

## SUBJECTIVITY, KNOWLEDGE AND THE ORIENT

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### Abstract

This paper attempts to study the manner in which the imperial self fabricates Oriental subjectivity. Construction of subject positions involves knowing the colonized. The knowledge of the colonial other is systematically implicated and elucidated through the study of texts (knowledge), extension of borders (geography) and perpetration of military (power). The paper also studies the subtle nexus between knowledge and subjectivity as elaborated by Edward Said.

**Keywords:** Orientalism, Subjectivity, Knowledge, Occident, Foucault, Said, identity, other, power

Edward Said attempts to account the influences that left trails on him as an Oriental subject by employing critical consciousness in a search for his own self that is configured by product a historical process. His bringing up in Palestine and Egypt bestowed in him the consciousness of being Oriental. Therefore Orientalism is not just his research motif but also his intricate and paradoxical personal subject position. It is also a question that deals directly with the configuration of his identity that obliterates subject hood. The compound procedure through which the colonized are bestowed its self, the manner in they are acculturated and their subjectivity named and interpreted correspond to a reconfiguration of the colonized subject. Such a procedure involves political underpinnings of colonial struggles and locates itself in violence as natural state. Moreover “colonized subject was and continues to be produced by cultural practices, historical documents, institutions, archives and literary texts” (Said, *Orientalism* 3) which lay latent even after the colonies attained their freedom.

The discourse on Orientalism involves not only the making of the Orient by the Europe but also the particular mode that influenced the existential experience of the Orient. Locating within Foucauldian metadiscourse, Said interprets the discourse on Orientalism as an

expression of power/knowledge. The intersection of colonial discourses and institutions necessitated an epistemic authority over the colonized. The knowledge about the Oriental subject became indispensable for the colonizer to justify imperialist endeavours. The received knowledge of the Orient and the Oriental is objectified as monolithic. The Orient is embedded with inert history but the Occident is assumed as having dynamic history. The association of colonialism in configuring cultural identities involve framing of colonial subjects. Moreover the dominance of European culture was instituted by recognizing Orient as a “surrogate and even underground self” (3). The Oriental is recognized as static other deficient in subjectivity and implores western benefaction that establishes the binary to configure their identity. The deficiency is that the Orient allows the Occident to construct knowledge about the Orient through geographical imagination: “knowledge gives power; more power requires more knowledge, and so on in an increasingly profitable dialectic of information and control” (36).

Arthur James Balfour legitimizing imperial rule over Egypt avows: “We know the civilization of Egypt better than we know the civilization of any other country. We know it further back; we know it more intimately; we know more about it” (qtd. In 32). Balfour’s knowledge of Egypt from its beginning till decline founded on tautological stereotypes exhibits an epistemological supremacy over the unknown other to the known self. In a sweeping and disapproving tone he announces that historically emergence of western nations displayed capability of self-governance which is absent of the whole Orientals. Therefore it becomes an obligation on the part of England to exercise its hegemony over Egypt to establish the acquittal of colonization and the Oriental inability to rule itself. Thus Orientals are “a subject race, dominated by a race that knows them and what is good for them better than they could possibly know themselves” (35). Balfour’s stance perpetrates knowledge/power dominance that denies the voice of the colonized assuming that the knowledge of Egypt by the West is the real Egypt. To determine and establish knowledge over the Oriental is to launch supremacy through epistemic and hegemonic fabrication: “the ideology of Empire was hardly ever a brute jingoism; rather it made subtle use of reason, and recruited science and history to serve its ends” (Kabbani 6). Cromer recognizes the demerits of coercively subjugating the Oriental within the imperial fold but supposed formulating their own approval. He conceives that the colonized as subject race who could implicate a commitment in understanding the colonizer’s vision for them and considers the colonized as having a “want” for accuracy but the colonizer as a “natural logician.” Thus Orientalism becomes a “political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, “us”) and the strange (Orient, the East, “them”)” (Said, *Orientalism* 43). The hierarchical binary of the conventional metaphysical inside/outside is recognized within a rational framework by the imperial self to configure a logical order. This logical order is an epistemic violation that subtly configures a corpus of theory on the

Oriental in a non-coercive and non-authoritarian manner. Said also argues that “The boundary notion of East and West, the varying degrees of projected inferior and strength, the range of work done, the kinds of characteristic features ascribed to the Orient: all these testify to a willed imaginative and geographic division made between East and West, and lived through during many centuries” (201). The East/West binary that is fabricated by the Occident produces hegemonic discursive practices and cultural institutions. European culture configured the orient “politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period” (3). Such disciplining of the Orient evolved into discursive practices that objectified Orient into an object of knowledge and power. Imperial power manifested culturally, socially, politically, economically and militarily on the colonized to appropriate the epistemic/ontic objectification of the Orient formed by the Occident. The East/West binary is fabricated significantly from a geographical ordering that altered the world view on the Orient.

The spatial demarcation between the Occident and the Orient is named as the “imaginative geography” which is a human fabrication rather than a fiction. Said observes that “geography was essentially the material underpinning for knowledge about the Orient. All the latent and unchanging characteristics of the Orient stood upon, were rooted in, its geography” (216). The “universal practice of designating one’s mind a familiar space which is “ours” and an unfamiliar space beyond “ours” which is “theirs” is a way of making geographical distinctions that can be entirely arbitrary” (54). The spatial separation obtains rational significance through a poetic procedure that influences meaning temporally. Therefore what one discerns about time and space is fictional rather than facts. The divisions of Orient as Near Orient, Far Orient and a Familiar Orient are juxtaposed with the Occident. Moreover the Orient was explained and known in relation to the Occident forming basic stereotypes. For instance, Islam was considered as a religion ‘like’ Christianity. Said’s attempt was to discard the ‘lie’ that was perpetrated by the Occident and to engage dynamically to dislocate the Orient from the “imagination of the West.” (Varadharajan 124). While locating “the Orient to be a representational chimera, a fantastical image projected from the Occident,” (Cairns 73) Said attempts to revoke the preconceived subject formation that is fictional. Orientalism wields triadic compulsion on the Orient, Orientalist and the Western “consumer’ of Orientalism through a “process that not only marks the Orient as the province of the Orientalist but also forces the uninitiated Western reader to accept Orientalist codifications...as the true Orient. Truth, in short, becomes a function of learned judgement, not the material itself, which in time seems to owe even its existence to the Orientalist” (67). Oriental discourse is located as a subjected subject with language and representations mapping borders of imaginative geography. *Bibliothèque Orientale* presents Mohammed as an imposter in relation to a superior Christ through self-asserting language that fabricates an

eternal communication an inkling of replica that is unchanging. Canonical/colonial texts, travel writings, religious discourses, philology and literature configure the Oriental space as a subject. Said offers an archaeology of the East to express the manner in which the Orient facilitates to describe the Occident as a juxtaposed image and cultural space. The relational binaries are a subjectification mode that reinforces the antagonistic nature of the Occident towards the Orient as a weakling possessing no counter identity. The various representational strategies employed by the Occident in establishing colonial otherness outlines political domination because the representations were influenced by cultural superiority and political obligation connected to the imperial project. Representations are meant to be a 'subjecting' policy eliciting knowledge and perpetrating control over the Oriental providing a transcendental dichotomy that is asymmetrical and dominant. The Occidental discourses are not only relational but also reductive and "exoticist" fundamentally engaging in a mutually exclusive categories. The Occident possesses an epistemic superiority whereas the Oriental is posed as ignorant having "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident"" (2).

The Occidental imposition of subject position on the Orient involves launching scholarly, scientific and geopolitical projects. The Oriental is constructed not only through empirical verifications but also through world views expressed through texts. Orientalists like William Jones and Edward William Lane tethers cultural and intellectual traditions with political authority. Jones who became the president of the Asiatic Society of Bengal acquired enough knowledge to be the founder of modern Orientalism. He considered Sanskrit perfect than Greek and bountiful than Latin and refined than both which paved way for the scholars to investigate a common source for all these three languages. Such a stand created ripples among the European scholars and generated fresh positions on linguistic history because language was associated with national and cultural identity. Said observes that "the link between language and identity, particularly the link between the diversity of languages and the diversity of racial identity gave rise to the discipline of ethnology, the precursor of modern anthropology" (58). Classical texts of the Orient provided the foundation for the configuration of modern Orient and assist the progress in forming the subjects. The Suez Canal, a geopolitical project that links Mediterranean Sea with the Indian Ocean opened Europe to the East and made it geographically closer to Europe. Said notes, "De Lesseps had melted away the Orient's geographical identity by (almost literally) dragging the Orient into the West and finally dispelling the threat of Islam" (92). The Occident found it easy to perpetrate their ideology on the Orient to subjugate and make them compliant.

During 1870's the academic mode switched toward instrumental attitude by British and French Orientalism. Instrumental representation fabricated a "cultural praxis or a system of opportunities for making statements about the Orient. And as all representations do, it operates for a purpose in a specific historical and even economic setting" (273). The material,

political and economic systems subjugated the West as subject allowing military conquest possible and executed a hegemony offering an epistemic dominance over their subjects through imperial bureaucracy. Latent Orientalism is an “unconscious positivity” but manifest Orientalism is explicit worldview on Oriental society, cultures, literatures, languages etc. Latent Orientalism remains unchanged in its political standpoint and will to exercise power over the subjects. Manifest Orientalism is based on false consciousness and forms a negative ideology on the subjects and changes from author to author. Said views Orientalism as ideological because the Orient is weaker than the west and suppress Orient’s difference with its weakness. Orientalism as an imaginative geography is segregated and the Oriental subject is recognized “by its eccentricity, its backwardness, its silent indifference, its feminine penetrability, its supine malleability” characterizing its inability to be autonomous. The Oriental subjects are configured out of biological determinism and ethical reproach to be subjected. The Occidental gaze inspects the Orient from above for a panoramic view on culture, religion, psyche and sociohistory with a reductive lens. The gaze is strategic and efficient eventually forcing the Orient “to rely for its coherence and force on the person, institution, or discourse whose property it is” (329). Such a panoptic gaze exercises a surveillance that imposes an ideology reframing Oriental subjectivity. The ideology instilled on the subject makes it vulnerable and diminishes it to an object, “a fundamentally ontological and stable fact over which observers have authority” (Varadharajan 125). Grossberg observes that “the very politics of subjectivity and the search for a subject position for the colonial subject, because subjectivity is only possible in the places constructed by the colonizer” (96).

Every writer on the Orient presumes knowledge of the Orient which employs disciplinary power to represent the Orient. Subject formation is an abyssal thought process that blocks the colonial other from self-representation and self-understanding. It is in this process the colonial subject become known as a derivative of gleaned historical forces of imperialism. Therefore subjecthood is attributed with lack and incapable of representation and thereby establishing a conditional social relation that is centred on the sovereignty of the colonizer. Moreover Foucauldian model of discourse functions through enunciative modalities locate the subject positions. Foucault challenges the unified subject position of the colonizer that assumes power with enunciative modalities representing the diffusion of the subject to articulate subjectivity. It is within this enunciative modalities Said appropriates the constitutive ability of the author who assumes a significant role in Orientalist discourse. Said counters the sovereign power that generates subject positions. When Said talks about subjectivity, it denotes a unified individual and a particular western personhood. However subjectivity when fabricated as a non-contingent form is a mere generalization because it is modelled on western individual. Western consciousness that assumes an *a priori* position functions in a polymorphic procedure in formulating subject positions. It enforces the lack on

the subject to make the culture contingent without any intrinsic inevitability in possessing the other. The imperial self does not assume individuality but exercise subjectivity into the extent of the colonized by historically intensifying the idea of self. Said smudges the individual and the collective by bringing in generalities that clears differences between subjectivity and generality.

Subjectivity is initiated in establishing truth to power because the ambivalence of subjectivity is linked to knowledge, a fundamental condition of truth. Hoffman identifies three strands how Said relates subjectivity to knowledge. The first is “morally interrogated positivism” expressed through differentiations:

There is a difference between knowledge of other peoples and other times that is the result of understanding, *compassion*, and careful study and analysis *for their own sakes*, and on the other hand knowledge—if that is what it is—that is part of an overall campaign of self-affirmation, belligerency, and outright war. There is, after all, a profound difference between the will to understand for purposes of coexistence and humanistic enlargement of horizons, and the will to dominate for the purposes of control. (xix)

The very power and scope of Orientalism produced not only a fair amount of *exact positive knowledge* but also a kind of second-order knowledge –*lurking* in such places as the “Oriental” tale, the mythology of the mysterious East, notions of Asian inscrutability –*with a life of its own*. (52)

The first passage differentiates between an ethically impeccable knowledge and polluted knowledge seeped in structural domination. Knowledge that connotes shared comprehension obtain scholarly stance contrary to the other knowledge which is “violent, reactionary and imperial – is spawned in power-filled contexts and is emotionally accompanied by the quest for self-aggrandizement” (Hoffman 57). Epistemic sovereignty exercises its compassionate influence over the mechanisms of dominance to establish empowerment and truth. In this differentiation between exact positive knowledge and second-order knowledge, the latter assumes its own existence making the probability of contrary constitutions of knowledge. These contradictions are different in theoretical and empirical level. While the normative knowledge aids the functions of imperialism without taking into account the position of subjectivity, empirical knowledge takes a positive role in bringing together knowledge and subjectivity through a positivistic stance. Thus exact positive knowledge is pure ethically allowing the opportunities of self-affirmation inherent to imperialism. Said also attempts to systematize the epistemic rubric through an extra-textual referent, an actuality exterior to discourse and autonomous of discursive configuration. The association between subjectivity

and knowledge traces the position of society in relation to society. The material and the social encompassing knowledge supports with its merits defying the epistemic deception of veiled interconnection of politics and knowledge. Said argues that true knowledge is devoid of politics and disrupts the politics of knowledge production. He resists the deception through worldliness which calls for the Gramscian notion of hegemony to provide a general liberal consensus. His attempt is “to complicate and/or dismantle the reductive formulae and the abstract but potent kind of thought that leads the mind away from *concrete human history and experience* and into the realms of ideological fiction, metaphysical confrontation, and *collective* passion” (Said, *Orientalism* xxiii). The praxiological possibility of such proposition could involve empathy and a contrapuntal interpretation of subjugative systems. However examination of the subtleties of subjectivity and knowledge opposes any systemic conceptualizations because the system is already tainted, “a realm of dead abstraction and depersonalization” (Hoffman 59). Said’s idea of experience being universally determined and accessible ignores the specific and culturally symbolic orders which necessitates the requirement for an exact positive knowledge. However in this process “subjectivity is severed from its very conditions and rendered context-less. What remains after this operation is the epitomized western individual: self-declared universalistic, standing above cultural particularities” (60). Moreover Said’s elaboration on “second-order knowledge” as “lurking” and having its own life evokes more questions than possible solutions in the relation between subjectivity and knowledge. This stance also hinders the substantiation for a collective passion for human existence that is at times becomes mere outcropping of individuality. The second stance of Said’s conceptualization of knowledge and its relation to subjectivity portrays the epistemic domination perpetrated by the imperial powers. The academic knowledge about the colonized is “tinged and impressed with, violated by the gross political fact” (Said, *Orientalism* 11). This denies the possibility of exact positive knowledge because this supposition locates knowledge and power as two entities with power conciliating with the other. What evolves here is that “resistant subjectivity (which is the only one possible) is not to be lived and experience from the inside of the academy. Rather, a process of distancing takes place, leading directly to Said’s valorization of the positions of the *amateur*” (Hoffman 60-1). Said simplifies the impact of power and politics as broadly influencing human activities and cautions against “the inevitable contamination of what is supposedly solid positive knowledge by human interpretation, vagaries, wilfulness, biases, grounding in personality, radically human circumstantiality, worldliness” (Said, *World* 178). It is with this backdrop Said situates the experience of exiles as the ones whose idea is clear within a cultural setting but still an outsider undergoing detachment. The third stance removes the differentiation between power and knowledge and reality and representation. He alludes Nietzschean view that truths are misapprehensions that has made one forget what they actually are. His intention is not to locate the real Orient but he posits that the Orient is “itself

a constituted entity, and that the notion that there are geographical spaces with indigenous, radically, “different” inhabitants who can be defined on the basis of some religion, culture, or racial essence proper to that geographical space is equally a highly debatable idea” (Said, *Orientalism* 322). This point of view leaves subjectivity defenceless as Foucault has offered portrayals to engulf the subject and restore with discursive formations that could be altered. The colonized as disengaged subjects becomes no owners of resistance and subjectivity. Instead, “they are entangled, they open spaces of ambiguity, they eclipse each other and together they make up one instance of Said’s “incomplete discursive constructivism”” (Hoffman 62).

To conclude, the issue of subjectivity entails “theorizing the specificities of a polymorphic postcolonial condition, understood almost entirely in terms of identity and subjectivity” (Parry 33). Said’s attempt to relate subjectivity and knowledge is to bring together examinations of texts as the locale of resistance and to reunite Foucault’s notion of discourse to subjectivity. However as Grossberg observes: “One possible interpretation of the existence of the Orient is tautological: since the Orient and the Oriental are constructions of colonial discourses, they cannot exist outside of those discourses. The Orient as an object of knowledge is the product of colonial relations of power” (95). Orientalism discloses less about the colonized because “the representation of other cultures invariably entails the presentation of self-portraits, in that those people who are observed are overshadowed or eclipsed by the observer” (Richards 289). Said is often criticised for representing the submissive and passive colonized subject. However his affinity to humanist and Marxist tradition establishes his legitimacy to be a representative of the political subject. Is *Orientalism* a sloppy critical articulation or a hypothetical supposition on the segregation of the Orient and the Occident? Said argues for a coexistence of cultures with challenging alter ego for the existence of any culture. The configuration of identity subsequently entails the founding of the other whose subject is conditional on the mutual interpretation and reinterpretation of the differentiation. Every culture in its own epoch reframes the other through a socio-historic, intellectual and political procedure through a contestation of the social systems. Therefore, in its search for meaning the self rediscovers itself by meeting the duality between the self and the other which is requisite in subject formation. Sudipta Kaviraj observes: “Being someone, as we all find out, is only partly under our own control. There is a constant play of being for self and being for others....The task of a critical intellectual is to use each of those partial anchoring of his self to invigilate the temptations of others, to prevent the usual slide into insensitivity or self-deception. What is surely questionable is Said’s claim that the West, through Orientalism, has always silenced the Orient, an astonishing statement, to say the least. And Said could assert this so unproblematically precisely because of his insufficiency as an Oriental subject” (536). While identifying the significance of the dissemination of ideology in subject formation Said fails to challenge this

foundation. The colonized subject situating itself in its subject position and the formulation of counter subjectivity that is influenced by ideology. The postcolonial texts that challenge western hegemony are based on the indeterminacy in the imperial power that is instilled through western knowledge voiced through colonized subject.

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