

Edward Said on Orientalism - Factsheet

Introduction

In this interview, Edward Said talks about his book *Orientalism*, a manifesto of the rise and current-day perception of the East, also called the Orient. He claims that the manner in which the West perceives countries and people in Asia, is through a Western-made lens that misrepresents reality and is based on stereotypes. This phenomenon is called Orientalism, a framework which we employ in order to try to familiarize ourselves with the unknown. During this interview, Said discusses the repertory of Orientalism, the relation between imperialism and Orientalism, and the way Orientalism is perceived in America.

Significance

This source functions as a reminder that many images of the so-called “Orient” are based on this deeply rooted, stereotypical image that was created through imperialism by the West. The significance of Edward Said’s interview lies in the fact that it reestablishes the truth that Orientalism exists and functions as a powerful worldview, and how paramount it is to realize and eventually let go of these frameworks surrounding the Middle East and Asia as a whole. By recognizing and invalidating orientalist assumptions, all the stereotypes and prejudices that come along with it might be alleviated.

“The East is kind of a mysterious place full of secrets and monsters”

Edward Said’s Key Points

- As a person who grew up in the Middle East, Edward Said noticed an immense difference between the dominant representation of the Middle East and his own experiences. This led to his research into the concept of Orientalism, which is the framework used by the West to understand the “mysterious” East based upon stereotypes.
- Said realized two things:
 - I. The collection of writings regarding the East were all the same and produced a constant image of exoticism and mystery, which of course did not correspond with the realities;
 - II. And these collections were more often than not founded on the ideas of people who have never actually been to the East
- This notion of Orientalism stayed rigid and unchanged, communicating the perception that the Orient is timeless and does not develop as the West does.
- Napoleon’s occupation of Egypt can be viewed as a significant expedition due to the fact that it was a playground for scientists, artists, and writers to document all that they encountered; to produce a scientific analysis of this “newly discovered” place. This information, however, was meant for the Europeans to see Egypt from the conquerors’ view, not from the perspective of the natives. It led to a distorted vision based on fantasies and prejudices.



Gérôme (1870)

- One of the issues that stems from Orientalism is the fact that it describes the differences between individuals based on their characteristics and does so while displaying it as objective knowledge. It creates the illusion that these are the unbiased facts, thus convincing others that it is reality.
- Said explains the different types of Orientalisms, which resulted from imperialism. Since Britain and France had colonies in the East, they developed a different type of perspective, unlike the United States, which did not have a direct link.
- Additionally, the United States has been substantially influenced by the presence of the illegal settlement and their ally Israel, who views Arabs and Muslims as the enemy, a thought passed onto the U.S.
- American Orientalism is the general view the United States has regarding the East, which is highly motivated by politics. Due to close connections, both politically as well as economically, between the U.S. and Israel, these two countries tend to follow each other's views and assumptions. Since Israel sees Arabs and Muslims as terrorists who attack Israeli citizens, the U.S. decides to join in that perspective, "strengthening" their relationship in a way.
- Due to this enshrined anti-Islamic and anti-Arab ideology within American Orientalism, the idea of the Islamic terrorist within the media causes the entirety of the Arab and Muslim world to be viewed in that way, which in turn, leads to the generalization and marginalization of Arabs and Muslims.
- After the World Trade Center bombing, American Orientalism reached a new level where anything that is related to Arabs or Muslims is seen as a threat to American society, and the only way to deal with them is through the use of force. Said gives the example of the Oklahoma City bombing, where the majority of news outlets and people instantly believed it to be the work of the Middle East, which it was not, thus reaffirming the concept that is American Orientalism.
- According to Edward Said, this type of Orientalism plays into the need of the U.S. to convince the West that, after the Cold War, Arabs are the next threat, "foreign devils" who need to be subdued. Furthermore, since the Middle East is filled with dictator-led States who need the support of the U.S., they are not in the position to criticize the United States for spreading these ideas around.

End note

- Said ends the interview with a thought regarding the Palestinian question. He states that it is paramount to understand ourselves in relation to others and to understand other people as we would ourselves. To accept each other's differences and respect them without coercion, which might lead to peaceful coexistence between different people. This is his vision of a better world, and a better future for Palestine.

Bibliography

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