

Dr. Vipul V. Kapoor, Associate Professor

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ORIENTALISM:

Explained by Dr. Vipul V. Kapoor, Associate Professor

INTRODUCTION:

Orientalism is a literary theory which acquired importance towards the end of 20th century. This theory was propounded by Edward Said, a modern cultural critic. Edward Saïd argued that a dominant European political ideology created the notion of the Orient in order to subjugate and control it. Orientalism studies the Western approach and attitude towards the Eastern societies and cultures. It is a study of “WE” and “You”, the “WHITES” and the “BLACKS”, the “EAST” and the “WEST”. This theory emerges from colonialism.

ORIGIN OF THE TERM ‘ORIENTALISM’:

The term ‘Orientalism’ comes from the Latin word “**oriens**” which means “**East**”. Hence, ‘**Orient**’ means the “**Easterns**” or the people and cultures of East Asia. The study of orientalism is the study of the East Asian people and cultures from the Western perspectives and ideology.

PIONEER OF ORIENTALISM:

Edward Said (1935 – 2003) was a Palestinian American literary theorist and famous cultural critic theorist of post



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colonial literature. He published a book 'Orientalism' in 1978. His theory of orientalism is influenced by the imperialism and colonialism of the 19th and 20th century.

BASIC CONCEPT OF ORIENTALISM:

Edward Said defines Orientalism in this manner, "Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the orient".

The West sees the Middle Eastern, Asian, and North African society by the only word "the East". In simple words 'orientalism' is the term used to show Western approach and attitude towards Middle , North African and Asian people, society and culture. Western people see them as unintelligent, undeveloped, uncivilized and lower than themselves. So, in this way they think themselves superior to the Eastern people. The Western scholars and thinkers see the Eastern people as "the other", different from them. It is through this oriental approach only that they held the concept of "White Man's Burden". They (Western people, Colonizers) thought it their responsibility to polish and reform the Eastern people, Colonized).

In short, Orientalism is "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the orient".



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ORIENTALISM & POST-COLONIALISM:

Orientalism actually originates from colonialism and post-colonialism. Post colonialism is the study of a culture after the physical and political withdrawal of an oppressive power. When all colonies were freed from the Western rule in the mid 20th century, a conflict and difference still remained between the East and West. Rudyard Kipling wrote this line in one of his poems:

“East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet”

So, orientalism studies this Western approach and attitude towards the Eastern societies and cultures.

TWO TERMS – OCCIDENT & ORIENT:

The term **‘occident’** means the West countries, their ideology, their customs, and their philosophy of life. (West means the countries of Europe, America, and France). Occident societies are considered as dynamic and innovative.

The term **‘orient’** means the Eastern countries, especially East Asia. Orient societies are considered by the

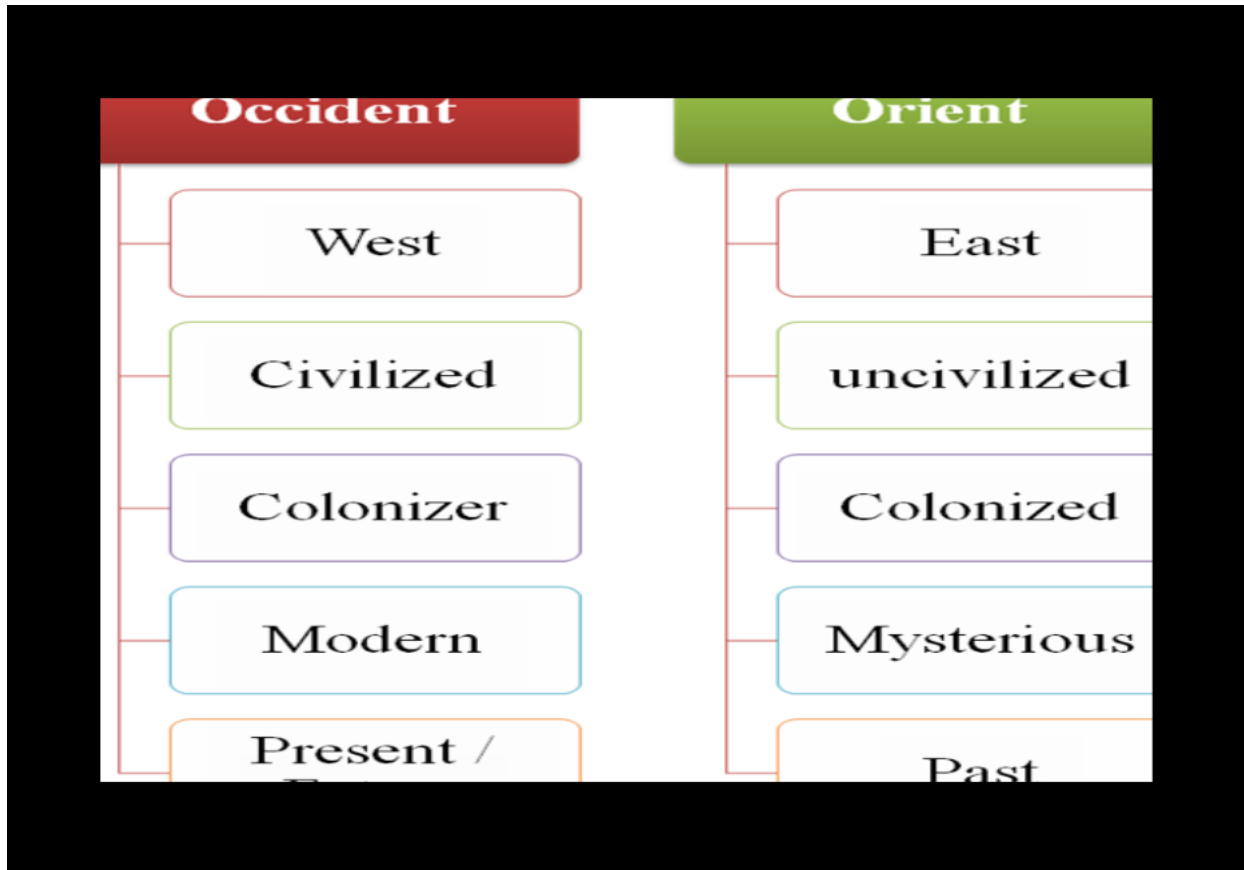


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Occident as static, never changing.

The relationship between Orient and Occident is a relationship of power and domination.



EXAMPLES OF ORIENTALISM:

1. Alladdin - a character of Disney Land has been presented from oriental perspective. Alladdin is an Arab character from a cartoon series named Arabian Nights. It was the show for children. Consider this remark of Kincheloe:



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“Movies that children watch for enjoyment and pleasure rather than instruction, unfortunately leave a deeper imprint on a fresh, impressionable mind than does an unexciting textbook.”

In this cartoon series by Walt Disney Pictures, Alladdin was the most celebrated character. But that series had faced criticism for wrong and unjust portrayal of the Arab people and world. Here Alladdin was ridiculed and mocked a lot. This becomes problematic because he was shown as the representative of Arab society and people. And the theme song of that cartoon series was also very much criticized for its words, that show Arab as uncivilized world. The lyrics of that theme song are:

**“Oh, I came from a land
From a faraway place,
Where the caravan camels roam,
Where they cut off your ears if you
Don't like your face,
It's barbaric, but hey, it's home.”**

('barbaric' - unsophisticated, primitive)

We can see in this song lyrics that how the Western world does wrong portrayal of Arabic world. It seems that they wanted to show themselves as more



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civilized than the Arabs. But after facing enormous criticism about such lyrics, Disney Pictures had changed the lines. So, instead of the line "...where they cut off your...", This lines was put:

**"Where it's flat and immense
And the heat is intense."**

2. Another example is of a comedy produced by Paramount Pictures, named "The Director". It was released in 2012. The main character is Admiral General Haffaz Aladeen In this movie Aladeen has travelled to New York City to tell the secrets of his country's nuclear program to United Nations Council. And this character was mocked a lot. In this way, the characters are criticized from the orientalist point of view.

So, it is clear that the Western ideas about orient are not based on facts or reality, but rather they are based on their imagination and on the old archetypes about Eastern people.

MAJOR ORIENTALISTS:

Outstanding British scholars associated with these Orientalist studies were William Jones, Henry Colebrooke, Nathaniel Halhead, Charles Wilkins, and Horace Hyman



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Wilson.

CONCLUSION:

In nut shell, we may say that orientalism is a literary movement or theory which came after post-colonialism at the end of 20th century. Edward Said has been hailed as the pioneer of this theory. Orientalism studies how East is misrepresented by the West. It studies how the West tries to still dominate the East even after freeing the colonies.

