

# OCCIDENTALISM AND ORIENTALISM

REFLECTIONS OF THE EAST  
AND THE PERCEPTIONS OF THE WEST



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# OCCIDENTALISM AND ORIENTALISM

## REFLECTIONS OF THE EAST AND THE PERCEPTIONS OF THE WEST

**Editors**

Azizan Baharuddin  
Faridah Noor Mohd Noor



PUSTAKA PERDANA



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# Preface

The term “orientalism” originally referred to an interest (usually an admiring one) in cultures and regions that were perceived as “Eastern”, and especially to the imitation and depiction of features of those cultures in art and architecture. Thus the term implied a positive attitude to these cultures. However the term gradually died out until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Edward Said published his book *Orientalism* (1976). Much influenced by Michel Foucault and Alexander Gramsci, Said argued that the idea of the Orient was an imperialist or, in Gramsci’s term, hegemonic construction designed to demonstrate the superiority of the “Western” culture of Europe and the United States. According to Said, Western scholars set out to create a dichotomy, presenting the Orient (and Africa) as child-like, backward, romantic, mysterious and inscrutable, as well as barbaric, corrupt, cruel, devious and undemocratic while the West was seen as progressive, modern, democratic, enlightened, sophisticated and civilised. Said’s work is often considered a landmark of critical theory and post-colonial thought.

It is easy to find examples to back up Said’s position. “Arabs” are particularly stereotyped and demonised as terrorists and fanatics, and, by association, so is Islam, a religion that is widely misunderstood in the West. So are other predominantly Asian religions, but only Islam is seen as a “threat”. In popular culture, Arabs are depicted as comical buffoons (as in Disney’s *Aladdin*) or sinister and cruel (*Midnight Express*) but invariably in an unfavourable light.

It is often argued that many leading figures in Asia have accepted these stereotypes and sought to emulate the West and it is certainly true that many features of the West have come to dominate much of Asian life, from forms of government and military organisation to mass production, Western medicine, and elements of everyday life from consumerism to conventional business attire. Indeed, the language of modernisation, development, progress, economic growth and the like that increasingly dominate social, political and economic discourse in Asia are all thoroughly Western in origin, urged on by scholars such as Francis Fukuyama.

Others however have taken the opposite view, noting that the claim of the West to moral superiority is deeply flawed. In the last 20 years, countries such as the US have focused on human rights, contrasting the West with Asian and African countries where people’s rights are ignored. It is certainly true that, for example, in many countries the criminal justice system permits governments to lock up innocent people in filthy jails; but the US does the

same in Guantanamo Bay and Abu Gharib, and sanctions barbaric methods of interrogation amounting to torture. Its justice system, as the author of one of the papers in this volume notes, is also racist, with 1.5 million young African-Americans in jail and a further 9.1 million on parole – “This underclass has no parallel in any other industrialised country” (Prof. Dr. Shad Saleem Faruqi). More generally, from the Crusades through the capture and treatment of anywhere between 10 and 30 million Africans for the slave trade, the massacres of indigenous people by colonial powers through to the Holocaust and the horror of Vietnam, the West has frequently failed to live up to its professed ideals.

The term “Occidentalism”, was coined to refer to the opposite view from Orientalism: an equally dichotomous and stereotypical representation of Asian superiority. A conspicuous example is the promotion of “Asian values” in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century by figures such as Lee Kwan Yew. Although no definitive statement of Asian values exists, a contrast is drawn between Asia as characterised by loyalty to family and nation, putting society ahead of the individual, respect for authority, excellence in one’s work, hard work and thrift. In contrast, the West is seen as selfish, individualistic, lazy, lacking in ambition and wasteful. The Western insistence on democracy and personal freedom are seen as undermining unity and the achievement of national goals, which are said to require strong leadership. Drugs and promiscuity are said to be rampant in the West, as indeed they are in some countries, and in so far as such behaviours have infiltrated Asia this is said to be due to Western influences. The economic success of many Asian countries, especially those where Confucian values predominate, is often attributed to Asian values, and the examples of Japan, South Korea, Hong Kong, Singapore and China since the passing of Maoism are given as evidence.

Of course, just as the West often fails to live up to its ideals, so does Asia. One area is corruption, which does not figure in the Confucian ideal but is widespread in many Asian societies, the most common motive being greed. Too often, “strong leadership” has been a euphemism for tyranny, with leaders amassing huge fortunes and locking political opponent through trumped-up charges. While it is true that consumerism and the ubiquitous shopping mall have spread from the West, Asian people have always loved to go to the market: the Bazaar of Tabriz, Iran, is well over 3000 years old.

Are the concepts of Orientalism and Occidentalism worth attention? They are, though, not so much for what they tell about the cultures they depict, but rather about those who developed them. Certainly, any theory that divides hugely diverse phenomena into two supposedly homogeneous groups merits suspicion. However, works like those of Said, Fukuyama and

Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* are invaluable because they force us to engage in dialogue, the purpose for which the Centre was established. The papers in this volume will undoubtedly further stimulate that dialogue.

**Assoc. Professor Dr. Alastair S., Gunn**

**Department of Philosophy**

**University of Waikato**

**New Zealand**

**(Visiting Scholar, Centre for Civilisational Dialogue, University of Malaya)**

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# Colonial Knowledge and the Deepening of Orientalism: The Asian Experience

Shamsul A.B.

## Introduction

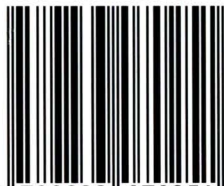
Orientalism is the study of Near and Far Eastern societies and cultures, generally by Westerners. Although this term had become archaic and rare by the late twentieth century, Edward Said redefined this term in his groundbreaking work, *Orientalism* (1978) to emphasize the relationship of power and knowledge in scholarly and popular thinking, in particular, regarding Europeans and how they saw the Arab world. Oriental, a politically loaded term, referred to Western notions of a subjugated colonial “other”.

Indeed, Said also focuses his attention in his book on the interplay between the “Occident” and the “Orient.” The Occident is his term for the West (Europe and the United States), and the Orient is the term for the romantic and misunderstood Middle East and Far East. The West, according to him, has created a dichotomy, between the reality of the East and the romantic notion of the “Orient.” The Middle East and Asia are viewed with prejudice and racism. They are backward and unaware of their own history and culture. To fill this void, the West created a culture, history, and future promise for them. On this framework rests not only the study of the Orient, but also the political imperialism of Europe and the United States in the East.

Taking a comparative and historical literary review of European scholars and writers looking at, thinking, talking, and writing about the peoples of the Middle East, he sought to lay bare the relations of power between the colonizer and the colonized in those texts. While his work owes much (as Said himself made clear) to that of Michel Foucault, Said’s work has had far-reaching implications beyond the Middle East, to India, China, and post-colonial studies generally.



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