
DEFINING, DEBATING, AND DISMANTLING THE COLONIAL CONSTRUCTION OF CULTURE: EDWARD SAID

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Abstract:

The idea of culture as a tool for social engineering began to acquire serious significance only when it had to be reckoned with politically. Post-colonial theorists use culture as an important site to understand the political efforts of colonial rule and their continued impact in Post-colonial societies even today. Edward Said, a Palestinian Christian, with an English name attached to an Arabic surname, residing in America, a leading postcolonial critic, has raised a series of questions relating to culture while concluding 'Orientalism': 'How does one represent other culture? What is another culture?' (Orientalism 1995, p.325) Said has tried to respond to those questions at the discursive, ideological, and theoretical levels. His two major works, i.e. 'Orientalism' and 'Culture and Imperialism' where his commitment to a viable culture as a product of history. He has provided a specific historical period as a legitimate context to reread and interpret modern western culture or the 'metropolitan culture. All through his works, he has tried to focus on a single theme, i.e. an ontological, epistemological, ethical and a cultural crisis in modern western culture. The crisis is so overpowering and dominating that it has problematized the very essence and acceptability of academic knowledge and aesthetic experience. He challenges and dismantles the defective, fallacious and dehumanizing projections of Arab- Islamic culture in western discourse. But he has, formulating a comprehensive debate; extended the narrow geo-cultural limitations of Arab- Islamic culture to a broader and common category of the excluded others.

Keywords: Defining, Debating, Dismantling, The Colonial Construction Of Culture, discursive an ontological, epistemological, ethical

The idea of culture as a tool for social engineering began to acquire serious significance only when it had to be reckoned with politically. Post-colonial theorists use culture as an important site to understand the political efforts of colonial rule and their continued impact in Post-colonial societies even today.

Edward Said, a Palestinian Christian, with an English name attached to an Arabic surname, residing in America, a leading postcolonial critic. Said has tried to respond to those questions at the discursive, ideological, and theoretical levels. His two major works, i.e. '*Orientalism*' and '*Culture and Imperialism*' where his commitment to a viable culture as a product of history. He has provided a specific historical period as a legitimate context to reread and interpret modern western culture or the 'metropolitan culture. All through his works, he has tried to focus on a single theme, i.e. an ontological, epistemological, ethical and a cultural crisis in modern western culture. The crisis is so overpowering and dominating that it has problematized the very essence and acceptability of academic knowledge and aesthetic experience. He challenges and dismantles the defective, fallacious and dehumanizing projections of Arab- Islamic culture in western discourse. But he has, formulating a comprehensive debate, extended the narrow geo-cultural limitations of Arab- Islamic culture to a broader and common category of the excluded others.

Said has tried to respond to these questions at the discursive, ideological, and theoretical levels. These metanarratives subsequently spill over to comparatively smaller areas, such as aesthetics, ethics, areas in social science (anthropology, geography), epistemology etc.

Said's critique on Western culture, he has missed out the genuine context, the theoretical complexity, and the genuine objectives that Said has dealt with in *Culture and Imperialism*. Looking at Said and his works from some narrow ideological, communal and culture-specific positions for some immediate political gains is highly problematic, and this will lead to serious misconception. This does not mean that Said has not been able to address these fragmented and isolated issues, and has emerged as an opportunistic representative of the metropolitan culture. Said indicates his commitment to formulating a comprehensive mechanism for the interpretation of culture as a whole. His attempt has been primarily to liberate culture from the limitation of aesthetics, ethics, anthropology, and epistemology.

Said's idea of culture as a 'worldly' phenomenon problematizes culture at a very basic level. He does not consider culture to have any autonomous position, which is free from the socio-political, economic, ideological and historical forces. They are, to him, mutually constitutive and share a common agenda. He tries to establish a kind of taxonomic collapse as the process of formation of culture, which unsettles the so-called apolitical academic boundaries. Another aspect of culture that Said has emphasized while critiquing modern Western culture needs serious attention for any kind of genuine understanding of a Saidian view on culture. His two major works, i.e., *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*, where his commitment to a viable cultural analysis is prominent, conceive of culture as a product of history. He has provided a specific historical period as a legitimate context to reread and interpret modern Western culture or the 'metropolitan culture'. The kind of crisis he is talking about in the

metropolitan culture can be made explicit only through examining the context or the historical background of that particular culture. His idea of culture in this context is a 'worldly' phenomenon mainly refers to the 'context' he is emphasizing. In that process, he has brought to the fore culture's complicity in the political and the ideological forces, prevalent in that specific historical period. This, according to Said, is the authoritative force and the ultimate logic, which invariably controls the process of both writing or conceiving of one's own culture or other's culture.

Said has not tried to offer a holistic assessment of Western culture as a whole, nor has he attempted to redefine or to dismiss culture as a surreptitious tool of empire. His focus has been specifically on the metropolitan culture of the West. All through his works, writings, and interviews, he has tried to focus on a single theme, i.e., an ontological, epistemological, ethical and a culture crisis in modern Western culture. The crisis is so overpowering and dominating that it has problematized the very essence and acceptability of academic knowledge and aesthetic experience. One of the dominant themes that Said focuses on in his study of culture is the relationship between modern Western culture and imperialism.

Orientalism looks into this relationship more as a discursive reality when *Culture and imperialism* focus on the narrative dimension of the relationship. The addition he makes in his later one, of what he thinks as the sequel to *Orientalism*, is the inclusion of the postcolonial narrative of resistance. This issue will be taken up in a more detailed manner later. Said's critical observations on the High Humanism and the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century had a determining role in his subject position and his perspectives. Foucault considers this new phase in European history as a break or a rupture in the so-called Marxist notion of the continuity of history. This break up in history, according to him, gave birth to a complex network of the relationship between 'power', 'knowledge' and 'discourse'. This nexus of knowledge and power eventually created a crisis of 'representation' (which is mainly epistemological by nature). Foucault conceives of the fundamentals of culture in the rubric of linkages between knowledge and power. Both the creation and transmission of knowledge were central to the production of knowledge. And culture is produced in relation to the creation of knowledge.

Said's notion of culture, is Derrida's concept of the 'ontology' or 'being' or the 'presence' in the Western metaphysics. Both Levinas and Derrida talked about the construction of the ontology of the West in the Age of Reason or in the Age of Enlightenment (Young 12).

The influence of Antonio Gramsci and Raymond Williams, two major Marxist scholars, and critics of culture, upon Said's notion of culture, is immense. He has very often categorically mentioned the names of these two Marxist critics possessing two different lines of thought (as the former is a radical Italian Marxist and the latter is a liberal Marxist) and he has admitted to having borrowed a lot of ideas from them relating to the idea of culture. The rise of European imperialism, followed by colonialism, and its close proximity to fascism, Nazism, anti-Semitism, has been rightly identified by Said, as the direct outcome of European Enlightenment.

Said's observations on the relationship between modern Western culture and imperialism have some definite connections with the Gramscian paradigm of 'hegemony'. He uses 'hegemony' as a dominant perspective to explain the formation of European metropolitan culture.

He has located a similar kind of extension of European hegemony in the narrative space of the West's aesthetic experience in *Culture and Imperialism*. Said has tried to examine, how to European novel, since the nineteenth century, has evolved as a dominant genre of European aesthetic experience on the basis of its inviolable association with the two-fold narratives of empire. By the two-fold narratives of empire, Said means the ideas and strategies that have reinstated imperialistic domination and formulated a system of resistance against imperialistic ideas.

Said uses this dominant perspective of culture, what he often emphasizes to be the 'worldly context', to examine the neutrality of discursive formation in *Orientalism* and the aesthetic autonomy in *Culture and Imperialism*. His intention here is to establish an inviolable link or relationship between the host of writers and thinkers, and their active involvement in their own cultural experience. Said uses another important category of culture, developed by Williams, in order to carry on this debate concerning the relationship between author and culture, especially in *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*. Said, in *Culture and Imperialism*, tries to locate the presence of that 'structure of feeling' while discussing the complicity of modern European literature in the imperial paradigms of modern

Said claims that the aura of truth and objectivity, which is generally associated with the subject and its capacity to produce or to document others' culture is a myth. It is primarily a self – eulogizing and self – constructing endeavor of the West. From the point of view of colonialism, anthropology remains more like a problem and less as a cultural critique.

The construction and the representation of other culture and the simultaneous colonial expansion and domination have a strong discursive dimension. *Orientalism* is a concrete step in that direction, according to Said. This offers him the legitimate space/scope to look into the methodological mechanisms, strategies and devices adopted for the formation of different types of Orientalist discourses, be it aesthetic, historical, anthropological, or scientific discourses. Said has clearly emphasized the fact that ethnography has played a dominant role in the process of the constitution of knowledge about Oriental cultures. He locates the origin of ethnography, as a branch of knowledge, in the colonial encounter between the West and East.

The works of Amilcar Cabral of Guinea, C.L.R. James, Aime Cesaire, Frantz Fanon, and a large number other postcolonial critics and scholars, are of utmost importance to understand Said's attempt to construct a broader postcolonial perspective on culture. He has drawn both theoretical and ideological support from them in order to situate his subject position much beyond the constraints of the totalitarian paradigms, such as discursive, epistemological or class determined. The relationship between the colonizer and the colonized has been

examined in a comprehensive manner in Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, *Cesaire's Discourse on Colonialism* and *The Return to My Native Land*. The observations made by Fanon and Cesaire have provided him enough insight to look into the different aspects of modern Western culture and its clandestine link with colonialism and imperialism.

Said in *Orientalism* looks into the formation of European culture basically as a positive response to its overseas colonial expansion and domination, which implies both its conscious and unconscious participation in the process of colonization. He, in a way, indirectly claims that colonized territory has created a serious epistemological, ontological, cultural, and intellectual crisis in the West. Said has used this pluralistic Fanonian model of culture as a dominant perspective to look into the problematic of the relationship between culture and imperialism. He comments,

In *Orientalism*, he attempts to demystify the manifold dimensions of imperialism and its material as well as the subtle functioning in the socio-political, cultural, and individual life of the modern West. His deconstruction of a large number of Orientalist discourses in the light of its relationship with colonialism and imperialism, does not end by merely problematizing modern Western culture, its formation of knowledge, and its aesthetic experiences; in *Culture and Imperialism*, he initiates a comprehensive dialogue with a number of postcolonial positions such as resistance, opposition, nationalism, anti-imperialism etc. There he tries to bring to the fore the Fanonian model and culture and subsequently endorses a similar view on culture. In the light of that model Said tries to look into a number of other postcolonial positions, such as exile immigration, insider-outsider, expatriate, border etc. and establishes them as a kind of third paradigm, what he calls, "counter-narrative of great deconstructive power" or "underground narrative" (*Culture and Imperialism* p. 329 – 31). He thinks, these median positions can adequately combat both imperialism and orthodox nationalism and can facilitate the formation of a composite kind of culture beyond the constraints of imperialism, regionalism, and tribalism.

In *Culture and Imperialism*, he has strategically shifted his focus from the issue of representation of the Orient or the Arab and Islam to studying the relationship between modern Western culture and imperialism. There he has selected the 19th and 20th century European novel for an extensive discussion because he thinks the powerful narrative dimension of the novel is directly associated with the imperialistic culture of Europe.

There, the forces of imperialism, he finds, condition the evolution, the growth, and functioning of culture. The perspective of imperialism that he has adopted to examine the relationship between modern European novels and imperialistic culture in *Culture and Imperialism*, can be applied in *Orientalism* in order to formulate an identical view on modern Western culture.

The division of culture between the East and the West has been the main focus of Said for examining the relationship between modern Western culture and imperialism. The issues like the colonial rule, civilizing the Orient, reconstruction of the Orient, and its representation,

constitute some of the major objectives of the Orientalist discourses. He thinks that the very legitimacy of these issues lies in its agreement with an eccentric notion of culture relating to its own and others. This element of eccentricity articulated culture in terms of difference and division. At a supposedly popular level it got its expression in the form of the East and the West; the Orient and the Occident; we and they; us and them, and so on. The importance of the division does not lie in the state of being merely so; it lies rather in conceiving of the difference on the basis of an immutable inequality and formulating the difference accordingly. Initially, Said looks at this phenomenon as a sort of epistemological problem, where the geo-cultural isolation of a nation automatically brings in a number of misgivings, myths, and misinformation about the nations beyond its territory, popularly based on imagination, fictionalization, and fantasy.

Said has adopted the Foucaultian perspective on culture as a fundamental organizing principle to discuss the knowledge-power relationship in culture. To Foucault, transmission of knowledge is central to culture, and this process is linear and linked with power both in conscious and in unconscious ways. His position is that knowledge is constitutive of culture and he has his focus on the shifts from classical to modern culture, where the process of production of culture is realized in relation to the creation of knowledge.

In *Culture and Imperialism*, he talks about the perspective he has adapted to locate the functioning of imperialism as hegemony in European culture. His concern here is to highlight how the tradition of modern European novels, conforming to European canon, and the novelists, such as Jane Austen, Dickens, Conrad, George Eliot, and many more, have consciously or unconsciously accommodated the narratives of imperialism, despite their obvious non – political status.

Said as a critic and as a scholar right from *Orientalism* to *Culture and Imperialism*, Said's unambiguous rejection and dismissal of imperialism and imperialistic culture are quite obvious. It would be totally a wrong kind of premise to claim that Said has not gone beyond that rejection. He has clearly stated at the end of *Orientalism*: "the answer to *Orientalism* is not Occidentalism" (*Orientalism* p. 328)

He has advocated some methodological revisions by which the genuine "hybridity", as well as the "heterogeneity" of culture, can be apprehended. This is quite evident when he says, "we must all write our histories and cultures in a new way" (*Culture and Imperialism* P. 331).

His intention is, first of all, to restore the history to culture, which he thinks, is denied by both imperialism and colonialism. Like Fanon, he, up to a certain extent, advocates the growth of nativism or nationalism for the cause of rewriting history and culture and for dismantling the European or the Orientalist vision of a universal culture, i.e., the dominant European culture.

Said has extended the perspective of comparative literature to the specific field of contrapuntal methodology. In *Culture and Imperialism*, he has tried to elaborate its functions in a rather comprehensive manner and has identified it to be a potential tool of interpretation of cultures. The basic function of the contrapuntal methodology is to establish the fact that all cultures are involved in one another: none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily, differentiated, and unmonolithic. He has emphasized the urgency to adopt contrapuntal methodology. He observes:

The comparative or better, the contrapuntal perspective then proposes itself and with it, Ernest Bloch's notion of non – synchronous. That is we must be able to think through and interpret together discrepant experiences, each with its particular agendas and pace of development, its own formations, its coherence and its system of external relationships. (Said 1986: p. 56)

In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said has claimed, “this book is an exile's book (p. xxx). In all his major works, he has, in some way or the other tried to emphasize his subject position as a postcolonial intellectual with the position of an exile and has interrogated that position in a comprehensive manner, emphasizing its significance, productivity, and its anti-theoretical dimension. He eventually privileges exile as a dominant perspective for the cause of writing a pluralistic culture. His unambiguous reluctance to belong to either side of the "imperial divides," his consistent attempt to write a non – coercive kind of culture, based on the Lyotardian idea of coexistence, rather than the imperialist hierarchies, his vision of an inclusive and hybrid kind of culture, which is free from the constraints of both imperialism and nationalism, and a lot others, can be understood correctly from the point of view of Said's privileging of the position of exile. His notion of writing an alternative history and culture is closely associated with the idea of exile.

The state of schizophrenia, formulated by Deluze and Guttari, seems to have a strong influence on Said's notion of exile In *Culture and Imperialism* he calls it the “emigre consciousness”, which, he thinks, is located in a state of marginality, combined with a search for “fresh concepts” outside the general pattern, i.e., “an averted gaze from the beaten track” and “a hatred of brutality” (*Culture* p. 403 – 404).

Orientalism has eventually occupied a significant position as a major torchbearer of postcolonial theoretical positions, having been at par with the writings of the leading postcolonial ideologues, such as Aime Cesaire, Frantz Fanon, C.L.R. James, and others. It has made its impact felt in a substantial way, over the writings of the Third World as a whole, and has provided new impetus and avenues to realize a possible expansion of the spatiotemporal limitations of the ongoing postcolonial debates across the globe.

In this regard, its particular contribution to the field of anti-colonial scholarship inheres in its painstaking, if somewhat overstated, exposition of the reciprocal relationship between colonial knowledge and colonial power. It proposes that 'Orientalism' – or the project of teaching, writing about, and researching the Orient – has always been an essential cognitive

accompaniment and inducement to Europe's imperial adventures in the hypothetical 'East'. Accordingly, it claims that he peculiarly.

The categorical refusal of imperial culture is, at best, a necessary evil in the decolonizing process. In itself, 'abrogation' or inversion represents an incomplete or failed radicalism which needs to acquire the more subtle political habits of 'appropriation' or 'subversion – from – within". The anti-colonial 'appropriator' challenges the cultural and linguistic stability of the center by twisting old authoritarian words into new oppositional meanings.

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