

EDWARD SAID: THE POSTCOLONIAL THEORY AND THE LITERATURE OF DECOLONIZATION

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Abstract

This paper attempts an exploration of the literary theory of postcolonialism, which traces European colonialism of many regions all over the world, its effects on various aspects of the lives of the colonized people and its manifestations in the Western literary and philosophical heritage. Shedding light on the impact of this theory in the field of literary criticism, the paper focuses on Edward Said's views for the simple reason that he is considered the one who laid the cornerstone of this theory, despite the undeniable role of other leading figures.

This theory is mainly based on what Said considers the false image of the Orient fabricated by Western thinkers as the primitive "other" in contrast with the civilized West. He believes that the consequences of colonialism are still persisting in the form of chaos, coups, corruption, civil wars, and bloodshed, which permeates many ex-colonies. The powerful colonizer has imposed a language and a culture, whereas those of the Oriental peoples have been ignored or distorted.

Referring to some works of colonial and postcolonial novelists, the paper shows how being free from the repression of imperialism, the natives could, eventually, produce their own culture of opposition, build their own image, and write their history outside the frame they have for long been put into. With such writers, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* can never be read the same after Achebe's criticism, nor can Bronte's *Jane Eyre* after Jean Rhys's postcolonial parallel novel *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, literary theory, colonial discourse, decolonization literature

Introduction

This paper attempts an exploration of postcolonialism, a literary theory, which traces European colonialism of many regions all over the world, its effects on various aspects of the lives of the colonized people in general, and its manifestations in Western literary and philosophical heritage in particular throughout the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, in addition to the emergence of the literature of opposition and resistance in the ex-colonies. The purpose of this study is to shed light on this theory and the remarkable impact it has left in the field of literary criticism. The paper will focus on Edward Said's views and ideas by exploring his most important books and articles, for the simple reason that Said is considered the one who laid the cornerstone of this theory, despite the importance of other leading figures such as Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha in this respect. Edward Said, the Palestinian American, and the notable academic and lecturer, had been the professor of comparative literature at Columbia University for a long time until his death of leukemia in 2003. Said's name came to light when his book *Orientalism* was published in 1978 and laid the ground for the theory of postcolonialism, sparking a storm of controversy, which didn't die with Said's decease.

I

Said's theory of postcolonialism is mainly based on what he considers the false image of the Orient or the East that has been fabricated by western explorers, poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators since Napoleon's occupation of Egypt in 1798. According to Said, these have always shown the Orient as the primitive, uncivilized "other", in an attempt to create it as the contrast to the advanced and civilized West. In his highly influential work, *Orientalism*, Said considers that "Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident". Said believes that such discourse has been used either in preparation to military campaigns and colonialism against the Orient, or as a justification for the occupations and horrors that accompany them. He goes further, contending that it is quite misleading to consider that such horrors came to an end with the end of direct colonialism. On the contrary, he believes that the consequences of colonialism are still persisting in the form of chaos, coups, corruption, civil wars, and bloodshed, which pervade many of these countries, mainly because of the residues of colonization. In this respect, Said believes that a powerful colonizer has imposed a language and a culture, whereas cultures, histories, values, and languages of the Oriental peoples have been ignored and even distorted by the colonialists in their pursuit to dominate these peoples and exploit their wealth in the name of enlightening, civilizing, and even humanizing them. What seems to be so infuriating to Said is that such peoples, who, in most cases have completely different cultures, have always been stereotyped by the so-called Orientalists, who so simply cross out all the distinctions and national characteristics of these diverse cultures. Consequently, the colonial texts have depicted the Indians, the Egyptians, the Palestinians, the Latin Americans, and many others as almost the same, the Orient, the "Other", in juxtaposition with "Us", the Occidental.

It is true that Edward Said was not the first to write on and criticize Western Orientalism, as he himself admits in his article "Orientalism Reconsidered", published in Diana Bryden's *Postcolonialism* (846). However, in *Orientalism*, Said, by most accounts, revolutionized the literary field and laid the ground for postcolonial theory, creating an unprecedented dispute in the Academic circles in the West and East alike. According to *The Economist*, "*Orientalism*, translated into dozens of languages, became a foundation text for a great boom in post-colonial studies."

Orientalism, together with his later works, represents Said's vehement commitment to speaking truth to power, to uncovering the grave oppression and persecution practiced against the colonized peoples by imperialism and colonial discourse. He describes the way the imperial West has always seen the Orient and how this view is obvious not only in many texts written by early travelers and explorers, but also in important literary works of prominent writers. Because there would be no limit to the narrative history of Orientalism, Said emphasizes in his study on "the Anglo-French-American experience of the Arabs and Islam, which for almost a thousand years together stood for the Orient" (17). In this sense, Said defines Orientalism as "a distribution of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly discovery, philological reconstruction, psychological analysis, landscape and sociological description, ... about what 'we' do and what 'they' cannot do" (12) Said argues that what has been written about the East is no more than false assumptions upon which the Western attitudes toward the East were built, justifying and encouraging the European and American colonial and imperial behavior towards the Arab-Islamic peoples and their cultures. Said sees that the long European colonial rule of the East has negatively influenced the most seemingly objective texts on the East even those written by the most knowledgeable and well-meaning Western Orientalists. These texts, according to Said, are highly biased, depicting the Orient as irrational, strange, weak, feminized "Other", contrasted with the rational, familiar, strong,

masculine West. He affirms that the West needs to show this difference so that it would legalize the domination of the superior "civilized" West over the inferior "primitive" East. He concludes that "The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony" (5). In *The Empire Writes Back* Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin support Said's idea of the condescending view the West has always seen the Orient through, by showing how Africa and Africans, for example, appear in the eyes of Western writers and thinkers as not only the primitive and demonic "opposite to the angels of reason and culture" but even to the extent that "Hegel could define the continent as being " 'outside history' " (159).

Said goes further to emphasize that, unfortunately, the standardized molds and culturally stereotyped images of the Orient still permeate the Western media, academia, and political circles, thus intensifying "the hold of the nineteenth-century academic and imaginative demonology of 'the mysterious Orient' " (*Orientalism* 26). In short, the Orientalists' effort to obliterate the Oriental as a human being is, for Said, important both academically and intellectually, and it is totally wrong to separate literature and culture from politics and history, thus the necessity to study and understand society and literary culture together.

That is why Said refers to specific examples of books written by Orientalists and analyzes them in a detailed study, showing how these supposedly subtle works of art have not only distorted the East with its values, cultures, traditions and languages, but also encouraged, overtly or covertly, the dispossession process the imperial West has practiced against the East. In other words, the Western fabricated image of the Orient was a preface and a reinforcement of the Western imperial rule over the Orient.

It is worth mentioning that Said's criticism in *Orientalism* is not restricted to Western colonialism and Orientalism, but he equally and harshly attacks the practices of Arab elites who internalized the American and British orientalist's ideas of Arabic culture. This definitely was the case of the literary elite in other ex-colonies. In her landmark essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Gayatri Spivak deals with the problem of "how the third world subject is represented within Western discourse" (Brydon 1427). She shows that even now the powerless are unable to express themselves, and that the experiences of such groups are inevitably distorted by the perspectives of the elite, such as academics, who are describing them. According to her "Certain varieties of the Indian elite are at best native informants for first world intellectuals interested in the voice of the Other. But one must nevertheless insist that the colonized subaltern *subject* is irretrievably heterogenous" (1442).

According to Said, the present is a mirror to the past, and it would be absolutely gullible to study it ignoring the role played by the colonialists in forming this present. Consequently, Said contends, both histories of the colonizer and the colonized are inextricably interrelated and cannot be studied from a unilateral point of view. To justify his claims that literary texts are tools used by colonialism, and that these misleading texts have always distorted the image of the Orient, Said goes back in *Orientalism* to Aeschylus's *The Persians* and Euripides's *The Bacchae*, picking evidence to show how both works depict Asia as the hostile destructive "'other' world beyond the seas" (*Orientalism* 56). Other writers Said studies in details are Silvestre de Sacy, whose works have been used later as references in studies of the Orient, and Ernest Renan, whose study of philology in general and Semitic languages in particular leads him to the conclusion that the European prose "points out defects, virtues, barbarisms, and shortcomings in the language, the people, and the civilization"(142) of the Orient, and that "Semitic is not a live language, and ... neither are Semites live creatures" (145). In the last chapter entitled "Orientalism Now", Said draws a comparison between Conrad's Marlow and Lamartine, pointing to the fact that both talk about "blank spaces on the earth" (216), while these blank spaces were inhabited by natives." Such writings continued in the twentieth century by T.E. Lawrence and Gertrude Bell, whose image

of the Arabs is that of primitiveness and lack of wisdom. Said shows how such writers' Eurocentrism and ethnocentrism were, ironically enough, directed against both the Muslims and the Jews. (241)

In an article entitled "Islam through Western Eyes" published in *The Nation* two years after *Orientalism*, Said emphasizes his ideas of the distorted image of Islam in the West's texts and media, shedding more light on how Islam is seen as a threat of a return to the Middle Ages and a danger to the democratic order in the West. In this article, Said reasserts his point in *Orientalism* that the same mistake made by the past Orientalists is repeated now by blindly generalizing all the Muslims and by simply classifying them into good or bad Muslims. He wonders how the scientific progress and objective research in the West, mainly in the States, hasn't included Orientalism, where Orientalists are still biased, but the reason, to him, is, after all, a political one.

In *Culture and Imperialism*, a sequel to *Orientalism*, Said projects a new light on the interwoven connections between the imperial enterprise and the culture that reflects and strengthens it. He extends his study to colonization in parts of the world other than the Middle East, namely India, African countries, Caribbean Islands and Australia. Analyzing more works of literature such as Kipling's *Kim*, Austen's *Mansfield Park*, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and Verdi's *Aida*, Said emphasizes the inseparability between the history of the empire and the great works of literature written in that era. That is to say, Said illustrates the intertwined relationship between literature and the life of its time. In fact, this relationship between literature and the Imperial endeavor has been emphasized by many other writers. In "Can the Subaltern Speak", Spivak assures that "Western intellectual production is, in many ways, complicit with Western international economic interests" (Bryden 1427). Not unlike Said or Spivak, Elleke Boehmer, in *In Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, argues that, among other functions, literature in a way reflects the social and historical moment. Boehmer defines the colonial literature as that which was "written by and for colonizing Europeans about non-European lands dominated by them...Colonialist literature was informed by theories concerning the superiority of European culture and the rightness of empire" (3).

To achieve his study of the modern Western Empires of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and to shed more light on the relationship between culture and imperialism, Said has chosen the novel because it plays an important role in "the formation of imperial attitudes, references, and experiences," and it has "also become the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history" (xii). To clarify his point, Said studies both, colonialist's literature and what he calls literature of opposition and resistance.

Concerning the former, Said refers to Conrad's *Nostramo*, quoting Holroyd, an American financier who supports Charles Gould, the British owner of a mine in a Central American republic, saying what resonates with the discourse of the New World Order, "We shall run the world's business whether the world likes it or not." (xvii). Said notices that in *Nostramo* as well as in *Heart of Darkness*, Conrad is anti-imperialist when he uncovers and criticizes "the corruption of overseas domination, [but] "deeply reactionary when it came to conceding that Africa or South America could ever have had an independent history or culture" (xviii).

After a thorough study of Austen's *Mansfield Park*, Said insists that Austen's works, as well as other great writers', should be read not only as creative works of artistic talents, but because they are so, they require "that longer and slower analysis" (96) so that we can see beyond the "dead silence" that the slave trade is met with in *Mansfield Park*. He concludes that by "reading it carefully, we can sense how ideas about dependent races and territories were held both by foreign-office executives, colonial bureaucrats, and military strategists and by intelligent novel-readers educating themselves in the fine points of moral evaluation, literary balance, and stylistic finish" (95). Among the seemingly endless examples Said mentions to illustrate his point is Andre Gide's novel *L'Immoraliste* in which Michel, the

narrator, degrades the Arabs by choosing French Algeria to satisfy his suppressed instincts, seeing it, "a place of deserts, languorous oases, amoral native boys and girls" (192).

Similarly, Boehmer analyzes Conrad's *Lord Jim* to reach almost Said's conclusions. Although Jim was a flawed protagonist, he was given another chance to prove his manhood and heroism on a lesser type of human beings, the natives in the Malayan archipelago. Showing colonialism as problematic as it is in *Heart of Darkness* – a failing project – doesn't prevent the novel from showing the real image the colonialists have of the colonized. Boehmer asserts that the novel is in fact about the Europeans, where "the non-European environment plays a part in the narrative only in so far as it corrupts" (66). Boehmer adds that "Always with reference to the superiority of an expanding Europe, colonized peoples were represented as lesser, less human, less civilized, as child or savage, wild man, animal, or headless mass" (79). According to Boehmer, both Conrad and Kipling "subscribed to theories of racial difference and supremacy, manifested in the main as the hierarchies of command which dominate their narratives. Despite his failings, Marlow sees Lord Jim as possessing an internal nobility and quality of leadership that distinguishes him from the people of Patusan" (86). Like Said, Boehmer even believes that such literary works took Western values for their standards of success, where the colonialists define themselves not only as superior but also as masculine keeping in mind that "masculinity characterized colonialist action" (63).

Similar to Said and Boehmer, Gayatri Spivak agrees that there is a severe need to reread European literature, having in mind that this literature, mainly that of the 19th century, reflects imperialism, which was part of the cultural representation of the empire. In her notable essay "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism", she argues that "The role of literature in the production of cultural representation should not be ignored" (694). Examining Charlotte Bronte's famous novel *Jane Eyre*, Spivak believes that although this novel portrays Jane as a new feminist ideal, the study of the novel in this process disguises the attempt of the novel to naturalize Western dominance, thus Spivak's belief that Bertha, the Jamaican, functions as the "other" juxtaposed with the novel's protagonist with whom the reader sympathizes and limitlessly supports. In fact, Spivak's analysis of *Jane Eyre*, very much like Said's of *Kim*, and Boehmer's of *Lord Jim*, reaches a conclusion that Bertha Mason is "a figure produced by the axiomatics of imperialism" (698).

On the other hand, Said admits in *Culture and Imperialism* that as there has always been colonial literature, a literature of opposition and decolonization started to appear reflecting opposition to the empire in the center as well as nationalist resistance in the peripheral. He believes that "Here, too, culture is in advance of politics, military history, or economic process...Just as culture may predispose and actively prepare one society for the overseas domination of another, it may also prepare that society to relinquish or modify the idea of overseas domination" (200). One example Said cites here is Forster's *A Passage to India*, in which, though modest, opposition to the empire is represented in both Aziz, the Muslim nationalist, and Godbole, the surrealist Hindu, and to some extent, in Fielding, the British. Said finds that "At least Fielding can connect with a character like Aziz," and concludes that despite seeing India "unapprehensible," he still could make the reader "feel affection for and even intimacy with some Indians and India generally" (205). Said shows that sympathizing with a resisting nationalism appeared more explicitly in types of writing other than the novel. To prove that, Said refers to Edward Thompson, whose subject is misrepresentation, saying that Indians "see the English entirely through the experience of British brutality during the 1857 'mutiny'. The English, with the pompous, cold-blooded religiosity of the Raj at its worst, see Indians and their history as barbaric, uncivilized, inhuman" (206).

This leads Said to study the themes of resistance culture, showing how the natives could, eventually, produce their own vigorous culture of opposition. In this respect, in an article on Edward Said published in *Prospect magazine*, David Herman believes that "long

before most other critics in America, [Said] had discovered a new set of thinkers who had written about colonialism, race and identity [among whom] are CLR James, Tagore, and Fanon and he put their insights together with the work of a later generation of postcolonial writers and theorists, including Henry Louis Gates, the Subaltern studies group, Rushdie and Marquez, Achebe and Mahfouz (2). Writers of the "margin" could speak free from the suppression and repression of imperialism, so Conrad's snake-like river that leads to nowhere but to primitiveness, corruption, and annihilation in *Heart of Darkness* is Honia in Ngugi Wa Thiongo's *The River_Between*, a river of cure, which "seemed to possess a strong will to live, scorning droughts and weather changes" (*Culture & Imperialism* 211). Again Conrad's river becomes the Nile in Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*, where Kurtz's voyage is reversed and Mostapha Said, metaphorically speaking, conquers the West, coming from the Sudanese countryside. Said makes it clear that "The post-imperial writers of the Third World therefore bear their past within them – as scars of humiliating wounds ...as urgently reinterpretable and redeployable experiences in which the formerly silent native speaks"(212). In this respect, in his article "Postcolonial Criticism", Homi Bhabha, assures that despite all attempts of repression, "it is from those who have suffered the sentence of history – subjugation, domination, diaspora, displacement – that we learn our most enduring lessons for living and thinking"(106). Said's emphasis is on how more importance should be given to the references to the colonial world made in this great literature. According to Ashcroft in *The Empire Writes Back*, this postcolonial literature gains its significance from the fact that it reflects the influence of colonialism on "more than three-quarters of the people of the world today", as these people "have had their lives shaped by the experience of colonialism" (1) in a way or another. These peoples have had the chance for the first time to write about themselves, to speak of themselves outside the frame they have for long been put into and given an image which is no more than a fabrication imposed on the them by the powerful empire. In response to the colonial discourse, these writers show that the natives did have a culture and a language before colonization, and, like all human beings, they had their strengths and flaws. Unlike the colonial texts, these writers do not stereotype even the Western characters in their works. In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, for example, we see two completely different missionaries, the understanding, non-violent Mr. Brown versus the strict, intolerant Mr. Smith. Similarly, Kamala Markandaya introduces Dr. Kenny in her *Nectar in a Sieve*, who dedicates his life to help the impoverished Indians juxtaposed with the merciless white owners of the tannery. Analyzing several other writers from different regions of the Third World including Tagore, Achebe and even Yeats, Said concludes that "no one today is purely *one* thing" and that ethnicity, gender, religion or nationality is just a starting point, thus his call to stop ruling, classifying, or putting people into hierarchies and "For the intellectual there is quite enough of value to do without *that*" (*Culture & Imperialism* 336).

What Said emphasizes in *Culture and Imperialism*, as well as in other books and articles, is not accusing such talented writers like Conrad or Austen, because after all, he believes, they are creatures of their time. Nor does he write to blame those who were once responsible for the bloodshed and horrors caused by the empire and colonization. In fact, what he calls for is a different reading of those literary works as great products of imagination and as a part of relationship between culture and empire, more realistic understanding of the relation between the colonizer and the colonized, and an objective look at the historical experience of empire as common to both," Indians and Britishers, Algerians and French, Westerners and Africans Asians, Latin Americans, and Australians despite the horrors, the bloodshed, and the vengeful bitterness" (xxii).

In summary, being highly controversial, as mentioned above, Said's ideas have gained countless adherents and even followers to the extent that Paul Bove, in his *Intellectuals in Power*, places Said at the level of thinkers like Nietzsche, Foucault, Auerbach and others. But,

on the other hand, Said's views have aroused the rage of many opponents, who spare no effort to raise suspicions around him and attack his views.

As a matter of fact, Said's works, mainly *Orientalism*, have been harshly criticized on different grounds. Paradoxically, Said and his colleagues of postcolonialism have been attacked by critics of the left as well as those of the right. Marxist writers such as Aijaz Ahmad, Terry Eagleton, and Sana Haque sometimes go to the extent of accusing them of complicity with the American cultural Imperialism. On the other hand, academic Orientalists, whom Said has seen as spokespeople of the empire, consider that it is unreasonable that Said attacks the West while he enjoys the privileges of this West, and accuse him of taking the Palestinian cause as a cover to introduce himself the victim he has never been. Among these are Bernard Lewis, Albert Hourani, and Nikki Kiddie. Some other opponents have gone too far to accuse him of encouraging terror, ignoring all his secular discourse and call for a humanistic approach and a constructive mutual understanding, not conflict, between different cultures. In his attack on Said in his article "Enough Said", David Pryce-Jones, ironically enough, agrees on what clearly supports Said's assertion of the inferiority the East has always been looked upon in the West. He quotes what he calls Ibn Warraq's "lapidary judgements" that "Only the West seems to have developed the notion that the natural world is a rational and ordered universe, that man is a rational creature who is able to understand, without the aid of revelation, or spiritual agencies, and able to describe that universe and grasp the laws that govern it." Price-Jones comments that "Rationalism, universalism, and self-inspection are Western traits which expand civilization." Trying to cast doubts on what he calls "Said's claims to be a Palestinian, dispossessed by Zionist Jews, therefore an archetypal Third World victim," he, finally, reaches the conclusion that "On the pretext of victimhood, but from the safety of New York, [Said] urged others to kill and be killed" (3). Stanley Kurtz, in his turn, remarks after a prolonged attack on Edward Said in "The Hegemonic Impulse of Post-colonialism" in *The Weekly Standard* that "Like the terrorists themselves, the post-colonial theorists have long found comfort and solidarity in blaming both American power and a fast-fading band of traditionalist scholars for the complex ills of the Muslim world" (1)

However, according to his countless supporters, among whom are Nicholas Dirks, Gyan Prakash, and Ronald Inden, it seems that the West has not been ready enough to accept his revolutionary theory, which projects a new light on the West's discourse and requires a radical reconsideration of the way many of the classics of the empire have been read.

It is important to mention here Said's view in lecture one of *Representations of an Intellectual* that an intellectual's mission is to speak truth to power, "to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than to produce them), to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations, and whose *raison d'être* is to represent all those people and issues who are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug" (4). According to his supporters, Said had always been a true intellectual who did all that. After exploring Said's successes and failures, David Herman concludes that "It is only fair to say that the achievements were his alone, but the silences and failures are shared by many" (49).

Conclusion

No matter what, Although Chinua Achebe's essay "An Image of Africa" on Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* exploded a storm of protests and denunciation in the Western literary circles, still, there is almost a consensus that the novel will never be read again secluded from Achebe's views. Likewise, it seems certain that a critical reading of the literary heritage of both the West and the Orient can never be comprehensive without Edward Said's legacy, a legacy that both supporters and critics acknowledge the profound influence it has had in the field of humanities, a legacy that will always be seen as a form of intellectual resistance against the hegemony of the empire reflected in both popular representations and misinterpretations of the Orient in the Western culture, mainly in the United States.

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