you have discussed this point in detail in the previous classes as well. It is a materialist explanation for how and why the ideology of Orientalism came to occupy such a prominent place in European culture in the modern period. This explanation maintains that like any system of domination that creates an ideological discourse to justify and naturalize its superior position, colonialism also created its own legitimizing discourse, that is the discourse of Orientalism. So, in this argument, it is colonialism that created Orientalism, or in other words, Orientalist discourse comes after colonialism as its justification or as its rationalization. Chibber would say that the causal arrow of this argument runs from Imperial domination to that of the discourse it created, that is Orientalism.

So in one sense, he is saying that colonialism came first, and Orientalism followed as its

justification or rationalization. But again, this is more of a conventional argument and Said was not the first scholar to make such an argument. So, there were others like Said Huzain Alatas, Franz Fanon, Amis Cesar, Anwar Abdul Malik etc. who pointed out that much of the scholarship produced by the colonial ruling class has justified the rule over their eastern people and eastern nations. Said himself wrote about this in an article titled Orientalism Reconsidered which appeared in the journal Cultural Critique in 1985.

So if this point is something that is already discussed and well established, then what kept Said's book apart? And obviously, it was not just the argument he made, but as Chibber rightly points out, it was the erudition and the literary quality of Said's work. However, Edward Said has also makes another argument in this book that actually reverses the causal arrow that we have just mentioned. It takes the argument to a new direction and in this version, Orientalism was not understood as a consequence of colonialism, something that came after colonialism as its justification, but rather one of its causes. So, in this version of the argument, it is not colonialism that produced Orientalism. Rather, Orientalism has produced the cultural conditions that are conducive for colonial rule to happen in the Oriental nations or in the third world countries.

And to quote Said, to say simply that Orientalism was a rationalization for colonial rule is to ignore the extent to which colonial rule was justified in advance by Orientalism rather than after the fact. It means that Orientalism was around far before the modern era and its characterization of East in a particular way as uncivilized, non-modern, irrational, etc. has produced the cultural conditions for the West to embark on its colonial project. So, what is the importance of this argument? If Orientalism was there even before modernity or colonialism, where is its origin? Said traced this form of Orientalism back to the classical period in Europe to the works of Homer, Aeschylus, and other thinkers. And according to Said, it continued through the medieval period and culminates in the great works of Renaissance and after.

And this is an important point, and this implies something important. So, what is it? It says that Orientalism is not so much a product of the circumstances specific to the historical conjuncture, rather it was something embedded deeply in Western culture itself. See, he is trying to say that Orientalism was there even before colonialism. It is not just something that emerged as a consequence of colonialism or as a justification or a rationalization for colonialism. It was there since Homer, the great ancient Greek thinker, and runs through what we considered as the great literature of Renaissance.

So, in all these literary and scholarly writings, you can see a particular depiction of the mysterious and unchanging East, a contrast to the familiar and dynamic West. And this is something interesting and that we have to keep in mind. So, how does Said push this

argument or how does he substantiate this argument? To push this argument, Said makes a distinction between two components of Orientalism, that is Latent and Manifest Orientalism. And the Latent components are its essential core, its basic moral and conceptual architecture, which have been in place since Homer. And these components defines Orientalism as a discourse.

And manifest elements are what gives Orientalism its form in any particular era and hence, the manifest components undergo change in the course of history. And this is an important distinction that Said makes and I will explain why in a minute. This distinction between Latent and Manifest Orientalism helps Said to argue that as a discourse, Orientalism has not remained unchanged across space and time. And he did point out that the nature of Orientalism on the Western conception of the East in its form and content has undergone significant changes over the period. But the changes have only been in the ways in which Orientalism was expressed in different contexts.

The essence of Orientalism or its Latent components has remained more or less same across the centuries from since the time of Homer to the modern period. So, this is an important point and this distinction we have to keep in mind. So, the Latent Orientalism goes beyond simple bias towards the East and becomes a practical orientation, which is an urge to bring the reality of the East in line with the ways in which West imagine what the world should be or what the world ought to be. And it is simply the idea that the modern, rational and civilized West has the burden of civilizing the despotic and irrational and uncivilized East. And for Said, this practical stance has been a defining characteristic of the Orientalist mindset from antiquity to modern era, in spite of all the changes that it experienced across time.

And Said is not saying that Orientalism was an unchanging discourse from the antiquity to modern era. Rather, it has changed its forms, it condenses across space and time. But more or less, the core of Orientalism has remained same. It is a form of a particular Western mindset and that has remained unchanged over the centuries. That is the crux of Said's argument.

So, the Western culture or the Western mind, Said says, has always characterized the East as inferior. And it is not just a modern phenomenon, it was always like this. So, from a simple bias towards East, it moves, the Orientalism moves towards gaining knowledge about the Orient and acquiring power over it. Why it is so important or interesting? We need to discuss that a little bit. This second version of his argument actually inverts the first that is the materialist explanation of Orientalism.

And as you might be remembering, in the first argument, it is a system of domination

that is colonialism is creating its justifying ideology that is Orientalism. And in this argument, in the second argument, the causal relation inverts. Here, the ideology that is Orientalism is in some way responsible for the rise of European colonialism. And Orientalism is no longer one of the consequences of colonialism. Rather, it causes, it kind of produces the cultural conditions that is conducive for the West to embark on its colonial project.

And this is obviously a novel take by Edward Said. And most of the critiques of Orientalist constructions at that time, had typically been materialist in their nature, and was grounded in political economy. Said's originality is in offering a culturalist alternative to the existing approaches. And it is this argument that displaced materialist analysis with the culturalist one. And interestingly, this was the argument that was deeply criticized by many scholars, and especially by Marxists.

And I think this point is clear. And I have kind of tried to summarize some of the core arguments of Orientalism in the first few slides. Now, I want to introduce two early critiques of Orientalism, Sadiq Jalal Al-Azm and Aijaz Ahmad. Sadiq Jalal Al-Azm is a renowned Marxist philosopher from Syria. He was a professor of philosophy at the University of Damascus, and he was author of some of the important books, including criticism of religious thought and secularism, fundamentalism, and the struggle for the meaning of Islam. His criticism of Said first appeared in the magazine called *Kamsin*, which was a socialist magazine published from France.

And his article *Orientalism and Orientalism in Reverse*, published in 1981, was one of the earliest critical engagements with Said's work. Sadiq Jalal Al-Azm also reiterated that one of the most vicious aspects of Orientalism, as carefully pointed out by Said, is the deep-rooted belief that there exists a fundamental ontological difference between the essential natures of the Orient and the Occident. And this difference, and this ontological difference, sees Western societies, cultures, languages, and mentalities as essentially superior to that of the Eastern cultures, societies, languages, etc. And we just saw that Said traced the origins of Orientalism all the way back to Homer, Aeschylus, and other ancient thinkers, implying that Orientalism is not really a modern phenomenon. Rather, it was a natural product of an ancient and almost irresistible European mind to misinterpret the realities of other cultures, peoples, and their languages, etc for the Occidental self-affirmation, or the self-affirmation, the dominance and ascendancy of the West. So, for Said, the European mind, whether it is Homer or Descartes, whether it is the Orientalist historian Hamilton Gibbs, or the revolutionary Karl Marx, it is inherently misinterpreted and distort the realities of the East. That is an essential characteristic of the European mind, according to Said. But what is the problem with such a perspective? The problem is that tracing the origins of Orientalism to the European mind simply lends strength to

the essentialist categories of Orient and Occident. So, what does that mean? When we say that it is inherent within the Western culture or Western mind to misinterpret the realities of other cultures, especially the East, in favor of West-owned self-affirmation, dominancy, and ascendancy, we are making a claim that there is an ineradicable ontological distinction or an ontological difference between the East and the West.

Actually, it is this highly problematic distinction that Said's book *Orientalism* tries to demolish. I don't need to explain this further. You have engaged with this particular point in great detail in the previous classes. So, what was Said trying to achieve in *Orientalism*, his magnum opus, he was trying to demolish the distinction between East and West, the distinction that was made by the Orientalist scholars that the essential realities of the East and West is different and the West is considered modern, rational, civilized, etc. and where the East was considered non-modern, uncivilized, despotic, etc.

So, Said was trying to demolish these essential categories of Orient and Occident, this distinction, this ontological distinction between East and the West. So, but when he says that Orientalism is a deep-rooted cultural disposition that is there in the Western mind from the time of Homer and it runs through the medieval period and culminates in the great literary and scholarly writings of Renaissance, he is basically saying that Orientalism is a Western mindset, it is deeply rooted in the Western culture. So, in a sense, when he conceptualized Orientalist discourse as an unchanging component of Western culture, he is actually again reinforcing this distinction, the distinction between Orient and the Occident and this is what Saadiq Jalal Al-Azm calls Orientalism in reverse. So, rather than demolishing the binary between the East and the West, said in a way, accidentally reinforces it again. So, this is one of the major criticisms raised by Saadiq Jalal Al-Azm.

And similar criticisms were also raised by Aijaz Ahmad against Said in one of the most landmark essays he has ever written, *Orientalism and After, the Ambivalence and Metropolitan Location in Edward Said*. And this essay appeared in the celebrated work in *Theory, Classes, Nations, and Literature*. And this work has also attracted a lot of attention from scholars within various disciplines, including literature, sociology, history, comparative literature, etc. So, this essay of Aijaz Ahmad makes so many important criticisms, especially critical comments on Said and *Orientalism* in particular. So, I don't think we can explain all the major points that he is raising in this essay.

And I only want to focus on three important observations of Aijaz Ahmad and it is related to the methodological and political consequences of locating Orientalism in the Western mind or in Western culture, rather than among the consequences of colonialism. So, as Saadiq Jalal Al-Azm, Aijaz Ahmad is also critiquing the second argument, the

culturalist explanation Said has given for Orientalism. The first and most important criticisms raised by Aijaz Ahmad against Said is related to the methodology Said used in his work, *Orientalism*. So, what is this? One can identify that a sense of affiliation with Foucault reminds strong throughout Said's work. So, Ahmad's criticism is that? The second argument of Said that we just discussed is influenced by Foucault but Said refuses to accept the consequences of Foucault's overlapping of history.

And this is a very complex, but also very interesting point. So, what does this mean? We will explain that in a minute. In his work, Said identifies Orientalism as a discourse in the Western culture or in other words, rooted in Western episteme. There are two important terms here, discourse and episteme. What is a discourse? Broadly, one can argue that a discourse is a historically constituted system of thoughts, composed of ideas, attitudes, some courses of action, that is practices, beliefs, etc. that systematically construct the subjects and the worlds of which they speak about. For example, Orientalism as a discourse is a set of idea, practices, beliefs, etc., that was emerged over a period of time and it creates specific forms of knowledge about the East, the Eastern world, its people, its languages, its culture, etc. Also, a discourse legitimizes the power relations of that particular historical period and produce what is considered to be truth and knowledge. And this discourse of Orientalism, according to Said, is rooted in Western episteme.

And what is episteme? That is also something that we have to explain a bit here. An episteme, according to Foucault, is a set of unconscious rules that govern all discourses and forms of knowledges in a society, in a particular historical epoch. It actually determines what does and what does not get seriously taken in a society. So, in another sense, episteme represents the condition of the possibility of the existence of discourses. So, Orientalism as a discourse exists because there is an episteme and, in this case, the Western episteme.

It is a set of unconscious rules that sees this discourse of Orientalism as legitimate. And why this episteme is called Western episteme? Foucault would say that this episteme is constituted historically in the West, in the processes that range from roughly the 16th century to the 18th in the emergence of what we call as the Bourgeois society. Or in other words, this period, the 16th century to the 18th century is also known as the period which runs from the so-called primitive accumulation up to the first industrial revolution. So, what does this imply? It says that the Western episteme is historically constituted in the modern period and it is constituted in what we consider as the modern epoch and it is thoroughly a modern phenomenon. So, the Western episteme actually makes a clear-cut distinction between the ancient regime and the modern world.

It is a shift from the ancient regime that makes the Western episteme possible, and it is

historically constituted in the modern epoch or in the modern period. And this is the idea of Western episteme by Foucault. Said uses this Foucauldian idea of Western episteme and as we have already mentioned, for him the orientalist discourse is rooted in this Western episteme. But interestingly, Said refuses to accept the consequences of Foucault's own mapping of history. So, that was our initial point, the criticism that raised by Aijaz Ahmad.

So, how does Said refuse to accept the consequences of Foucault's own mapping of history? Because in Said, the Western episteme starts from the classical period with the writings of Homer and other Greek thinkers because he traces the origin of orientalism all the way back to the classical writers and all the way back to the ancient Greece. Said assumes a putative continuity of Western history from ancient period to the modern epoch and thus, he traces Western episteme from ancient Europe to modern Europe. And this is not only an unfoucauldian idea, rather it is antithetical to Foucauldian framework. And as we have said, for Foucault, Western episteme is thoroughly modern phenomena. It makes a clear-cut boundary or a clear-cut demarcation between the ancient regime and the modern world.

And Foucault would not agree with Said when he takes Western episteme as something existed from ancient Greece to modern Europe. For Foucault, the Western episteme has its origin in the bourgeoisie society or in other words, the Western episteme according to Foucault is thoroughly modern. It is actually this Foucauldian pressure that forced Said to trace the beginnings of orientalist discourse from the 18th century in his first argument and not in second one. In the first argument, he traces the beginning of the orientalist discourse to the 18th century.

But in the second argument, it changes. When he identifies orientalism as a mindset, a Western mindset or deeply rooted in the Western culture, he traces its origin all the way back to the ancient period in Europe to the Greek thinkers like Homer, Aeschylus, Euripides, etc. So, as I said, in the second argument in which he traces orientalism to the classical period to Homer and others, he is actually going against Foucault's own mapping of history, Foucault's own idea of Western episteme. And this assumption of a putative continuity of Western history, according to Aijaz Ahmad, is coming from a humanist tradition that Said alludes to. But this is questionable, as the humanist tradition Said adheres to is not only unfoucauldian, rather it stands in direct opposition to the Foucauldian framework that Said used to understand orientalism as a discourse rooted in Western episteme. The second issue Ahmed has with Said is that the idea of orientalist mindset introduced by Said was so pervasive in its scope, as even the most radical critics of colonialism were treated as people with orientalist prejudice.

The most prominent figure in this regard was obviously called Marx. And Said's portrayal of Marx was heavily questioned not only by Aijaz Ahmad, but also by other Marxist thinkers like for example Irfan Habib. Marx and his followers had not only questioned and criticized the racism of colonial administrators and orientalist scholars, but also contributed to the anti-colonial movements in various countries, including Ireland, India, Tanzania, etc. Ahmed points out again, as quite correctly, that the very passages that Said singled out as instances of cultural parochialism from Marx's writings, or other revolutionary leaders' writings could easily be read in a different way as describing not the superiority of Western culture, but the brutality of the colonial rule. For instance, scholars have pointed out that Said has misinterpreted a particular quote from Marx's writing.

And this particular quote is from Marx's famous work, *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. And this quote goes like this, "they cannot represent themselves, they must be represented". So, this is a part of a quote taken from the *18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* by Said. And you must be remembering this Said actually begins his book by this quote. And an innocent reader might think that Marx was talking about the Eastern people here, when he says they cannot represent themselves, they must be represented.

And it is an instance of cultural parochialism or patronization. But in reality, the context of that quote is completely different. And this is pointed out not only by Aijaz Ahmad, but also by various other Marxist scholars. So, they say that the Marxist scholars have argued that the context of this quote is completely different. Marx was making this claim in the context of the 19th century rural France, when he was talking about the small peasants and the oppressions they have faced at that particular historical period. So, this characterization is considered to be highly misleading and problematic.

And I don't think, for our purposes, we don't need to go to the actual context of the quote, and what it actually meant, and what was Marx, what was the intentions of Marx when he used this passage. And if you are more interested in this, I would suggest you to read this famous and very interesting work by Marx, *the 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. The third important criticism raised by Aijaz Ahmad against Said's work is that Said has displaced the materialist explanations of colonial rule by culturalist explanations. For instance, the conventional accounts of colonial expansion had focused on the interest groups, classes and state managers as its moving forces. For example, for Marx, it had been the capitalist, for nationalist, it had been the British interest, and for liberal, it was overly ambitious political leaders or national figures.

What all these explanations had in common was the central role that they accorded to the material interest as the motivating factor in colonial rule. But if in fact, Orientalism is a

body of ideas that guides colonialism and its interest, as Said's second argument would suggest, then it is not the interest that drive the colonial project, but a deeply rooted cultural disposition and discourse, and here the discourse of Orientalism. The implications it had for the study of colonialism are profound. Most say colonialism appear not as the consequences of developments, particular to a certain era, certain historical processes, but as an expression of a deeper ontological divide between the East and the West as a symptom of the cultural orientation of Europe's inhabitants. Again, rather than demolishing the problematic binary between the East versus West, Said comes to reinforce it in the opposite way.

And this is similar to the criticism that was made by Saadiq Jalal Al-Azm when he said that Said is producing Orientalism in reverse, or Said's arguments accidentally reinforces the binary between East and West. And this is an important criticism that we have to keep in mind, even when we admire the erudition and the literary quality of Said's work. So, these are the two important and earlier criticisms of Said's work. But recently, Vivek Chibber, a well-known Marxist sociologist has argued that while Aijaz Ahmad and Saadiq Jalal Al-Azm were able to capture the limitations or the problems in Said's work, they failed to observe something else. That is Said's second argument that Orientalism is not simply a consequence of colonialism, but importantly one of its causes.

And that argument was contradicted by Said's own evidences he used in his work. But more or less, Chibber is also making claims similar to that of Aijaz Ahmad, but just qualifying, qualified the critique by pointing out that the evidences brought by Said itself contradicts his arguments. I don't think we need to go into detail of Vivek Chibber's criticism. But I have used Chibber's essay to prepare for this class and it's a wonderful essay.

And those who are interested in Said's work must also read this wonderful essay by Vivek Chibber, *The Dual Legacy of Orientalism*. And not just Vivek Chibber's work, but also Saadiq Jalal Al-Azm and Aijaz Ahmad's article. They are very important and interesting. I hope those who find Said and his work, his arguments interesting, will also read these interesting criticisms. I would like to end this class by sharing something that we should keep in mind when we engage with a criticism of such a fascinating text like Orientalism.

At this quote is from an interview with a famous French philosopher, Gilles Deleuze. And in this context, he was talking about the words of Immanuel Kant, the German philosopher. But I think that this is equally applicable to any giants in any field, including Said and his magnum opus. So, the quote goes like this, "When you are facing such a work of genius, there is no point in saying you disagree. First, you have to know how to

admire. You have to rediscover the problems he poses, his particular machinery. It is through admiration that you will come to genuine critique. You have to work your way back to those problems, which an author of genius has posed, all the way back to that which he does not say in what he says, in order to extract something that still belongs to him, though you also turn it against him. You have to be inspired, visited by the geniuses you denounce.”

And this is something that I find really fascinating. And I think it is important that we keep this in our mind whenever we engage with any important works in our field. Thank you.