
(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

AHMAD'S CRITIQUE OF ORIENTALISM AS SAID'S EUROCENTRISM

Mr. Yuvraj Shinde

Research Scholar,

Dept of English,

Shivaji University, Kolhapur

and

Assistant Professor,

Govt Institute of Science and Humanities, Amaravati

&

Prof. A. M. Sarawade

Dept of English,

Shivaji University, Kolhapur

Abstract

This paper critically examines Edward Said's seminal work "Orientalism" through the lens of Aijaz Ahmad's Marxist critique, focusing on Said's Eurocentric approach. Said's interdisciplinary exploration of discourse and representation in Orientalism has influenced scholars to navigate away from Eurocentrism. However, Ahmad highlights contradictions within Said's framework, particularly in essentializing the West while critiquing Orientalist essentialism. Ahmad argues that Said's alignment with postmodernist discourses undermines the revolutionary potential of Marxist thought, overlooking its contributions to anti-colonial struggles. Moreover, Ahmad contends that Said's analysis fails to transcend Eurocentric paradigms, emphasizing the enduring challenges of representation and discourse within capitalist frameworks. This critique underscores the complexities of decolonization in scholarly endeavours and calls for a deeper interrogation of power dynamics in knowledge production.

Keywords: Orientalism, Eurocentrism, Marxist critique, discourse, postmodernism, decolonization, power dynamics, essentialism, anti-colonialism, capitalism etc.

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

The literary theory attempts to simplify all contours of discourse and representation for the general readers. Going beyond aesthetics of the text, theory highlights the textuality of the literary work. Based on vigorous study and analysis, theory presents social and political conditions which are responsible for the production and dissemination of the text. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) has been praised for its interdisciplinary approach and hybrid methodology. Most importantly, *Orientalism* has inspired readers and critics to avoid the entangled web of Eurocentrism which has been 'colonizing the consciousness' of the global south.

Orientalism basically deals with the issues of the 'discourse and representation'. According to Said, west has invented east and orientalism, which do not have any material basis, is the figment of western imagination. In this binary opposition, west is endowed with all positive attributes and east with negative. Metaphysically speaking, this artificial narration is normalized and naturalized through the manipulations of the methods of the representation in discourse. The orientalism, being generated from the western imagination, disguises itself theoretically to be part of positivist methodology. Therefore, *Orientalism*, instead of becoming an art about orientals, develops into the science of orientals which subjects orientals into their respective subjective positions. Being a transhistorical phenomenon, the discourse of orientalism manages to defy the logic of space and time by propagating irrationalism through the medium of the discourse in the contemporary times. Most significantly, the divinity or very neutrality of literature is a myth generated by the vested interest to hegemonize subjects. In the opinion of Said, literature has played a very significant role in the perpetuation of the myth of orientalism across the time and space.

Aijaz Ahmad was a famous Marxist critic of Indian origin and was famous for his dialectical understanding of different varieties of capitalism. Like Said, he was a cultural critic who was interested in the production, dissemination, and consumption of the meaning in the discourse. Being part of the global south or periphery of the ever-growing discourse of 'capitalist universality' (Ahmad:74), Ahmad had devoted his time and energy to launch theoretical and practical resistance in the 'War of the Position' (Gramsci:110). Instead of getting trapped in

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

web of ‘donnish abstractions’ of traditional intellectuals who have arm chair approach to the metaphysics of narration, his aim was to be ‘organic intellectual in Gramscian mold’. According to Gramsci,

All men are intellectuals; one could therefore say; but not all men have in society the functions of intellectuals. (Gramsci: 115)

Most importantly, his radical commitment to Marxism makes him different from the other critics.

In the beginning of his essay, ‘Orientalism and After: Ambivalence and Metropolitan Location in the work of Edward Said’, Ahmad has acknowledged the contribution of Edward Said to the field of critical inquiry. He argues that ‘Jameson and Said are possibly the most significant cultural critics writing in the English language today’ (Ahmad :159). Moreover, he appreciates Said’s devotion to the cause of Palestinians and lauds his commitment ‘to do honor to that origin’ (Ahmad:160). Being part of the Marxist solidarity, Ahmad faced dilemma regarding his criticism of Said’s approach. But he realized that ‘suppression of criticism, I have come to believe, is not the best way of expressing solidarity’ (Ahmad:160).

Said’s orientalism has been situated in the dynamic of the postmodernism which has rejected Marxism as grand narrative of humanity’s liberation from oppressive social, economic, and political structures. Moreover, Said has employed Foucauldian methodology of discursive formations to analyze the very artificiality of the discourse of orientalism. Being trained in classical Marxism, Ahmad rejects all elements of postmodernism including Foucault’s trope of the discursive formations. Therefore, at the onset of his essay, he makes clarification regarding his disagreements with Said ‘on issues of both of theory and history’ (Ahmad:159). In his analysis of Said’s Orientalism, Ahmad attempts to locate orientalism in the framework of postmodernist critical production system which is anti-reactionary in its approach and methodology.

In the parlance of Marxism, analytical twin structure of base and superstructure is deployed to understand the textuality and historicity of the text. Focusing on the material conditions of the production of the Orientalism, Ahmad locates Orientalism in the post war ascendancy of

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

the right-wing political forces in all parts of the world. In his opinion, postmodernism is nothing but theoretical manifestation of anti-humanism of right-wing elements. He argues,

This global offensive of the Right, global retreat of the Left, retreat also of that which was progressive even in our canonical nationalism, is the essential backdrop for any analysis of the structure of intellectual productions and their reception in our time.

(Ahmad: 192)

According to Ahmad, these changed political conditions have produced ‘a new kind of intellectual’ (Ahmad: 192) who devoted critical and creative energy to the lost cause of the wretched of earth by giving prominence to issues of global south and national liberation. Due to the monopoly of the ‘capitalist universality’ and ascendancy of postmodernism in theoretical realms, this new intellectual rejected the tradition of classical Marxism. Moreover, instead of joining progressive forces, the new intellectual became foot soldier of the reactionary forces of capitalist modernity. Therefore, the critical output of new intellectual has failed to bring real changes in the life of the people who are the focus of the analysis. This failure on the part of new intellectual is more visible in comparison of intellectuals of progressive nationalism of the global south, who brought a significant change in the lives of people due to their allegiance to the tenets of the Marxism. According to Ahmad, Said has been incorporated in the structure of capitalist universality and his orientalism is all about representation in which there is no place for the tradition of humanism, empiricism, and historicism. Hence like other postmodern tropes, it becomes just another linguistic game of representation, devoid of any revolutionary content and action. In this way, Ahmad locates the production and reception of Orientalism in the age of advanced late capitalism.

After locating the production and reception of Orientalism in the ascendancy of right-wing framework, Ahmad then accuses Orientalism of pandering ‘to the most sentimental, the most extreme forms of Third -World nationalism’ (Ahmad:195). In the parlance of postmodernism, cultural or religious revivalism is very important element in high jacking of the modernist project of the progress. By igniting cultural or religious revivalism in the age of advanced late capitalism, postmodernism has been creating real and imaginary obstacles in modernist emancipation of individuals across time and space. In the opinion of Ahmad, Said’s

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

passionate pandering of the extreme forms of the Third World Nationalism in Orientalism indirectly legitimates the cultural or religious revivalism in the global south.

Conceptually speaking, colonialism was diabolical process which had created victims and beneficiaries in the native counties. Due to their strategic position in networks of power hierarchy, the higher classes were actual beneficiaries of the colonialism. The end of colonialism, after the World War II, galvanized this local higher class to migrate to the 'center' from 'periphery'. Most of them were absorbed in 'ideological state apparatuses'(Althusser:121) of USA or European nations. Moreover, the strategic need of capitalist universality created a new class of 'metropolitan intelligentsia' (Ahmad:195) who could produce the epistle of knowledge for the unchallenged march of the capitalism. Having roots in native cultures, these metropolitan intellectuals have been incorporated in these centers of knowledge production. On the contrary, Said argues,

Noone has ever devised a method for detaching the scholar from the circumstances of life, from the fact of his involvement (conscious or unconscious) with a class, a set of beliefs, a social position or from the mere activity of being a member of a society.

(Said :10)

Said assumes that objectivity is myth and it is difficult for critics to be neutral or impartial while conducting research. Most significantly, Said's pandering of the extreme forms of Third World nationalism is targeted at 'dominant sectors of metropolitan intelligentsia who first bestowed upon it the status of a modern classic' (Ahmad:195). The discourse of Orientalism was the strategic need of this new 'ethnic intellectual' (Ahmad: 197) who were benefited from the colonial enterprise. Ahmad points out,

Those who came as graduate students and then joined the faculties, especially in the Humanities and the Social Sciences, tended to come from upper classes in their home countries. In the process of relocating themselves in the metropolitan countries, they needed documents of their assertion, proof that they had always been oppressed.

(Ahmad: 196)

Ahmad's argument proves that the manipulative capitalist universality had prepared the fertile soil for the reception of Said's Orientalism. To these groups of 'ethnic intellectual',

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

the publication of Orientalism became a kind of divine intervention in secular sphere of the discourse. The essentialist discourse of orientalism, Ahmad believes, liberates the native high class from their own complicity in the exploitation of masses or even from functioning of unjust social manifestations such as caste and communalism. For ethic intellectuals, 'colonialism is now held responsible not only for its own cruelties but, conveniently enough, for ours too' (Ahmad:197). Therefore, most of name and fame, which is attributed to Said's Orientalism, is credited to this class of intellectuals. In short, Orientalism has a kind of redemptive value for them.

Ahmad, after the analysis of production and reception of Orientalism, turns his attention to some essential features of the text. In his analysis, Said has highlighted manipulations of discourse which have been controlled by Eurocentrism. He defines Orientalism as,

Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the orient and (most of time) the occident. (Said:2)

Said, through his analysis, locates the artificiality of the discourse of orientalism. He believes 'Orient is not an inert fact of nature' (Said:4). Therefore, the entire book is devoted to prove this argument. In his opinion, the identity, or the subjectivity of 'the orient was almost a European invention' (Said:1). Said, in his analysis of Eurocentrism, has accused west of essentializing the east, by giving static and stable identity which even defy the logic of the time and space. Moreover, this project of essentialized documentation has been backed by the might of the well sourced and funded institutes.

Though Said has pointed out the essentialist nature of Orientalist discourse, Ahmad has some reservations regarding this approach. Most importantly, he accuses Said of using the same methodology that also essentialized the west. To Ahmad, Said's analysis is a kind of 'Orientalism in reverse' (Ahmad: 183). Ahmad points out that Said is the product of Eurocentrism and has been performing the role of scholar for the east as it was performed by orientalists in the discourse of Orientalism. He argues,

Said quite justifiably accuses the 'Orientalist' of essentializing the Orient, but his own essentializing of 'the West' is equally remarkable. In the process, Said of course gives us that same Europe – unified, self-identical, transhistorical, textual – which is always

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

rehearsed for us in sort of literary criticism which traces its own pedigree from Aristotle to T. S. Eliot. (Ahmad :183)

In the opinion of Ahmad, Said is guilty of the same accusation which he is making at orientalist writers and thinkers. While analyzing the enterprise of orientalism, he has made the sweeping assumptions about Europe, which are rejected by Ahmad. Metaphorically speaking, Said is unable to free himself from 'the inventory traces upon' (Said :25) him. Though Said has all sympathy for the East, he is trained in western discourse. Therefore, he would deploy same logic of the binary oppositions which was used by earlier orientalists. Most importantly, the classical equation of binary opposition, in the analysis of Said, has been reversed and there has been exchange of the place. Hence, instead of being west-east, it becomes east-west. Philosophically speaking, the example of Said is classic case of the entrapment of individual in the meshy web of the discourse. Credit should be given to Said for bringing out falsity and artificiality of Orientalism but he failed to construct his theory outside the semantic boundaries of the discourse of Eurocentrism. Most significantly, his narration of orientalism is marred by his notion; that is his subjective position. His idea of Unified Europe is not feasible in a sense of history or culture and religion. Therefore, his analysis has been accused of the sweeping generalizations which cannot stand in the domain of research. In short, Ahmad is of opinion that Said has failed to venture beyond the essentialist western method of representation and has been indirectly working for the cause of Eurocentrism which he wishes to reject. Said is not the only scholar or researcher to fall in such trap. The lack or absence of reliable method of representation, which would be free from binary logic of western representation, is the main obstacle in 'war of position' against the western discourse.

Ahmad was a committed Marxist and most of the time his analysis was based on the postulates of dialectal materialism. Whether one agrees or disagrees with the Marxist vision of class politics or Marxist utopia of classless society, one cannot deny the fact that Marxism, being the method of analysis and interpretation, has enriched our understanding and has brought a revolutionary change especially in the social sciences. Therefore, someone like, Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), the opponent of Marxism, had to accept the very relevance of

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

Marxism by calling it 'philosophy of our time' in his book 'Search for a Method' (1968). Even most of postmodernist critics, to whom Said professes his literal and philosophical allegiance, have received training in classical Marxism or they were Marxist in early phase of their career.

What is surprising about Said is his refusal to consider Marxism as a narrative of humanity's liberation and make it as part of the discourse of the orientalism because of Marx's European origins. Ahmad explains,

Said's break with that political tradition was sweeping indeed. Marx himself was dismissed in the book yet another Orientalist, Marxism was swept aside as an unsavory child of 'historicism' and the insights which had originally emanated from that tradition were now conjoined with Foucauldian Discourse Theory. (Ahmad:178)

The strategic aim of postmodernism is to discredit the progressive nature of Marxism because 'socially enlightened and politically progressive critiques of colonialism had been affiliated with either Marxism' (Ahmad:178). Hence, Said's analysis is based on 'Foucauldian Discourse Theory' and 'Nietzschean anti-humanism' (Ahmad:193). Though Arab nationalism or Third World nationalism has been inspired by ideology and vision of Marxism, Said overlooks these facts on the ground while making Marxism an integral part of the discourse of orientalism. Therefore, Ahmad positions Said as part of the postmodernist discourse which have been trying to reverse the revolutionary achievements of the Enlightenment and Modernism.

Though Said had managed to diagnose the very artificiality of orientalism, Ahmad believes that Said's analysis is still rooted in Eurocentrism which is foundation of orientalism. Furthermore, he rejects Said's argument which views orientalism as a transhistorical phenomenon by locating it in the paradigm of industrial capitalism. Most importantly, Said, according to Ahmad, has essentialized the west in his analysis, which is exactly the reverse copy of orientalism. In short, Ahmad's critique of Said's Orientalism is highly relevant and points out the real difficulty in the domain of representation and discourse to venture beyond the paradigms of capitalism.

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

Works Cited:

- Ahmad, Aijaz. *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992. Print.
- Ahmad, Aijaz. *On Communalism and Globalization Offensives of the Far right*. New Delhi: Three Essays Collective, 2004. Print
- Ahmad, Aijaz: *Iran Afghanistan and the Imperialism of Our Time*. New Delhi: New Delhi: Left Word Books, 2004. Print.
- Ahmad, Aijaz: *Lineages of the Present Ideology and Politics in Contemporary South Asia*. London: Verso, 2000. Print.
- Ahmad, Aijaz: *A World to win Essays on The Communist Manifesto*. (Ed. Prakash Karat) New Delhi: Left Word Books, 1999. Print.
- Ahmad, Aijaz. *Postmodernism in History*. From *The Making of History Essays presented to Irfan Habib*. Edited by K N Panikkar, Terence J Byres, Utsa Patnaik. New Delhi: Tulika Books.
- Ahmad, Aijaz. *Twelve Jottings on Liberalization of democracy from Marx, Gandhi and Modernity*, essays presented to Javeed Alam edited by Akeel Bilgrami . New Delhi. Tulika Books. 2004.
- Ahmad, Aijaz. *From Marx and Engels on the National and Colonial Questions* edited by Aijaz Ahmad. New Delhi, Left World Books 2001
- Ahmad, Aijaz. *The Politics of Literary Postmodernity*. In *Race and Class* 36, 3 (1995)
- Ahmad, Aijaz. *Nationalism, Post-colonialism, Communalism*. In *Radical Philosophy* 76 (March/ April 1996)
- Ahmad, Aijaz. *Postcolonial Theory and the Post-condition*. From a lecture delivered at York University, Toronto 27 November 1996.
- Ahmad, Aijaz. *Postcolonialism: What's in a Name*. in *Late Imperial Culture* edited by Roman De La Campa, E. Ann Kaplan, Michael Sprinkler. London. Verso. 1995.
- Althusser, Louis. *Ideology and Ideological State apparatuses*. Lenin and Philosophy and other essays P. N. 121 -176 Wikipedia

(Peer Reviewed and Refereed Journal)

Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. edi and trans. By Geoffrey Nowell Smith and Quintin Hoare, London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2003

Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: First Vintage Books Edition, October 1979.

Sartre, Jean -Paul. *Search for a Method*. Trans. Hazel Barnes. New York: Vintage, 1968. Print.