

The SAGE Dictionary of Cultural Studies

Orientalism

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The concept of Orientalism is associated with the work of Edward **Said**, who argued that cultural-geographical entities such as the 'Orient' are not inert facts of nature, but rather should be grasped as historically specific discursive constructions that have a particular history and tradition. Thus, 'The Orient' has [p. 139 ↓] been constituted by an imagery and vocabulary that have given it a specific kind of reality and presence within Western culture. In particular, the idea of Orientalism suggests that racism is not simply a matter of individual psychology or pathology, but rather is constituted through patterns of cultural representation deeply ingrained within the practices, discourses and subjectivities of Western societies.

Orientalism is a set of Western discourses of power that have constructed an Orient – have Orientalized the Orient – in ways that depend on and reproduce the positional superiority and hegemony of the West. For Said, Orientalism was a general group of ideas impregnated with European superiority, racism and imperialism that are elaborated and distributed through a variety of texts and practices. Orientalism is argued to be a system of representations that brought the Orient into Western learning. These include Flaubert's encounter with an Egyptian courtesan that produced an influential image of the Oriental woman who never spoke for herself, never showed her emotions and lacked agency or history. That is, the sexually beguiling dark maiden of male power-fantasies. In contrast, the Oriental male is seen as wily, fanatical, cruel and despotic.

In this respect, the contemporary elevation of 'Islam' to the role of chief bogeyman in Western news follows a well-worn path. Long before the current twenty-first-century crisis of relations between the West and Islam, Said argued that the Western media represented Islamic peoples as irrational fanatics led by messianic and authoritarian leaders. In recent years, a great deal of news coverage in the West has been devoted to such matters as the states of Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Libya (with a special emphasis on their alleged sponsoring of terrorism), the *fatwa* declared by Ayatollah Khomeini against Salman Rushdie, the US-led conflicts between the West and Iraq including the 2003 war, and, of course, Osama Bin Laden and the tragedy of 11 September 2001.

Thus we may note a certain imbalance in the cultural representation of Islam within the West. There is a concentration on the violence of some Islamic fundamentalists but little exploration of the reasons for this hostility towards the West and the part played by Western cultural and political actions in fuelling conflict. Nor is it often reported that Islam is seen by most of its adherents as a philosophy and religion of love and peaceful cooperation.

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