

Orientalism and Islam: A Saidian Study of Lewis' Book: "What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response"

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Abstract

The existence of numerous versions and strands in Western academia on the study of Islam and Muslims can hardly be overemphasized. Many western scholars of Islam have been in the limelight throughout history. In the present era, the western Islamologist who has gained attention is Bernard Lewis. His marathon career has gained him the position of specialist on Middle East and Islamic history. His readings on Islam and analysis has received both admiration and criticism after the historical event of 9\11. His work was very influential in the second half of the twentieth century especially after the cold war. His essay *The Roots of Muslim Rage* (1990) is a living example of it. After the Twin Tower incident Lewis work on Islam especially to know the Muslim world became the favorite of Islamophobes. Lewis work on Islam has received mixed criticism ranging from Pro to Anti-Lewisist postures. This study focuses to analyze Lewis' work according to Edward Said's analysis of the corpus of orientalist scholarship. The focus of the present study is to discuss the Lewis's book, "What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response (2004)". Briefly, Lewis approach towards the study of Islam is reductionist and essentialist. The present study also suggests that a researcher should adopt Inclusive approach to study "Foreign" cultures to keep harmony in the world.

Keywords:

Orientalism,
Orientalist,
Lewis, Said,
Middle East

1. Introduction

Bernard Lewis is one of the most respected religious historians and lately one of the best known. He is a professor emeritus and Near Eastern Studies at Princeton. He has written more than twenty books on the subject of the Middle East. His one of the most influential books entitled "What Went Wrong" has been on the bestseller list for more than two months since September 11. The number of leaders have sought his expertise and his historical judgment including members of the Bush administration. His work was very influential after the cold war. His essay *The Roots of Muslim Rage* (1990) is a living example of it. After the Twin Tower incident, Lewis work on Islam especially to know the Muslim world became the favorite of Islamophobes. As Lewis brags of knowing and conveying the causes of Muslim resentment that led to 9/11 incident particularly in his book *What Went Wrong* (2004). Lewis work on Islam has received mixed criticism ranging from Pro to Anti-Lewisist postures. The whole corpus of such criticism has established Lewis as one of the most influential post-war historians.

2. Methodology

The current study is the discussion of criticism of Bernard Lewis' work by Edward Said. Said's main argument in his book *Orientalism* (2004) was that European colonialism in the Orient was closely linked to how the Orientals were thought of, researched, and talked about in Europe. In other words, what Said says in the book is that the military and economic domination of the East was associated with the discourse about the East.¹ It is this discourse about the East that Said refers to as Orientalism. This builds on Foucault's argument that power, knowledge, and mysterious manifestations of knowledge are inextricably linked. However, what Said is doing here is that he is taking this common sense of Foucault and applying it to a particular context of European colonial rule in the East. Orientalism, therefore, as Said describes it, refers to the European archive of the Orient, which is associated with the military and economic domination of the East.²

In this study, Lewis' work will be analyzed according to Edward Said's analysis of the corpus of orientalist scholarship. Firstly, Said will be discussed as literary theorist. Secondly, Orientalism as per Said will be defined. Thirdly, we will analyze Lewis' book: "What Went Wrong?"

3. Limitation of the Study

The discussion of the present study revolves around Lewis' book, *What Went Wrong: Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response* (2004). Though marathon career of Lewis has produced several bestsellers on the topic involving Islam and Muslims especially of Middle East, it is outside the range of this article to discuss all of his views about them.

4. Literature Review

Saidian attack on orientalism traditionally practiced proved as per Al Macfie (2016) most effective. As far as approach of Said has concerned, several intellectuals, analysts and Scholars have influenced it. For instance, three personalities were the basis of his arguments. He consumed the concept of cultural hegemony from Antonio Gramsci. Foucault's analysis of the terms discourse epistemic field and power knowledge relationship was used by Said. Moreover, Derrida's idea of deconstruction was also one of his fundamental premises. Edward Said tried to expose subtle degradation of knowledge by explaining the relationship between power and knowledge. Counter Orientalist vision of Said has raised mixed response among the critics. It ranges from Pro- to Anti-Saidian postures.³ Anti-Saidian postures list may include the following such as Ernest J. Wilson *Orientalism: A Black Perspective* (2000), Stuart Schar's "Orientalism at the Service of Imperialism" (2000) and Ronald's "Orientalist Constructions of India" (2000).

As far as the critics who are sympathetic to Saidian approach may include Sadiq Jalal ul Azam "Orientalism and Orientalism in Reverse", Ejaz Ahmad "Between Orientalism and Historicism" (1991), Fred Halliday "Orientalism and its Critics" (1993) James Clifford's *On "Orientalism and The Predicament of Culture"* (1998).

What is Orientalism? The question gets a lot of attention. So Edward Said while explaining his reasons for writing his book, the famous book *Orientalism* which appeared in 1978, suggests that he came up with theoretical view of Orientalism while studying a European text about the Middle East. He realized that, as he read fiction, literature, travel stories, a specific Middle Eastern concept called the Orient in the book, hence the name Orientalism. It did not matter who went there or wrote about it and some toys were always put together.⁴

Images like the Bedouin people living in the desert appeared mainly

in Dutch paintings of these people who existed in some way other than the teleological era as if their history had not changed. Said realized that this has been around for 300 years with many representations coming out of here. That view of the Middle East was given and it was then he decided to put the idea like that. In that sense, the reason why Europeans and Americans see the East, the way they do it is because according to Said that the Oriental theory is produced by chaos and Said may have been one of the greatest scholars in the United States using Foucault's concept of speech. In fact, in the introduction to *Orientalism*, he mentions Foucault's works there.⁵ So to speak plainly what he meant by the fact that speech or Orientalism does not agree with the body of knowledge comes from the East. It could be historical works or it could be written travel documents and that writing is so powerful and widespread that any European interested in the Middle East or East cannot escape watching it with that lens. By using the lens that puts the East in this timeless place like these ossified patriarchal traditions and perhaps violent. That the considerations have been illegally produced in the European sense to look to the East. This particular approach is what Said calls Orientalism. To build such a discourse you need to be strong. He begins the book *Orientalism* with Napoleon's invasion of Egypt as in the first moment and the reason for that is because it shows the power of the European Conqueror. He not only came with an army and a navy but also an army of international physicians and anthropologists with the power to remember Egypt. Said says the ability to do that is what determines the production of speech because there is no such thing as a French reading about the Arabs or anyone like that. Power is essential. Power is the key to recording and disseminating that information. It is that body of knowledge combined with the power that has ultimately created the discourse that obscurely unseen the Europeans to see the East the Islamic world of the present Middle East in some way without knowing it. That is the lens they see or think of East and is what they call Orientalism. That idea is largely produced because they are already in talks where their knowledge is already focused on these previously established tracks. It even goes so far as to suggest that it is almost impossible for people living in America or elsewhere to see the East in any other way because the expression of Orientalism is still so powerful. Now many conservative scholars who contradict Said's views always claim that there is Occidentalism. They explain why people from Muslim countries use their tropes about America and Europe and even unite them with the terrorist groups that unite them. But the reason at least

at the level of scholars, Orientalism is impossible because these people are misleading the way speech is produced.⁶

To be able to promote that idea and spread it to people with racist views about Europe and elsewhere requires the power of knowledge to produce a powerful discourse that is accepted as true and not within the current context of power given. So, they can have their prejudiced views. They can even preach it to their followers but it still does not become Orientalism because it does not dislodge the power of the European or American power centers. That is why people who theorize or talk about Orientalism do not really understand Said's work well and do not really understand how discourse works.⁷

There are obviously criticisms of Said even from post-colonial studies. Another major criticism of his work is that when you study Orientalism the natives seem to have no agency. They seem to be the product of Western speech and our architecture. Said actually explains that after the voice of the letter in which he made it clear that his intention was not to record and cool down and explain the actions of the agency and the resistance. The purpose of the book he introduced in the introduction was to explain the discourse that created a particular pre-Eastern idea. That is why, the book focused on Europeans and what they produced and how they represented east and west. Nevertheless, that criticism is there and Said of course goes on to write 'Culture and Imperialism' and other works. His works on Palestine show that he was not naive enough to assume that there was no real orient or there was no East and that people did not exist. However, that is just one of many criticisms offered by critics.

So, in a nutshell, Orientalism, according to Said, is the discursive framework within which Europeans, Americans, and other urban dwellers have developed ideas that they have previously seen about the East and the Islamic world without knowing how those ideas were developed.⁸ The Western world is looking at that part of the world with that lens and that is the lens that has been made inconsistently over time with the body of work, power, and knowledge is what he calls Orientalism.

Said quotes Karl Marx quote, "They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented". The first one from Marx with the biggest criticism is that Said quotes it out of context. First Marx writes about young French landowners who could not form a class and therefore had no political representatives. The whole idea was that they should take a patronym and napoleon should become the person who represents

them as a father-like figure. So, the quote is kind of, a lot of critics who have read the quote and Said's justification for using it have had problem with that. First, because it makes people think. People who have not read Marx, would it make them think that this is what Marx thought of the oriental people which was not necessarily the case. Second, Marx is trying to theorize how would the small landholders who cannot constitute a class, be politically represented so that is the first code, which is problematic.

Said also quotes Disraeli that "East is a career", suggests the people who were tired of materialism of Victorian England. That is kind of an epigram, because east and a lot of critics who write about orientalism would tell that within the context of today's politics, east still of course is a career for a lot of people. Now that we have seen the second gulf war and all that we've also learned that east is also a career for a lot of contractors, defense contractors and everyone else.

Orientalism is the first major textbook at least from the American academia using Foucault's discourse theory and Said states that in the last part of the introduction. Therefore, the three possible definitions of orientalism, which he considers orientalism and gives us a common definition of orientalism that anyone who teaches, writes, writes poetry, executives or anyone who claims a certain expertise, knowledge, oriental unity can be called orientalist.⁹ Now within the colonial system, this would also include the people who were the rulers. They would be the people who lived in the eastern colonies, so all the actions of the people what he would call orientalism. Any sensory range that sets this ontological and epistemological differences between the orient and the occident.

What is the ontological difference? Ontology deals with human existence. Therefore, any time someone thinks that these two categories have different kinds of existences as human beings, that one is an orientalist. Epistemology is about dealing with knowledge so anyone who tries to explore what the orient writes about, or claims his expertise about these writings is an orientalist.

Educational orientalism is the main theme of his concept. Educational orientalism produced people who called themselves orientalists. There are conferences to the east. There are still schools in Europe that call themselves oriental schools. These are the people, who consider themselves experts in the established field of oriental studies, and have conferences, produce books and produce a body of knowledge. Therefore, these are the academic orientalists.

The second is in the cultural sense. People think of the orient in a certain way and there is according to Said many books between the two. Educational orientalism informs the popular ideas of the audience and vice versa. The third most important part of the book is about orientalism as a co-operative center of globalization.

What do you mean by working with the orient, producing information about it, controlling it and making it understandable and audible to Europeans? This is where we will now use Michel Foucault and discourse theory.

As Foucault describes the discourse in *Archeology of knowledge* (2002) and two works, he himself states that speech is a body of knowledge made by dignified scholars behind them. It creates a situation, a contradictory situation where without knowing it, we incorporate the claims and the mind of that discourse and see the world through it.

The reason for looking at the third, orientalism is corporate because we had knowledge bodies, universities, colonial businesses, colonial masters and professional writers, poets who always produce information about the orient and it is difficult for people to feel physically orient and know.¹⁰

For example, how does a discourse work? Putting you in front or more determines how you think about things. If you buy a travel guide to Nepal, you are buying a travel guide. That tour guide creates your desire by isolating yourself, balancing it and building your expectations. If you are the only thing you have learned about Nepal, when you get there, everything you do compares your experience with what you have learned. Therefore, your experience is only meaningful based on the text that informs you of the place you are visiting. In some cases, the visit itself does not change your mind. It sanctifies your superstitions.

That is what he says about orientalism as a corporate institution. He tells us that there are various categories of it. For example, the representation of the 18th century east and then the representation of the 19th century orient when the European powers already occupied a large part of the country. The themes of the work done by the authors by the local authorities are the ones that form the oriental view in European thought but also create an orient like the one in which Europeans can stabilize their cultural identity and people.

Said's essence is that it does not mean that orientalism puts unilaterally what can be said about the orient but that it is the whole inevitable network of interests carried out at any time when that

particular orient business is in question. How does this happen? That is what his book tries to show. What he is trying to say is that he is explaining how the place of the orient is determined by the expressions. Why Europeans see it as an important way for European self-determination and self-reliance as a culture. He tells us that in the early 19th and 19th centuries the oriental was India and the Levant but grew exponentially due to the necessary relations and close proximity in the French and British colonial sense in these areas. He confronts the captivity of the French and British kings in the east and in their imagination and so America is a subject to be studied but probably not in this book. What he goes on to say at the end of the introduction to his book is the role of America since Second World War in relation to another country in the Far East.

He does not provide details about every text. He chose some British and French texts over 300 years.¹¹ These are consistent texts that claim to be the point of doing certain things about Europe. Their administrative writings, their love, their way of looking at this, are all part of the common discourse of the eastern region that puts Europeans to see the east in a certain way to such an extent that people can feel the world in its material state. That east was further developed as a place where this could be used to stabilize Europe.

Is there any change among the western critics to approach Said's philosophy nowadays? As for now, things are clearer and the examples given by Said are authentic at every point whether it is about the false superiority of the west that they were the greatest explorers and all that. Are there critics or writers who are accepting that Said was absolutely justified in his assumptions? In the past, he was only criticized by these western hegemonic powers. There are western critics in all fields of study whose works have been impacted by Said, and that is a recorded fact in American academy. A more perplexing thing is that his work has not had much impact in the Arab world.

5. Discussion and Analysis

Lewis work on Islam has received mixed criticism ranging from Pro to Anti-Lewisist postures. The whole corpus of such criticism has established Lewis as one of the most influential post-war historians. As far as his admirers have concerned who are in favor of his criticism might include Fouad Ajmi, Hugh Fitzgerald and Martin Kramer. These personalities are very appreciative of Lewis' work in their works. A

Critique of Bernard Lewis (1998), *A Sage in Christendom*, *A Personal Tribute to Bernard Lewis* (1999) are some of these works. Martin Kramer has quoted Lewis in *Encyclopedia of Historians and Historical Writing*.¹² The titles that Lewis got from his admirers are *A Sage in Christendom* and *Doyen of Middle Eastern Studies* and a prophet from Princeton.

Anti-Lewisist postures may generally include the following works. Maxime Rodanant's *La fascination de l'Islam*, Asad Abu Khalil's *Bernard Lewis and his reputation and paradigm-shifting work of Edward Said Orientalism 1979*. Various titles have been given by the Anti-Lewisist critics such as 'vulgar propagandist' by Chomsky (2000), and 'demagogues' by Said and the 'orientalists' tiger' by Alam (2002). In American Oriental scholarship Lewis is generally perceived as the epitome of image of Islam. In a nutshell for his critics going to a number of facts proving Lewis politicized journalistic assertions and oversimplified judgements make him a controversial historian. Generally, Western Academy harp on the same string and recycles and projects Lewis analysis and judgement of the Islamic world. Lewis finds mention in paradigm-shifting book of Said according to him Lewis is the senior British orientalist who is at the forefront of Cultural war against Islam. Encyclopedic study of Lewis is based on the sole purpose to discredit Arabs and Muslims. According to Said Islam is Monolithic for Lewis. His judgements are Pro-Zionist. As per Winshuttle, Lewis may be termed as an epitome of the strength of the field of orientalism that focuses politicized judgements of self-affirmation instead of impartial enquiry.¹³ According to Said Lewis' analysis of Islam as an American Islamologist represents Islam like the carbon copy of west's cold war perception of communism. Lewis tailors Islamic history to fit in with political stereotyping of Islam as being equivalent to terror and hostility. The title of Lewis as professor of Near Eastern studies shows his binaristic position of East or West.

Prior to delving into the critical analysis of the book, it seems apt and appropriate to discuss some of the thoughts of Lewis in the book and its gist. His book *What Went Wrong* received mixed response ranging from admiration to Skepticism. To stamp the authority of western civilization, he overlooks multiple facts about Middle East. He has a long career of studying the life of Muslim world in the Middle East. His marathon career offers unique insight into the Muslim world especially of Middle East.

In *What Went Wrong?* Lewis tries to explore the reasons of the

decline of Islamic civilization in the post-imperial era. What were the causes of the downfall of the Islamic civilization that was at the forefront in every field of human endeavor like Arts and Sciences, Military and Economics?

While talking about western imperialism, Lewis argues that the Anglo-French interlude lasted for a very shorter period. He says they did contribute but they are not the cause of what went wrong. They are just a symptom, which he also maintained this as the field in the book that differentiate between the cause and the symptom. All these reasons were the ones that caused the area to be weak or the local including technical contemporary times. At this moment in time, two solutions in the Muslim world have received extensive support. One of them is attributing all evil to the fact that it is leaving behind the divine heritage of Islam is what Muslims take to themselves when they ask themselves what went wrong. They look at themselves and say because we abandoned the message of God but of course this is a very loaded expression because we know when they ask themselves this question answer this way it is easy to go back to the original tenets of religion but the matter of interpretation what is exactly Islamic. This is the very debatable thing. Therefore, it is not easy answer to soothe you as a Muslim to say so. Because we left our Book, we should go back to the book. But on what premises? What kind of interpretation of the book you are going to go? That is what causes a bigger problem. Lewis finds flicker of hope as more and more Muslim Listeners acquire a more self-critical approach. He writes the question became who did this for us and how can we catch up with that. The book of Lewis does not provide an answer to the question.¹⁴ At least scholarly speaking if you raise a question like that you lay all the premises of the failure of a cause and then you do not provide even suggestions. But he would say we leave it to the Muslims answer themselves. Imagine now that you are reading that book and you did not have a background in the savage cuts of Islamic history and have this list of these questions. So, what would you do if you were a White House top official reading Bernard Lewis while trying to come up with a new Middle East strategy.

You are putting yourself now in what many politicians are trying to put themselves in and try to find that answer now regret every book that comes in the market and read it because they want to develop a concept through which they can deal with the Middle East. It is a very complicated issue for especially a politician who does not have library and he does like to learn anything but he finds Lewis book written very

conveniently and concisely.

Two things may come to your mind. First, you will know that the conflict between Western and Islamic civilization is inevitable in history. This book tells you if you are a politician and have no knowledge of this area. Second, you will see that the crippling of Islamic civilization was not the result of modern Western civilization or the invasion of the Mongols in the 15th century but was the result of internal failures directly linked to Islam in Western civilization. Someone who reads this book has come up with the same results such as that Muslims who will not have it will have a problem. The problem is the layers and they have to deal with finding themselves but they do not see themselves responding fully.¹⁵

Muslims do not see themselves as responsible. They see anyone else dealing with that. What Lewis has written about the irregularities liberates that the author while questioning Islamic civilization and proposing certain provisions raises doubts about its nature and intentions from below. It does this by going through an important process of historical analysis and making the most important events of the past and complex controversies in the present and future. He puts too much emphasis on historical events right now without really talking about the changes that have taken place since then. So, now we have made sure that anyone who is studying elementary school in theology will know what really happened. Lewis's sudden conclusions leave the student and diminish his work ethic.¹⁶ Concluding the task in this case means one of two things. First Lewis could not come to a logical conclusion about the time and place he received as a Gordian cutting pledge and not in front of him by closing the absurd question.¹⁷

The ability and understanding of the book that you have become, to write this description is not acceptable. Lewis's weak conclusion after such a rich study leads the reader to a second conclusion. Lewis knows the answers to his question but chooses not to publish publicly for fear of controversy. In his conversations where he argued over many things, he wrote in a book. It leaves the book feeling unfinished. This closure challenges the reason for his conclusions and the unexpected benefits. Many oriental scholars ignore the attempts to confront Islam as if it were its main strategy and that is something that bothers anyone in the field.

One would not expect Lewis to make that sweeping judgment and Said has referred to that in his book *Orientalism* which is still really being practiced until today.¹⁸ He described the book as intellectual and

moral disasters rehashing much and recycling hired Orientalists proofs or half-truths. The book has created another type of response from several conservative corners. They praised the book very highly but some of them volunteers to hand in a condescending way. We have advised that the Muslim world how to deal with the issue and problems like bullet points. Muslims have to do so and so things. It was to westernize the Islamic world is in order to be accepted by the West.

6. Conclusion

Lewis work on Islam has received mixed criticism ranging from Pro to Anti-Lewisist postures. The whole corpus of such criticism has established Lewis as one of the most influential post-war historians. According to said Lewis' analysis of Islam as an American Islamologist represents Islam like the carbon copy of west's cold war perception of communism. Lewis tailors Islamic history to fit in with political stereotyping of Islam as being equivalent to terror and hostility. Lewis is a scholar we have to really respect for whatever he did. But such religious historians have to be exposed and has to be related with and that what makes scholarship something we value.

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