Intellectual Discourse

Intellectual Discourse

Volume 30   Number 2   2022

Intellectual Discourse is a highly respected, academic refereed journal of the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). It is published twice a year by the IIUM Press, IIUM, and contains reflections, articles, research notes and review articles representing the disciplines, methods and viewpoints of the Muslim world.

Intellectual Discourse is abstracted in *SCOPUS, ProQuest, International Political Science Abstracts, Peace Research Abstracts Journal, Muslim World Book Review, Bibliography of Asian Studies, Index Islamicus, Religious and Theological Abstracts, ATLA Religion Database, MyCite, ISC* and *EBSCO*.

Intellectual Discourse
Vol. 30, No. 2, 2022

Contents

Research Notes

Orientalism and the Globalised Muslim World: Decolonising "Exotic" Narratives of Eurocentrism in the Era of Post-colonial Studies

Mohd Irwan Syazli Saidin*
Nadhirah Zainal Rashid**

Abstract: This paper explores the origins of Orientalism and how it came into existence in the discourse of post-colonial studies. This paper utilises the work of Edward Said to demonstrate that Orientalism is not solely a field of study about the Eastern world, but rather critiques the biased nature of views towards the globalised Muslim world. This paper will examine some of the major events where Orientalism has shaped the realm of Muslim affairs as well as international history and politics - such as during the Algerian War of Independence, the polemics of Iran's Nuclear Crisis, the global war on 'Islamist' terrorism and the British government's response to the 7/7 London bombings. These case studies are chronologically ordered to demonstrate the pervasiveness of Orientalism across time. Ultimately, this paper argues that Said's critiques on Orientalism produce an important foundation for post-colonial studies namely: 1) to identify the stereotypes used in media, writing and literature; 2) to unravel fictional narratives among Eurocentric scholars;

---

* Visiting Research Fellow, Institute for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, School of Government and International Affairs, Durham University & Senior lecturer, Centre for Research in History, Politics and International Affairs, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Email: mohammed.i.saidin@durham.ac.uk.
** Postgraduate candidate, Department of Political Science, School of Public Policy, University College London. Email: nadhirah.rashid.19@ucl.ac.uk

and 3) to debunk myths when researching the 'globalised Muslim world'—as Orientalism is still very much apparent in the contemporary foreign and domestic policy realm, especially policies towards Muslims. Hence, this paper concludes that decolonisation of history is important in post-colonial studies in order to achieve unbiased (new) knowledge production.

Keywords: Orientalism, Eurocentrism, Edward Said, Muslim world, post-colonial studies

Abstrak: Artikel ini meneroka latar belakang dan kemunculan Orientalisme dalam wacana kajian pasca-kolonial. Artikel ini memanfaatkan kajian Edward Said untuk menunjukkan bahawa Orientalisme tidak hanya sekadar bidang penyelidikan berhubung dunia Timur tetapi juga adalah kritikan kepada penyimpangan sudut pandang terhadap dunia Islam sejagat. Artikel ini meninjau beberapa peristiwa penting di mana Orientalisme telah membentuk perspektif kepada hal-ehwal Muslim di samping kesannya terhadap sejarah dan politik antarabangsa, antaranya adalah seperti peristiwa Perang Kemerdekaan Algeria, polemik krisis nuklear Iran, peperangan global terhadap keganasan 'Islamis' dan reaksi kerajaan Britain terhadap peristiwa pengeboman 7/7 di London. Kesemua kajian kes ini secara kronologinya dikupas untuk menunjukkan implikasi Orientalisme dari masa ke semasa. Secara dasarnya, artikel ini berhujah bahawa kritikan Said terhadap Orientalisme telah membuahkan asas penting terhadap kajian pasca-kolonial seperti : 1) untuk mengenalpasti sterotaip yang sering digunakan di media dan penulisan; 2) untuk mendedahkan naratif-naratif tidak berasas oleh pengkaji Barat; dan 3) untuk memaparkan segala kepalsuan dalam penyelidikan berkaitan dunia Islam sejagat - memandangkan Orientalisme dilihat masih membayangi dasar luar dan tempatan kontemporari di Barat, terutamanya berkaitan dasar-dasar melibatkan Islam. Justeru, artikel ini menyimpulkan bahawa penyahjajahan sejarah adalah mustahak dalam era pasca-kolonial untuk mencapai sudut pandang yang adil dalam penghasilan ilmu-ilmu baru.

Kata kunci: Orientalisme, Eurosentrisme, Edward Said, dunia Islam, kajian pasca-kolonial

Introduction

This paper explores the origins of Orientalism and how it came into existence in the discourse of post-colonial studies. This paper utilises the work of Edward Said to demonstrate that Orientalism is not solely a field of study about the Eastern world, but rather critiques the biased

nature of views towards the globalised Muslim world. This paper will examine some of the major events where Orientalism has shaped the realm of Muslim affairs as well as international history and politics - such as during the Algerian War of Independence, the polemics of Iran's Nuclear Crisis, the global war on 'Islamist' terrorism and the British government's response to the 7/7 London bombings. These case studies are chronologically ordered to demonstrate the pervasiveness of Orientalism across time. Ultimately, this paper argues that Said's critiques on Orientalism produce an important foundation for post-war era studies namely: 1) to identify the stereotypes used in media, writing and literature; 2) to unravel fictional narratives among Eurocentric scholars; and 3) to debunk myths when researching the 'globalised Muslim world' - as Orientalism is still very much apparent in the contemporary foreign and domestic policy realm, especially policies towards Muslims. Hence, this paper concludes that decolonisation of history is important in post-colonial studies in order to achieve unbiased (new) knowledge production.

Defining Orientalism from Edward Said's perspective

Orientalism is a Western scholarly discipline that dates from the period of European post-Enlightenment (Said 1978). The study emerged when the European powers focused their understanding on East Asian societies through their communication, arts, writings, beliefs and body of laws. The colonial British administration and scholars in India adhered to Orientalism as a 'school of thought' as they believed that India's traditions and laws should be the centrepiece of ruling rather than the standard British traditions and laws - this practice is called "Anglicanism". Therefore, it is clear that a huge part of Orientalism is a product of Western colonial powers studying the subjects of their conquered territories in the East and thus making the history of international politics Eurocentric. This will be elaborated upon in the next section of the paper.

When one thinks of Orientalism, the immediate thought that comes to mind would be the European-constructed fantasies of this "other" world with "exotic beings." However, that is not entirely true. According to Edward Said in his work Orientalism, there are three definitions of Orientalism. Firstly, Said (1978) stated that any person who studies and researches the Orient is an Orientalist. Historians or sociologists who

write or teach about the Orient are thus teaching/researching Orientalism. There are a number of institutions that exist today focusing on the study of this region such as the School of Oriental and African Studies located in the heart of London. However, the term "Orientalism" is contested. As Said (1978) stated, the term implies the negative connotation of the imperious administrative attitude of European colonialism during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Hence, Orientalism, through this generic definition, suggests a kind of "Western" field of academic enquiry of the Orientalists so as to understand their subjects, the Orients in the East.

Secondly, Edward Said describes Orientalism "as a style of thought that is produced by the ontological and epistemological distinction between the Orient and Occident" (Said 1978, p. 2). Since Orientalism came into existence, there are many writers who have recognised the fundamental differences between the East and West in their literary and scholarly works that describe the Orient and its identity (Said 1978). This meaning implies that Orientalism provides a dichotomous discourse to separate two different regions of the world. The words included to describe the Occident are often superior and foreign, while the Orient is often associated with words such as inferior and native. Moreover, the Orient is seen as more feminine than the Occident which is seen as more masculine. Orientalism, then, also contributes to this invisible line that divides the world into the Global North and the Global South. That being said, Orientalism is constituted of a language where there exist two different kinds of world, where the Orient is a mirroring image of what is inferior and alien when compared to the West. In simpler words, the Orient is almost everything that the West is not, according to Western consciousness.

Edward Said's third definition of Orientalism is that it can be considered a type of "corporate institution" (Said 1978, p. 3) with its main function to manage the Orient through producing expressions of the "other" and to authorise Orientalist notions. In other words, it is a Western study in which the ultimate aim is to understand Eastern parts of the world in relation to their Western identities to further strengthen them. According to Said (1978, p. 24), the Orient is "Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the "other". The aim of the Western colonial powers was to gather

information on the Orient so as to understand their subjects well enough to rule them - which is related to the saying "knowledge is power." Without the Orient to rule, Western identity would not exist today. Hence, it is evident that Orientalism is a Western style of domination to invent depictions as a way to establish the East as the "other" and maintain Western superiority.

As these definitions suggest, Orientalism is not just a Western field of study that aims to understand the East. Said suggested in his book that European culture achieved and constructed a Western identity through mirroring itself against the inferiority of the Orient (Said 1978). This study established a Western set of basic differences between the West as the "Occident" and the "East" as the Orient, for the West to gain authority, identity and ultimately, power. Edward Said emphasised that definitions of Orientalism remain important in studies of post-colonialism and he unpacked the stereotypes - and what we see in the media today mostly pertains to people in the Middle East. In the next section, this paper will demonstrate how Orientalism has shaped the realm of International Politics and how it contributes to our understanding of global policies towards particular states and peoples.

Orientalism and post-Colonialism debates: Rethinking the "Battle of Algiers"

As Orientalist ideas came from the West's efforts to understand the East, one of the main contributions of this style of thought is the push for modern academia and historians to deconstruct Eurocentric narratives through the process of decolonisation of mainstream history. A lot of the history of the Orient was a product of the interaction between the Occident and the Orients, and not so much the other way around. Said's work on Orientalism is influential in such a way that academics nowadays retain it in the back of their minds when doing research on post-colonial studies. Besides Edward Said, the main post-colonial studies' authors to whom this paper will refer are Erik Ringmar, Tarak Barkawi, Mark Laffey and Meera Sabaratnam. These contributions are important as the main struggle for the Orients is their representation. Additionally, Orientalism also helps scholars of International Politics underscore the relations between power and knowledge, as described by Michel Foucault in The Archaeology of Knowledge and also Discipline and Punish (Said 1978). In addition, Orientalism allows the community

of academia to understand the power relations between a hegemon and other states. In this section, this paper will demonstrate the influence of Orientalism within major events of International Politics from the time of French Algeria to the London bombings in the 21st Century and the efforts to decolonise mainstream narratives of these events.

In 1830 the French invasion of Algeria began and it lasted for 132 years before Algeria gained its independence. The French authorities in Algeria imposed *Le Système Bugeaud* (Ringmar 2013: 270) as a way to fight the Arabs to fully conquer Algeria. This method suggested by the French Governor-General involved the raiding of resources in Arab society included crops, orchards and cattle (ibid). Not only did the French colonial powers deprive civilians of their resources, but French soldiers were also allowed to commit other brutal acts such as rape, torture and slaughter of civilians in order to control the Algerians until Abd al-Qadir surrendered (Ringmar 2013). Going back to Said's point about Orientalism as a "style of thought," is there really a difference between the Orient and the Occident when the French soldiers declared war on Algerian civilians? The French Colonial Empire was definitely not civilising Algeria through these "barbaric" methods, which is problematic as they were supposed to be the guardians to improve the backwardness of the society. In addition, Palestinian-American anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod (2002) also quoted sociologist Marnia Lazreg's claim that French women were saving Muslim women during the French occupation of Algeria. The ceremony that involved French women unveiling Algerian women was a symbolic event that manifested the liberation of Algerian women (Abu-Lughod 2002). It is contradictory that while their troops were committing acts of torture on civilians, French women claimed to be "liberating" Arab females. Moreover, the veil might have been a choice for some Algerian women as part of their identity.

One of the best examples of the use of Orientalism as a lens to decolonise history through cinematic production would be the film "Battle of Algiers" where the director, Gillo Pontecorvo, produced a film that portrays the Algerian resistance of the National Liberation Front (FLN) against the French colonial powers during the Algerian War of Independence from 1954 to 1962. This film stars Saadi Yaacef who was involved with the FLN in the Kasbah of Algiers during the actual war (Tunzelmann 2009). Pontecorvo received help from the FLN

in gathering stories from the activists during the struggle to create a film that favoured the Algerians (Whitaker 2006). When ''The Battle of Algiers'' was released, it sparked significant controversy and it was not shown in France for a couple of years after its release (Tunzelmann 2009). Through this film, Pontecorvo is giving subalterns a voice to speak about their experiences. Having said that, this film is aligned with Meera Sabaratnam's (2011) decolonising strategy challenging the Western perspective as the mainstream view of history. Since this film involved Algerians, it was also a way to narrate the history of the Algerian War of Independence through the voices of the subalterns, which is the fourth decolonising strategy mentioned by Sabaratnam (2011). This film 'decolonised history' by challenging the notion of the West being more civilised than the Orient by showing their methods during the war. However, Eurocentric and Orientalist assumptions remain the mainstream understanding of world politics even after the Algerian War of Independence.

Orientalism and the polemics of the Iranian Nuclear Crisis: Is Iran today a threat to the Middle East region and world peace?

Another important event with mainstream narratives that was influenced by Orientalism was the Iranian Nuclear Crisis. Many narratives only involved two blocs - the West, led by the United States of America, and the Islamic Republic of Iran. The implications of the Islamic Revolution of 1979 completely changed Iranian-Western relations (Saidin 2018). It replaced the days of bilateral cooperation with a war of rhetoric and sanctions between Iran and the USA in particular - and in the eyes of many it 'threatened' global peace. Laffey and Weldes (2018) argued that the implementation of nation-state structure creates international hierarchies which leads to the marginalisation of subaltern perspectives of world politics. The nuclear issue dominates this question. Iran's history with nuclear technology began in 1959 and was accelerated in the 1970's, aided by cooperation with the United States, after signing the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (Ansari 2006: 6). However, the revolution plunged Iran's nuclear programme into secrecy and debate has raged ever since, with little evidence ever being produced. Iran had two sites which strongly suggested the ability to make nuclear weapons, making it easy to argue that Iran threatened peace.

In the case of the Iran Nuclear Crisis, policymakers and scholars missed out on crucial dynamics and features of the crisis as the Iranian experience was omitted from a Eurocentric narrative. Even after a number of political gatherings involving the central participants in the Iran Nuclear Crisis, the assumption of the Iranians was that they were unable to go beyond a "national-political approach". Following this event, Orientalism created a dividing line between nations that were rational and those that were not. It was evident that the practices of scholars and states created a hierarchical international order where Iran was not significant to a crisis that was named after their own country. Laffey and Weldes (2018) state that in order to create a critical oral history, it is necessary for a postcolonial intervention in the literature to allow the voices of subalterns like Iran to challenge mainstream views of the Nuclear Crisis. Laffey and Weldes are also in the process of decolonising history through Sabaratnam's (2011) fourth strategy of analysing global political events through the perspectives of the subalterns. It is crucial to point out an example of a population from the Global South, as in the case of the Iranians, who were distinctly marginalised from the global knowledge production of the crisis that happened within their own territory.

Despite the ambiguity surrounding Iran's nuclear intentions, it is clear that Iran is not part of a threatening 'Axis of Evil', as the Islamic republic shows no capability, or even intent, to launch attacks on foreign countries. Ironically, Israel, having not signed the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), continues to threaten Iran and looks most likely to initiate conflict (Axworthy 2008, p. 296). Besides, if Iran was to acquire nuclear weapons it is doubtful it would initiate a conflict with Israel, instead using them as a deterrent like other nuclear armed nations (Axworthy 2013, p. 394). Nevertheless, it is clear that Iran's development of a nuclear programme displeases Western powers, especially Israel and the US (Ayoob 2014). Israel insists that it is the target of Iran's nuclear programme, whilst Iran asserts that it is only for civilian purposes as is its right under the 1968 NPT treaty. Better relations will help convince Americans that Iran is not the threat it once was. Furthermore, Rouhani's election in 2014 has paved the way for a new start in Iranian-Western relations by replacing the conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, under whom the nuclear issue worsened considerably.

Orientalism and the 'global war on terror' on Muslims

Fast forward to the early 21st century and one of mass media's most-used terms would be "terror". Terror is usually associated with the feeling initiated by those who are labelled terrorists - and unsurprisingly, these terrorists are almost always people of colour and the majority of them are Muslims with United States as the opposing hegemon; it was not a "Global War on Terror" but a war - and still ongoing - on Muslims. President Bush's war was supposed to be a war between the civilised Occident against the uncivilised Orient. However, the methods that were used by the American government were otherwise as they were against international conventions and domestic laws (Ringmar 2013). These "savage" methods were allowed as Elbridge Colby explained because the standard rules of international law "do not apply in war with uncivilised States and tribes" (Ringmar 2013, p. 269) as they can reduce the number of deaths and end the conflict sooner. The Global War on Terror illustrates that Orientalism is still dominant in discourses on global politics. As mentioned by Sabaratnam (2011), studies of international relations and politics strengthen the notion of "subject-object relationships" between former colonial powers and colonies even after the legalisation of decolonisation has taken place. There is a distinction between wars against "civilised" and "uncivilised" enemies where international laws only apply to the former (Ringmar 2013). Since the word "terror" has been used in that context, any forms of atrocities committed by a perpetrator who is not Muslim, will not fall into the "terrorist" category. The framing of the word "terror" is a significant issue as it is associated with a particular group of people based on the acts of some. Note that less mainstream global media called the perpetrator of the mosque shooting in Christchurch, New Zealand on 15 March 2019 a terrorist because he was white when he caused 52 casualties (Lazreg, 2019; Kaskeleviciute & Matthes, 2022).

The response of the British government to the 7/7 bombings in London is also proof that Orientalism is still very much influencing the realm of international politics. This bomb attack on public transportation in London on July 7th 2005 caused 56 deaths including the bombers (Elliot 2017). Although the bombers were British-born citizens and the attack happened in London, the government's response was to work on democracy promotion in Pakistan. It is perplexing that the measure taken by the British Government had nothing to do with the community

in London, but rather focused on another continent. The justification from the Prime Minister was that although the bombers were British born, the ideology was foreign. Reports on the bombers' travels to Pakistan for two and half-months in 2004 were used to legitimise the British government's interventions in Pakistan (Elliot 2017). This event reinforces the relationship between power and knowledge as the British government's aim was to educate the "other" on democracy. Nations who do not comply with liberal democratic values are considered barbaric and thus cannot be part of a modern civilised global society. To challenge this, scholars and researchers must deconstruct the notion of the West to represent the "other" as objects as mentioned by Sabaratnam (2011). Having problematised the existence of Orientalism in International Politics, it is important for scholars to bury the notion of the West's position as the East's guardian in the process of civilisation after so many years of post-colonialism.

Conclusion and Reflection: Future of Orientalism

This paper has demonstrated that Orientalism is an important foundation for post-colonial studies and it can be used as a lens for scholars and students to unpack the stereotypes of the "other" in mainstream media, writing and literature and reconstruct Eurocentric narratives and challenge them. It is also crucial to remember that Orientalism is not just purely a construct of the West, imposing certain traits to the East and labelling the Orient as the "uncivilised other". It is a style of thought that contributes to post-colonial identities of the Global North and the Global South and shapes the landscape of global politics and policies today, especially towards Muslims. This paper has also demonstrated that it is crucial to study global history, politics and international relations with multiple lenses and perspectives, and not just through the mainstream theories. Orientalism is important to understand hegemony and how power relations are interconnected with knowledge. As the case studies of different major political events have suggested, Orientalism is not a stagnant theory and neither is the study of politics/ international affairs as there is still a big chunk of history to deconstruct. There are many ways that can be implemented to decolonise history. States play an important part as they can encourage academic freedom, invest in education policies and provide funding for research. As the world is becoming more globalised and interconnected, it is important to remember that there is a voice inside the Orients that wants to be

heard in order to decolonise the exotic narratives of the "other" and seek to achieve equality in knowledge production.

Acknowledgements

References

Abu-Lughod, L. (2002). Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others. *American Anthropologist.* 104(3), 784-790.

Ansari, A.M. (2006). *Confronting Iran: The Failure of American Foreign Policy and the Roots of Mistrust.* London: C. Hurst & Co.

Axworthy, M. (2013). *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic.* London: Penguin Books.

Axworthy, M. (2008). *Iran: Empire of the Mind: A History from Zoroaster to the Present Day.* London: Penguin Books.

Ayoob, M. (2014). *Will the Middle East Implode?* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Barkawi, T. and Laffey, M. (2006). The Postcolonial Moment in Security Studies. *Review of International Studies.* 32(329), 352.

Elliot, C. (2017). *Democracy Promotion as Foreign Policy: Temporal othering in international relations*. New York: Routledge.

Laffey, M. & Weldes, J. (2008). Decolonizing the Cuban Missile Crisis. *International Studies Quarterly.* 52(3), 555-577.

Lazreg, H.B. (2019, March 25). *The hypocritical media coverage of the New Zealand terror attacks.* The Conversation. https://theconversation.com/the-hypocritical-media-coverage-of-the-new-zealand-terror-attacks-113713.

Kaskeleviciute, R. & Jörg Matthes, J. (2022) A Vicious Cycle? Threat of Terror, Perceived Media Bias, and Support for Surveillance Policies, *Mass Communication and Society*, DOI: 10.1080/15205436.2022.2052903.

Ringmar, E. (2013). How to Fight Savage Tribes: The Global War on Terror in Historical Perspective. *Terrorism and Political Violence*. 22(2), 264-283.

Sabaratnam, M. (2011). IR in Dialogue… but Can We Change the Subjects? A Typology of Decolonising Strategies for the Study of World Politics. *Millenium: Journal of International Studies*. 39(3),781-803.

Said, E. (1978). *Orientalism*. London: Penguin Books.

Saidin, M.I.S. (2018). Revolution in the Contemporary Muslim World: Review of the 1979 Iran Revolution and the 2011 Arab Uprisings. *Jebat: Malaysian Journal of History, Politics and Strategic Studies.* 45(2),104-125.

Tunzelmann, A. (2009, March 26). The Battle of Algiers: A Masterpiece of Historical Accuracy. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/film/2009/mar/26/the-battle-of-algiers-film-historical-accuracy.

Whitaker, S. (2006, October 14). Gillo Pontecorvo obituary: Italian director best known for The Battle of Algiers, a classic work on the struggle for liberation from the French. *The Guardian*. https://www.theguardian.com/news/2006/oct/14/ guardianobituaries.obituaries

In This Issue