

## 12.

## Orientalism and the Exoticization of the Brown Asian Body

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According to Edward Said, Palestinian American professor, founder of post-colonial studies, and author of the book, *Orientalism*, Orientalism is a socio-economical fantasy conjured up by the West. It, in essence, is indicative of a distribution of power strategically established by European and Western imperial and colonial exploits. Orientalism has been the force for the domination, erasure, predation, and displacement of colonized peoples. Orientalism is not exclusive to race but is a conscious act of *othering*. Orientalism includes the subjugation, pillaging, co-opting, discrimination of Asian peoples, and stereotyping of their culture. Suheir Hammad, Palestinian American poet, feminist, activist, and spoken word performer, commonly tackles thematic issues pertaining to race, war, disenfranchisement, and bondage in her transgressive poetry. Her poem, “Not Your Erotic, Not Your Exotic” turns racial stereotypes manufactured by Orientalism on its political head, by confronting the exoticization, fetishization, and commoditization of the brown Asian body. Her poem seeks to controvert the difference, presenting Asian people as *people*; not objects to be owned or masses of countries to be overpowered and overthrown.

According to Asian American Studies scholar Sylvia Shin Huey Chong - as she writes about Orientalism in the textbook, *Keywords for Asian American Studies* - “The ‘Orient’ only exists as a figment of the European imagination. It is done by lumping together disparate peoples from Asia and Africa into an undifferentiated mass of colonial subjects, slaves, servants, and unwanted immigrants” (Schlund-Vials et al., 182). Orientalism thrives on the presumed and theorized difference of the ‘Orient’ by illustrating the people as exotic, foreign, primitive, savages. Orientalism, in fact, refers to both “a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘The Orient’ and ‘The Occident’ and an academic field in which theories about the East are applied (Said 2). The ‘Orient’ is defined as the conglomerate countries of Asia, especially Eastern Asia, and ‘Occident’ are “the countries situated in the West, especially in Europe and America. Edward Said writes that “The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony” (Said 5). In the realm of literary criticism, theory, cultural studies, and post-colonialism, Orientalism is as much historical and geographical as it is social and political. There are direct ties to structuralism and language. Similarly, as detailed in the Introduction of his book, *Orientalism*, Said describes “The Orient as an integral part of European material civilization and culture. Orientalism expresses and represents that part, culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines” (Said 2).

Said states, “The Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that has given it reality and presence in and for the West” (Said 5). While the ‘Orient’ as a geographical region, does exist in reality, the idea of Orientalism is a conceptual theory

or way of thinking that originated in Europe and in the West as a way to suppress narratives and dominate what is said about the East. Said elaborates this mere detail when he notes, “that the East was a career” and “American interest in the Orient was political” (Said 5, 12). With the practice of Orientalism and Orientalist notions, the Eastern narrative is usurped by the West. In turn, the West solely speaks on behalf of the East, “Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as a corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it making a statement about it, authorizing views of it [...], and as a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient,” which is in itself, is problematic (Said 3). Basically, if you are not from Asia, what gives you the right to write discourses on the ‘Orient’? You see, this is a testament to inexplicable power. The West can write about the East but very little is written from the Eastern perspective about the West. Said says, “Orientalism unilaterally determines what can be said about the Orient” (Said 3). The problem lies in the complexity of this generality. So who gets to decide what an ‘Oriental’ is and what the ‘Orient’ looks like? Analogous to race and ethnic structures, Orientalism is a social and political-driven construct that is based on the assumption that the East is not “an inert fact of nature” but almost entirely man-made. In short, the theory of Orientalism is a hyper-illusory fallacy (Said 4).

The interesting thing about Edward Said is his belief that the creation of the Orient is not entirely false or fictional. He asserts the fact that the ‘Orient’ *exists*, but he deducts that the predominant problem with Orientalism is the presence of a one-sided perspective. This is evident in the fact that Europe and the West can talk and write freely about the East but the East can or will not reciprocate. Withal, this corroborates the notion that Orientalism is about power dynamics and distribution, and is primarily about who gets to say what about whom. It is the act of erasure and of whitewashing history that makes Orientalism, an inimical construction. Orientalism was created to speak on behalf of the ‘Orient’. Said emphasizes that “Orientalism is not a European fantasy about the Orient but is a created body of theory and practice in which, for many generations, there has been a considerable material investment” (Said 6). This itself is detrimental because of the presence of inherent bias. It is easy to see why so many stereotypes about the ‘Orient’ persist even today, especially when you look at the behemoth influence, the West still holds. Even by looking down, differentiating, and separating the West from the East in terms of culture, belief, customs, Orientalism has facilitated colonialism and effectively made historical incidents like slavery, indentureship, and forced migration, possible. With the teachings of Orientalism, people in positions of power have used these preconceived differences to treat Asian groups as the *Other*.

When Edward Said talks about Orientalism, “The Orient was almost a European invention— a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences,” he talks about the romanticization and exoticization of the brown body and experience (Said 1). The binary becomes that of submissive exotic or bushy-tailed savage. In her spoken word poem, “Not Your Erotic, Not Your Exotic,” Palestinian American writer Suheir Hammad touches on the depraved heart, root, and foundation of Orientalism. Her poem presents the idea that women of color are perceived as collective flesh to be sexually usurped or economically and politically conquered. This idea is seen in the poem’s first line, “Don’t wanna be your exotic” (line 1), and later, “Don’t seduce yourself with my otherness” (lines 11-13). The brown body is effectively terminated as a living thing or person and devolves into, rather an artifact or contrivance. For example, when she says, “In fact, nasty necrophilia cause my beauty is dead to you, I am dead to you” (lines 20-23), Hammad pictures a culture that is exploited, utilized for perversion, a body that is traumatized, dehumanized and left empty with death. Because of Orientalism, women of color are seen as what the subject craves the most and in turn, they become a projection of desires, devoid of their own will and autonomy. By employing the words, “necrophilia” (line 23) and “dead,” (line 24), Hammad willfully and painstakingly uses metaphors of violence to provoke thought and, in its purest form, elicit a reactionary cry of protest.

When Hammad describes herself as, “Some dark, fragile colorful bird” (line 2), she uses animal symbolism to depict an allegory of predation, vulnerability, and isolation. The bird is colorful and seen as precious but is despite this, “imprisoned” (line 3) and enclosed in a cage, “In a land foreign to the stretch of her wings” (line 4). There is a connotation of learned helplessness as well. Be as it may, the bird will want to fly away but is still caught in a cyclical tangle of assimilation, shame, guilt, and cultural-washing-away. Additionally, the bird-in-a-cage metaphor could be a substitution, to symbolize the mass incarceration of women of color and people of color in America. Hammad ends the poem with a catalog of various stereotypes often surrounding women of color, even more specifically, Caribbean women, South Asian women, East Asian women, Middle Eastern, Muslim women, indentured and enslaved women, and Black women. The terms “harem” (line 27), “geisha”(line 27), “belly dancer” (line 29), and “Hottentot venus” (line 30), are all references to stereotypes depicted about women of color over the course of history that reflect Orientalism. For instance, Hottentot Venus or Sara “Saarttjie” Baartman was a woman from Africa who was presented on stage and in cages in London and in France as a “freak show attraction.” Her body, namely her buttocks were of particular interest. She was objectified, dehumanized, raped, dissected among other things and when she died, vestiges of her body including her genitalia and labia were put on display for the next 100 years. Only in 1976, was it removed and sent back to her birthplace in South Africa. This antiquated term “Hottentot”, Baartman’s name and her history alone, recognizes and compels the reader to confront the malignant effects of Orientalism and of the systematic act of *othering*. Women of color have always been treated as lesser or as an object of fetishized desire or an artificial oddity of some sort. Hammad revisits these sets of particular stereotypes to say, *I am not yours and I am not your Other*. Suheir Hammad’s work navigates Orientalist notions, detailing ways that the brown body, experience, and identity has been appropriated, commodified, and relegated to that of subhuman. With this, Hammad provides her own inter-webbing parallels of race, ethnicity, politics, and sex.

All in all, Orientalism seems to be a surface perception. How can one write truthfully and without bias, about a world, a culture, and a group of people that one may know nothing about? And if Orientalism is a Western invention, why has the idea persisted and permeated almost all areas of culture, academics, language, and society? This ubiquity, I reckon is a verifiable testament to the distribution of power of the West and doubly indicative of the repercussions of national colonialism. Stereotypes and unfounded notions are only upheld by active consciousness, ignorance, and lack of awareness. As long as people continue to believe in them, they will naturally grow with forcefulness and pervasiveness. Effectively, Orientalism still exists in nuanced forms. It’s in the everyday language we use, the stereotypes we give validity to, the biases we unconsciously and consciously feed, and in the way we view cultures and people different from us. Furthermore, stereotyping, fetishization, and eroticization of brown and Asian bodies, is unacceptable.

If Orientalism was created as a result of exaggerated or perceived differences between Eastern and Western cultures and peoples then perhaps we should highlight our similarities, our shared traumas, and overlapping histories instead. In a way, a sense of togetherness and active cultural awareness will erode away the systematic ideology and Orientalist notions that still permeate American and Western culture today.

#### Works Cited

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