

Title—Orientalism
Author—Edward Said
Year—1979

Categories: Theory, Islam, The West, Politics, Culture

Place: The World (The West and The 'Orient')

Time: 1500-1980

Argument Synopsis:

Edward Said's *Orientalism* was an incredibly influential work that continues to inform the way academics think about the relationship of the West to the Orient. The concepts of the book have been applied to a myriad of locations in relation to the West. Said's intervention is centered around the concept that the Orient is a European invention that informs more about the West than the "real" Orient. Said argues that orientalism is a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience. The idea of orientalism rests on the assumption that the Orient is not an inert fact of nature. He demonstrates how the Orient has continually helped to define Europe (the West) as its contrasting image, idea, and experience. He characterizes orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. Due to the process of orientalism, the Orient is not a free subject of thought or action, and Said finds that the degree of involvement in the Orient is dominated by the French and the British. Therefore to speak of orientalism is to speak mostly of a British and French cultural enterprise. Importantly, Said notes that since the end of the Second World War the United States have dominated the Orient, although they approach it in much of the same way as the British and the French. Although the concept of the Orient is not intrinsic, it is also wrong to conclude that the Orient was essentially an idea or a creation with no corresponding reality.

Said posits that ideas, cultures, and histories can't be seriously understood or studied without their force, i.e. configurations of power, also being studied. The structure of *Orientalism* is not a system of lies or myths, but rather a system of ideas that remained relatively unchanged from the late 1840s onward. European cultural hegemony gives *Orientalism* its durability and its strength; central to this is the idea of European identity as superior. Importantly, he reveals how *Orientalism* does not exist in an archival vacuum, and what is thought, said, and done about the Orient follows certain distinct and intellectually knowable lines. Said attempts to study *Orientalism* as dynamic exchange between individual authors and the large political concerns shaped by three great empires (British, French, U.S.) in whose territory the writings on the Orient were produced. In terms of scope, Said limits the set of questions to the Anglo-Franco-American experience of the Arabs and Islam, which for almost a thousand years stood for the Orient. More specifically, he attempts to elucidate subsequent developments in academic as well as literary *Orientalism* that bear on the connection between British and French *Orientalism* on one hand and the rise of explicitly colonial-minded imperialism on the other; and then show how these earlier matters were reproduced in the American *Orientalism*. Said notes that he is personally invested in this history from his position as a Palestinian growing up in the British Empire. He concludes by emphasizing the importance for anyone writing about the Orient to locate themselves vis-à-vis the Orient.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- The Orient has helped define Europe (the West) as its contrasting image, idea, experience
- Central to concept of orientalism is the belief that European identity is superior in comparison to all non-European peoples and cultures
- Orientalism depends more on the West than the 'orient'