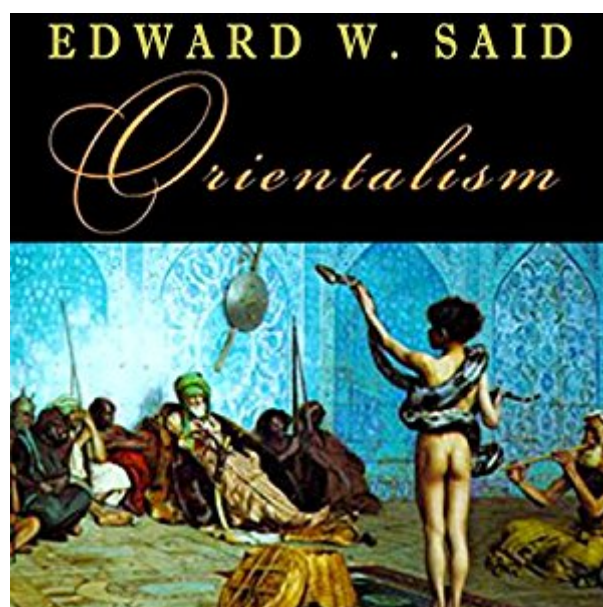


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# Orientalism



## Synopsis

This landmark book, first published in 1978, remains one of the most influential books in the Social Sciences, particularly Ethnic Studies and Postcolonialism. Said is best known for describing and critiquing "Orientalism", which he perceived as a constellation of false assumptions underlying Western attitudes toward the East. In *Orientalism* Said claimed a "subtle and persistent Eurocentric prejudice against Arabo-Islamic peoples and their culture." He argued that a long tradition of false and romanticized images of Asia and the Middle East in Western culture had served as an implicit justification for Europe and the US' colonial and imperial ambitions. Just as fiercely, he denounced the practice of Arab elites who internalized the US and British orientalist's ideas of Arabic culture. Peter Ganim's narration gives the work an elegant and knowledgeable voice.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This book and Edward Said in general seem capable of generating such intense controversy. Many reviewers of this book seem to forget actually to review the work and focus on attacking Edward Said as a person, many others still forget to review the book and proceed to speak for Palestinian rights and the negative western attitudes of Islam. I will attempt to present an actual review of this book based on MY own reading of it. In *Orientalism*, Said sets about dismantling the study of the "orient" in general with primary focus on the Islamic Near East. Said argues that concepts such as the Orient, Islam, the Arabs, etc. are too vast to be grouped together and presented as one coherent whole, encompassing all there is to know about the subject. Said bases his view on the sheer width and breadth of the subject, the inherent bias of conflicting cultures and more recently

the role of the Orientalism in colonialism. It is indeed difficult to attempt to represent a book that is so focused on anti essentialism. Said's research of western / occidental discourse was very thorough indeed and he does illustrate through repeated examples how misinformation sufficiently repeated can become accepted academic work. Said also presents an analysis of the causes and motives and theorizes about his findings. A lengthy and a times tedious discussion of the origins of Orientalism is rather repetitive and hard to follow for a non specialist like me. Edward Said however seem to have fallen in the same trap he attributes to Orientalism, he has not attempted to explore Arab writings of the periods he discussed nor has he attempted to present (possibly even read) work by Egyptian and Arab historians of the periods he was addressing save for work carried out in the west and within western universities.

When it was written, Orientalism administered a much-needed correction to the study of the Arab and Asian worlds. Any historian, social scientist or humanist working in related fields should own a copy. The strength of Edward Said's Orientalism is its highlighting of the underlying assumptions of dominance and subjection in Orientalist scholarship. Said correctly points out that the British, French and United States have relied on the reduction of the Orient to an academic study backed by a mythical image of its inhabitants and cultures as more primitive, passionate, mystical and illogical. Complementing this has been a presumption of Western superiority that allows diagnosis of social ills and prescription of Western remedies for these ills. Said also pointed out a secondary weakness in the Orientalist approach to its studies. If Westerners presume the Orient to be more passionate and mystical, they may assume that it provides absolute alternatives to the ills of Western culture and modernism. Thus the span of Western history scrutinized by Said has seen individuals and groups embracing ill-understood religions and cultural precepts. The anti-majoritarian/left-leaning subcultures arising during the upheavals of the 1960's are particularly susceptible to this. This leads naturally to Aijid Ahmad's primary criticism of Said. Orientalism doesn't consider the varied responses of the Orient/Third-World to its theories. In particular, Ahmad correctly points out that Orientalism over-focuses blames on the West and doesn't address the self-inflicted problems of "Oriental" societies. Based on this criticism, the proper approach is to balance the effects of Western Orientalism and the indigenous difficulties.

Public opinion has gone in and out like the tides on Said's book since I first read it some six odd years ago. It has been said that the primal characteristic of a truly enlightened mind is its ability to entertain two seemingly contradictory ideas at the same time; in that context I find it odd that people

can be so proud of their total discrediting of Said's work in favor of the preeminent and (seemingly) diametrically opposed Bernard Lewis. It is obvious to me that both men have something provocative to teach us about Europe and America's relationship with the Middle East (as it has been over the centuries and is reflected in culture and scholarship), and both need to be heard in that context. It is not often that a brilliantly, exhaustively researched book on an alternately controversial and trivialized subject can engender an emotional response of the magnitude with which this work does--which usually means that it is worth reading. In documenting the psychological architecture of the western mind and its perspective on the East--or the "Orient"--he deconstructs it. The idea that it exists deconstructs it by nature; before reading this book you will swear that most of what we know of the Arabian East is the absolute truth, without even being aware that it's been either romanticized into impotence or isn't much of anything complimentary, let alone influential. I rate ORIENTALISM, for its effect on our psyche as Americans alone (regardless of race or assumed political leanings), as one of the most important books written in the last decades of the 20th century. The world looks the way it does not because of natural law, like the reasons why the Sahara has become a desert--or at least not by the natural laws we have imagined.

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