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One of Edward Said's central ideas is that knowledge about the East is generated not through actual facts, but through imagined constructs that set up the East as the antithesis of the West. Such 'a priori' knowledge is constructed through literary texts and historical records which are often limited in terms of their understanding of the actualities of life in the Middle East.

As Lockman observes, Said provides a critique of "the ways in which Arabs and Muslims were often depicted in the Western media [...] as filthy-rich oil sheikhs or as terrorists" (p. 183). In this, Lockman suggests that the East has been categorized in terms of larger-than-life figures that are one-dimensional and typecast, rather than truly being representative of their real-life counterparts. Arguably, literature of the West has been responsible to a great extent for such negative stereotyping. Shelley and Kipling are two of the authors who are possibly responsible for establishing such notions about the East.

When Shelley's Ottoman sultan asks his soldiers to find "infidel [Christian] children to impale on spears," he is representing the nineteenth-century idea that all Muslims are enemies of Christianity, and do not spare the lives even of innocent Christian children in their thirst for "Christian blood." Significantly, Shelley says that the Muslims do not differentiate between religion and culture; he clubs their responses to Christianity with their reactions to Grecian culture, describing the brutal rape of "Grecian virgins" who are also the soldiers' victims, "Whose shrieks and spasms and tears they may enjoy." In this, he is translating the West's idea of the East onto the motives of Muslims, suggesting that those from the East do not differentiate between different kinds of Westerners, when actually the reverse seems to be the case. As Lockman elucidates, such 'knowledge' about the Ottoman Empire suggested that "these lands were economically, socially and culturally stagnant" (p. 241) before their contact with the West, whereas more contemporary studies have revealed that such provincialism existed not within the Ottoman kingdom, but rather in the minds of the historians who sought to represent it.

Similarly, and perhaps more culpably since he, unlike Shelley, lived in India, Kipling presents an idea of the East which sees it as teeming with savage, uncivilized people who have to be redeemed by being taught the ways of the West. In asking the West to "Send forth the best ye breed," he sounds frighteningly racist, invoking the Hitlerian thirst for 'breeding' pure races. Popularizing the famous phrase "the White Man's burden," Kipling also reveals in his capitalization of the initial letters of the phrase 'White Man' that he perceives the significance of both skin color and gender in his determining of the European identity. Further, he describes Easterners as "captives" whose lands are laden with "Famine" and "sickness," in a biblical reference to a land that is cursed and full of 'heathens.' He describes such 'natives' as "Half-devil and half-child," suggesting that they should not be blamed for their ignorance because they know no better, and have to be taught the ways of civilization by Westerners, who have nobly chosen to place themselves in "exile" in a monstrous place so that they may take on the "burden" of relieving these "sullen" and antagonistic people of their ignorant ways.

As Lockman observes, such thinking is what, according to Said, "perpetuated a certain image or "representation" of "the Orient," a representation that had little to do with what the parts of the world so depicted were actually like" (p. 184). Kipling's famous words represent the notion that Easterners are savages who cannot be communicated with in rational terms, and that they only understand brutality and force. The imaginings of such writers replaced actual facts about the East, and were widely accepted in the West as accurate and perceptive insights into the Eastern identities.

Secondly, traveler's accounts have also provided false impressions of the East. In such cases, we may see Foucault's categories reflected in Said's thinking, particularly in the former's derivation that knowledge is an instrument of power, and to create knowledge is to control it. Foucault suggests that there is no such thing as objective truth, and that "what we take to be truth is in fact always really the product of a certain way of depicting or representing reality, of a certain "discourse" – a structured system of meaning which shapes what

we perceive, think and do” (p. 184). Foucault therefore refers to the invention of knowledge in terms of perception, suggesting that ‘truth’ is often constructed in subjective ways, based on perception rather than objective reality. Traveler’s accounts of the East may be interpreted in terms of such subjective notions.

As a traveler’s description of nineteenth-century Istanbul observes, “The Stranger wonders whether all those veiled figures in bright colored wrappers are masquerades, or nuns, or mad women ... One is constrained to stop and meditate upon these strange figures and stranger customs.” The fact that the Westerner is a “Stranger” [note the emphasized initial capital again] is overtly stressed. He is clearly an outsider, but instead of feeling strange and out of place, he instead describes local people and customs as strange. To him, the veiled women can only, stereotypically, be “nuns, or mad women.” He interprets what he sees from the perspectives generated by his experience, refusing to allow for the possibility that there can be traditions that are not distinctly Western, and that these may have as much validity as their Western counterparts.

Similarly, a female British traveler sees “hell” in customs that are non-European, such as polygamy, without considering the religious or sociological motivations of such practices. Her argument is curiously syllogistic: “I declare that if we are to look for a hell upon earth, it is where polygamy exists; and that, as polygamy runs riot in Egypt, Egypt is the lowest depth of hell.” For her, hell equals polygamy; therefore, it follows logically that Egypt is hell, because polygamy is practised there. The fallacious logic of such an outlook is exacerbated only by the self-righteousness of her tone; she firmly believes that she has “diligently” looked for something that may redeem Egypt, but found nothing that can redeem it from its status as hell.

Thirdly, ‘official’ records and statements made by those in positions of political authority may also be seen to be absolutist in nature, determining that the East can only be represented as the antithesis to the West. It is not granted an identity which is autonomous and free from preconceived notions, but is rather typecast in terms of what the West perceives as everything that is different and alien. As in the British traveler’s perspective, the authoritative vision also decrees that the “Oriental is singularly deficient in the logical faculty.” By clubbing every “ordinary Arab” into the same mono-dimensional identity of an irrational idiot, a nineteenth-century British politician and colonial administrator states that “the” Arab is “incapable of drawing the most obvious conclusions from any simple premises.” Here, there is a call for all good Europeans to understand that their culture is based on rational thinking and reasonable premises, which “Orientals” [note here how “Arab” and “Oriental” are used interchangeably] fail to understand, not possessing an ounce of the reasoning faculty. In this way, such discourse becomes a filter or a lens through which the West perceives the East.

By suggesting that the “European is a close reasoner; his statements of fact are devoid of any ambiguity; he is a natural logician, albeit he may not have studied logic,” the British politician suggests that Europeans are somehow capable of rational thought even without studying the principles of logic. In striking contrast, he says, “somehow or other the Oriental acts, speaks, and thinks in a manner exactly opposite to the European.” In this, we see the typecasting not just of Easterners, but also of Europeans. The nineteenth-century politician cannot find it in him to appreciate and identify differences within cultures and skin colors; all whites think and act the same way, as do all ‘colored’ people. To him, it is unthinkable that cultural differences can be more subtle and more layered, and reach beyond religion and skin color.

In this way, the East is set up through orientalist texts as an emblem of all that is uncivilized and irrational. Many such source texts tend to use the East against itself, so to speak, especially where gender is concerned. Veils are seen as “masquerades”; the same writers do not pause to consider that corsets are equally ‘barbaric.’ The victimization of women is seen to be a representation of all that is savage about the East. The women of the East “are indolent, depraved things, locked away with no occupation save gossip and the sensual arts,” and are fit only for consumption, or the satisfying of their masters’ sexual needs. As Lockman points out, Said did not concern himself with gender, but his book came out at a time when feminism was increasingly gaining credibility as an academic and political movement (p. 208).

Additionally, perhaps the most insidious of prejudices manifest themselves in texts which are 'supposed' to be objective. In such works as literary pieces or the personal writings of travelers, one expects to find instances of personal perspectives overriding objective realities, since the imperative to be truthful is subjugated to the licenses of creative expression. However, the depiction of prejudiced attitudes in such works as encyclopedias, which claim to be definitive, is covert, hidden behind the façade of authenticity. As a seventeenth-century French encyclopedia entry for "Mohammed" states, "This is the famous imposter Mahomet, author and founder of a heresy, which has taken on the name of religion, which we call Mohammedan." As before, the very idea of a religion other than Christianity cannot be tolerated, and is automatically branded a "heresy." The generation of knowledge as represented by the text, therefore, is itself put into process through a method that discounts the validity of plurality and multiplicity.

The opinions of historians such as Bernard Lewis also fall under the category of such supposedly objective texts, which claim to represent reality in a disinterested manner, but actually deride the East based on deep-rooted biases. For example, Lewis states quite unequivocally that since there are no more imperial powers left in the West, "the countries of the Middle East are on their own, and can really determine their own destinies." In other words, imperialism so held them down that the Middle Eastern countries had no identity while the imperial powers still functioned. In this, Lewis is subjugating the East to the perspectives of the West, without factoring in the East's perception of itself. The East has no power to think or define even its own identity. For Lewis, it is only after the fall of the notion of 'empire' that the East has been 'set free' – presumably through the efforts of such theorists as Lewis himself, who have become saviors of the Eastern countries by deconstructing the notion of empire. Similarly, Lewis also states with absolute conviction that Islam was the downfall of the Middle East. Because of this religion, an "increasingly widening gap between reality and ideology" was created in the region. This 'gap,' for Lewis, was certainly the work of the "Muslim belief system," and not of "the Middle East's historical passage (much less that of its individual countries and regions), nor its politics or material condition." Most damagingly, Lewis cites the so-called crystallization of Islam as the sole reason "for its instabilities in the present day," falling back on an orientalist politics that does not differentiate religion from culture, or plurality from stereotypical views.

Lastly, it is in those texts that are seemingly 'pro'-Middle East that we find some of the most subtly hidden prejudices. The idea that there is a place for "the Oriental in his Orient" suggests a map of the world in which there is a place for every identity. However, by suggesting that "the men in their robes and the crowded, serpentine streets" are just as they were "in Christ's day," the author is suggesting that the place bears visiting only because it is also the birthplace of Christianity. Also, in stating that "Nothing had changed, and I was glad of it," the author sets up an image of the East as unchanging and stagnant, a place waiting to be discovered by Western eyes, dead and impervious to the flux and evolution of the Western world.

According to Said's discourse, orientalism is a structure which imposes pre-conceived notions onto the fabric of the Middle Eastern identity, forcing it into a mould that does not fit its realities. In such texts as the ones discussed in this paper, we find generalizations and false constructs about the Middle Eastern identity that are damagingly present even today. By inventing and applying such categories of thinking and interpretation, the orientalist way of thinking has ingrained itself into Western thought in an almost inextricable manner.

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