Chapter I

Orientalism: The Discourse and its Application

Prior to Said, the term “orientalism” was used to denote a style or manner characteristic of the orient, or the study of the language or culture of the orient. The term however, has come to imbibe complex politics with the publication of his work. With Orientalism [1978], the term which previously belonged to the seemingly innocuous phraseology of cultural location derived hegemonic political overtones and came to signify a measure employed by the west to extend its authority over the east.

Within the dominative structures of colonialism, oriental identity came to be typecast as opposite to the western, and the unquestioned polarity between them became a means of perpetuating colonial rule. With Orientalism, Said uncovers a universally discernible antagonism between the identities of the east and the west and offers his argument about the identity of the third world as represented by the west. But his analyses and assertions go only as far as the observation of the creation of hierarchical patterns of colonial identity by the west. This chapter is designed to critically analyze the polarized views about third-world identity as explored in Orientalism and their application in the context of identity politics. In line with postmodernist thought, this chapter centres on a demystification of those constructs which privilege certain definitions of identity. Beginning with the evolution of orientalism from a way of identifying what is eastern or coming to terms with it, to its political and hegemonic overtones, the focus of the chapter shifts to Said and his place in the debate. With a brief description and critical analysis of Said’s arguments about the representation of third-world identity, this chapter is designed to deconstruct the discourse of orientalism and the homogenous, timeless and inferior constructs that third-world identity is isolated in.
In its commonly understood form, orientalism denotes a universal and homogenized western perception of the orient created on the basis of a religious and cultural difference between the east and the west. However, this difference soon gives way to discursive construction and then to stark opposition between them. The history of orientalism can be traced back to the 8th century BC when some of the first references to the east were made in recorded literature. In the works of Greek masters like Homer, the east is full of ‘barbarians’ [root: barbaros (Gr.) meaning ‘different’]. One can simplistically associate this reference to barbarity with inferiority; but in the current sense of the word, it is believed to indicate distinction without reference to the east as ‘uncouth or uncultured’ (Irwin 10). Nevertheless, the reference to east as something different from west begins with classical Greek literary references. Robert Irwin attempts to uncover an innocent academic intention in the work of orientalists in For Lust of Knowing [2006] and tries to absolve them of the blame of discursive practice or politicization of identity.

But it cannot be denied that a foundational distinction between the east and the west was created through the works of Aeschylus, Herodotus, Aristotle and Euripides. The Greco-Roman references to the orient may not have created a discourse about oriental inferiority, although there are references to oriental despotism and ‘slavish’ attitudes (Irwin 17) which reflect the western sense of superiority against the east. This notion, when exhumed, supported the Christian/western denigration of Islam/the east after the death of Muhammad in 632 AD when the spread of Islam became intimidating to Christianity. Whether as an act of defense or political disparagement, the west, with its Christian affiliations, scorned the Islamic east and created a discourse about oriental inferiority. Based on a religious divide, the west associated itself with Christianity and the east with Islam defining the east or orient as opposite to the west.

Ziauddin Sardar gives a brief summary of the development of the discourse of orientalism. Through the works of orientalist scholars like Dante, Averros, Avicenna, Bedwell, John Wycliff and many others, the political and religious hostility between Christianity and Islam translates into an immortal discourse of orientalism. The orient is perceived as a place of exotica where the repressed desires and fantasies of the European can be executed. Quoting from the accounts of western travellers and artists, Sardar
observes a common attempt in them to locate all perversenesses of body and mind onto
the orient. Sardar suggests that orientalism finds a focus with the western perception of
Islam and its association of the orient with Islam. He emphasizes:

The West lived with the Orient of Islam and its own Orientalist ideas for
800 years before it had significant encounters with any other Orients. . . .
The major fluorescence of Orientalism occurred in the sustained period of
400 years that separate the preaching of the First Crusade and Vasco da
Gama’s landfall at Calicut in India. (54)

Orientalist ideas were already deep set in the western psyche. With the colonial
encounters and the subsequent reiteration of inherited prejudices to promote imperial
rule, and a strong effort to ignore anything antithetical to the age-old beliefs (Sardar 4),
the static notions about the orient gained currency and translated into a universal and
homogenous discourse of orientalism. The development of orientalism based on religious
opposition was nevertheless political, but the discourse of orientalism was largely
unchallenged.

Even 20th century accounts of oriental history, like the one offered by Denis
Sinor, present the orient as a place of inferiority vis-à-vis the west, without offering any
apologies for such denigration (3, 23, 35). Sinor simplistically divides his entire study of
the orient into five isolated chapters covering the near East, Islam, India, China and
Central Eurasia, and claims to offer historical insight into the orient (vii). Western
prejudices about oriental inferiority, lack of academic inclination, patchiness and
barbarity glare through the works of western historians and orientalists directly or
indirectly. But these stereotypical notions about the orient were not refuted till quite
recently.

Said’s work, as we can see, is definitely not the first in the line of academic
attempts to highlight the politics inherent in western ideas of the orient. Even so, it
occupies a landmark position in the postmodern world of challenging canonical ideas
with counteractive readings. Since 1978, when Orientalism was published, Said has
established immense credibility in the area of postcolonial studies. Said initiates what can
be called an exercise in debunking the domination of western ideology. In his introduction to Orientalism, Said states clearly his intention of deconstructing Eurocentric ideas of the binaries of east and west. Quoting Raymond Williams, he says that his is an attempt at ‘unlearning the inherent dominative mode’ (28).

However, despite its landmark status, Orientalism suffers from a foundational lack of force in dismantling the western perception of the orient. Although Orientalism deals with the concept of third-world identity in great detail, Said’s approach towards it is that of elimination and not assertion. Through a large number and variety of references and their analyses, Said tells us what the orient is not, and thereby offers only a conjectural idea of what it might be. Moreover, Said only seems to present an elaborate picture of the polarity between the east and the west, without making much attempt to challenge it. But before setting off to counter Said’s thesis or his approach, it is imperative to touch briefly upon his main ideas in Orientalism.

With Said, a new probe into the politics of orientalism is initiated which centres on European colonization and the power principle of the discourse mechanism. Said observes orientalism from the epistemological point of view. Orientalism is defined as a discourse created by the west about the non-west, so as to define itself in contrast to it. It can be understood as the creation of an idea about the orient as a homogenously regressive group as opposed to the progressive and dynamic west. Said defines orientalism as:

\[\text{distribution}\] of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts . . . an elaboration not only of a basic geographical distinction . . . but also of a whole series of “interests” . . . it is rather than expresses, a certain will or intention to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate what is manifestly different (or alternative and novel) world; it is, above all, a discourse that is by no means in direct, corresponding relationship with political power in the raw, but rather is produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power. (Orientalism 12)
He similarly observes in an Interview that:

As a systematic discourse Orientalism is written knowledge, but because it is in the world and directly about the world, it is more than knowledge: it is power since, so far as the Oriental is concerned, Orientalism is the operative and effective knowledge by which he was delivered textually to the West, occupied by the West, milked by the West for his resources, humanly quashed by the West. (qtd. in Viswanathan, Power 26)

Restricting his study to the Arab world, Said observes in Orientalism that the idea of the orient is constructed by the West on the basis of certain prejudices which are inherited by the latter through history and literature. Through a detailed analysis of texts from the genres of history, literature, travelogues and music, Said suggests that a set of beliefs about the orient has been circulated over time in Western society. These beliefs, coupled with a ‘positional superiority’ (7) over the orient, create a homogenous perspective of oriental inferiority. The authority of the west gives currency to this view, thereby creating a discourse of orientalism.

Said identifies three approaches towards the understanding of orientalism: academic, whereby, orientalism becomes a part of area studies, and a student of the discipline becomes an orientalist — a specialist in the study of the orient and the oriental; ontological, whereby, orientalism is observed as the political opposite of occidentalism and a stark opposition is construed between the east and the west; and historical, whereby orientalism becomes the hegemonic discourse that provided as a basis for European control over the orient: a medium to establish a ‘Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient’ (3).

To Said, orientalism is an attempt of the west towards self definition. The orient is a place of interest for the westerner not for itself, but for the experience of it as something that stands in contrast to the observer and offers a determining opposition for the colonizing ‘self’. Ziauddin Sardar echoes Said’s views about orientalism as a means to create western self identity. He says that:
Orientalism is a creation of the Western psyche that unleashes power but at the end of the day its most important impact is not in the relations of power and dominance in the real world of politics, economic and military relations. Its greatest potency is within the psyche of the West itself. (11)

On similar lines Ashcroft and Ahluwalia suggest:

Orientalism demonstrates how power operates in knowledge: the processes by which the West ‘knows’ the Orient have been a way of exerting power over it. (Edward Said 8)

Said explains that ‘the main thing for the European visitor was a European representation of the Orient and its contemporary fate’ [my emphasis] (1). With Said, the practice of orientalism becomes a psychological venture of narrating an eastern ‘other’ which can help construct a western ‘self’ in contrast. Quoting extensively from the likes of Arthur James Balfour and Evelyn Baring, also known as Lord Cromer, Said marks the connection between knowledge and power that formed the basis for colonial rule. With Foucault, Said establishes a relationship between knowledge and power and suggests that the creation of a homogenized knowledge about the orient provided the necessary ideological basis for the development and propagation of imperial power and rule.

Said is of the opinion that a homogenized knowledge about the orient is created as a result of the systematic collection of ideas about the orient that have been brought to the European from times immemorial. These ideas come as a result of the colonial encounter and the production of literary texts that puts the European in an unchallengeable position of superiority vis-à-vis the orient.

What gave the Oriental’s world its intelligibility and identity was not the result of his own efforts but rather the whole complex series of knowledgeable manipulations by which the Orient was identified by the West. (Orientalism 40)

This allows the colonizer to rule, judge, study, discipline and illustrate the orient as required. Thus the orient is ‘contained and represented by dominating frameworks’ (40). These dominating frameworks lead to the creation of systems of knowledge that are
solidified in time and every attempt at articulating these is an attempt to strengthen the power relation between the colonizer and the colonized.

Further, Said establishes that the European representation of the orient ‘is an integral part of European material civilization and culture’ (2). The cultural superstructure of Europe is characterized as one defined by the economic relation it has with its colonies. This economic base situates the orient in a subordinate position vis-à-vis the occident. Said explains that the belief in the superiority of the European civilization and the conviction in the civilizing mission are inherent in the European culture and not based upon personal experience. The prejudice against Eastern inferiority and the myth of the white man’s burden were rampant way before the term orientalism entered the vocabulary of colonial politics.

Said visualizes orientalism as a product of the scholarship produced about the east. This scholarship is produced in different fields by people who agree upon a certain idea of an orient which they collectively reiterate in their writings and thereby preserve. But Said argues that orientalism is not just a collection of lies and myths about the orient as created by the westerner. The idea, rather, is that the blanks left in the knowledge about the orient inherited by the scholars, are filled with certain collectively accepted myths about the orient, which make the oriental account and the discourse of third-world identity inauthentic and imaginary.

Extending what Claude Levi-Strauss calls ‘a science of the concrete’ to the symbolism of a community whereby everything in it acquires a place and a meaning which is concrete and logical, Said suggests that it is this symbolism which creates the idea of that which is ‘ours’ and that which is ‘theirs’ (Orientalism 53-54). This differentiation between what can be included in one’s bounds and what lies beyond, is necessary for the creation of borderlines and geographic boundaries. Said suggests that the historical or geographical knowledge about a particular place includes its poetics. The emotional or even rational pull of a space influences the way it is received by those who experience it, further giving meaning to even the empty or distant reaches of that space. The oriental identity is drawn through a process of filling these empty spaces in the partial experience of the orient with the traditionally accepted and inherited homogenous
perceptions of it. He claims that any belief that has had such a long life in areas of politics, academics, economics and history, cannot be just a fantasy and must have some grounding in experience. Thus the scholarship regarding the orient contains neither all reality nor all myth.

The orient also allows the occident control and a rather powerful position vis-à-vis itself. With reference to Gramsci’s distinction of civil and political society, Said explains that civil society is the one governed by families, schools, unions etc. and the political society consists of institutions. Though culture is a clear part of the civil society, it is nevertheless implicitly influenced by the political society through prevalent ideas and beliefs, and their currency. However, the working of these ideas in any non-totalitarian state is not a function of domination but one of consent. This cultural rule of the institutions is what Gramsci calls ‘hegemony’ (Orientalism 7). Said understands that it is this hegemony of European institutions which influenced the civil society of the world, thereby giving the discourse of orientalism the life that it has. The hegemony of European rule depended upon a presumption or discourse of European superiority. This discourse permeated through the institutionalized European power into the civil society of the orient as well and has been in currency ever since. Said mentions that the European had an invincible ‘positional superiority’ (7) over the orient in every relationship that he had with the latter. This positional superiority is not even challenged by the orient, which is why the European got ample chance to observe, think about, write about, and create images of the orient to his own taste and benefit. The orient is hence dressed to be displayed as the European wanted it to be. And this act is possible because of a passive acceptance on the part of the colonized. This, in turn, allows for the creation of a system of knowledge about the orient which can cyclically work at strengthening and immortalizing the hegemony of the colonizer and his ‘positional superiority’ over the colonized.

In terms of creating an identity of inferiority for the orient, which is my concern here, the inherent narcissism of the colonizer while defining a default opposite in the orient and the Nietzschean ‘will to power’ are at play.
European texts – anthropologies, histories, fiction – captured the non-European subject within European frameworks which read his or her alterity as *terror or lack*. . . . Concomitantly representations of Europe and Europeans within this textual archive were situated as normative . . . [T]he representations of Europe to itself, and the representation of others to Europe – were not accounts or illustrations of different peoples and societies, but a projection of European fears and desires masquerading as scientific/‘objective’ knowledges. (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, *Empire Writes Back* 93)

Within the forces of political manipulation and lack of resistance to the discourse, an imagined oriental identity is created which constantly oscillates between experience and imagination. The orient inspires unfamiliarity in the western perception and causes a tension or an anxiety which contains the attraction towards that which is new and at the same time, a repulsion or fear of the same as it challenges the historical image. Said further explains that there is an unreachable and ‘untouchable’ reality or ‘positivity’ about the orient which is ‘latent’ and another set of definitions, beliefs and stereotypical images which are ‘manifest’ in the texts of the orientalists (206). The manifest orient is made available to the orientalist and comfortably placed in his psyche, but latent orientalism is the one which constantly moves away from the orientalist, creating an area of attraction as well as fear for him.

The Orient at large, therefore, vacillates between the West’s contempt for what is familiar and its shivers of delight in — or fear of — novelty. (59)

To reduce the fear excited by the unfamiliar orient in the western mind, oriental culture, religion and society are observed from a western point of view, in western terminology. This ‘domestication of the exotic’ (60) includes a distortion of fact, or at least an aberration of it. The orient is now experienced as some kind of distorted imitation or pseudo incarnation of the great original, that is, canonical truth represented by the occident. The scholarship of an orientalist brings no new knowledge to light but rather restates the western views regarding the orient. Said notes that there is nothing entirely wrong with such a domestication of alien cultures to make them accessible to the foreign
reader, but such domestication entails a process of falsification, exaggeration, and in some cases absolute exclusion of fact (Orientalism 60). According to Said the orient created for western consumption is exotic and mysterious, quintessentially opposite to the west in characteristics, homogenously decadent and superstitious, stagnant in its being, incapable of evolution, and redeemable only through western control. This exotic orient slipping into an abysmal degeneration is presented to the philanthropic west with the power to define (even create) perceptions about it. In the hands of the modern orientalist, orientalism is a strategic device to mummify the orient in a stereotypical mould with the intention of advancing colonial rule. Said alleges that the western observation of the orient is not only a prejudiced one, but also seldom based on observations in the east.

[W]hat the Orientalist does is to confirm the Orient in his readers’ eyes; he neither tries nor wants to unsettle already firm convictions. (65)

This totalitarian method of making a discipline out of the accepted definitions about the orient ends up creating the practice of orientalism as an ‘insensitive schematization of the entire Orient’ (68).

Said elaborates how orientalism is an idea available to the westerner and not a first hand experience. It is inherited as a belief and reproduced and marketed in an environment which is open to accepting the same belief as truth.

The Orient, in short, existed as a set of values attached, not to its modern realities, but to a series of valorized contacts it had had with a distant European past. This is a pure example of the textual, schematic attitude. (85)

This ‘textual schematic attitude’ that Said argues about is the conscious reiteration of the past experiences as if they were an unchanging phenomena. Further a conscious recourse to these values strengthens and perpetuates the popular view about the orient. This textual image of the orient, devoid of its modern evolution, is schematically a part of the hegemonic process of domesticating the orient.
Further, the orient is presented in terms not of its own existence or identity but rather in terms of ‘world history, a euphemism for European history’ (86). There is also an attempt not to present the orient in modern terms but rather to create the imagined orient of the past in a modern setting.

[The Orient was reconstructed, reassembled, crafted, in short, born out of the Orientalists’ efforts. (Orientalism 87)]

Hence oriental history becomes a history not of the oriental people but rather a history of the orientalists’ invention and potency. Said identifies this recreation of the orient as the project of the colonizers to perpetuate their control over the orient and also to maintain power over it.

Drawing out a distinction between pure and political knowledge, Said suggests that no artist or critic of any sort can be divorced from the conscious or unconscious experience of his/her social and political environment. No writing can be termed ‘nonpolitical’ as all writing is influenced, directly or indirectly, by the socio-political environment (10).

[Political society in Gramsci’s sense reaches into such realms of civil society as the academy and saturates them with significance of direct concern to it. (11)]

With the influence of the political on the civil, the latter is bound to be ‘tinged and impressed with, violated by, the gross political fact’ (11). This means knowing constantly that:

[One belongs to a power with definite interests in the Orient, and more important, that one belongs to a part of the earth with a definite history of involvement in the Orient almost since the time of Homer. (11)]

The modern orientalist, hence, identifies himself as a hero entrusted with the task of rescuing the agency-less orient from succumbing to obscurity. This idea of restoring, and
many ways even creating the orient, and bringing it simultaneously to the modern world of sciences and refined arts leaves traces of power on the orientalist. The orientalist, lured by this aspect of power continues to ‘copy’ the inherited oriental experience into history (121).

With reference to the concepts of ‘strategic location’ (the place of the author vis-à-vis the text and the subject), and ‘strategic formation’ (the relationships between various texts and kinds of texts and genres and their influence on the discourse building phenomena) (20), Said analyzes how an orientalist author occupies a position of authority in his narrative. The imperial authorial position privileges certain concepts, strategically obscuring the objectivity of a text and the real picture remains hidden.

[The written statement is a presence to the reader by virtue of its having excluded, displaced, made supererogatory any such real thing as “the Orient”. (21)]

The oriental does not control or reflect the creation of his identity as a discourse. He can only go as far as to suggest it in the first place, but the rest of the idea is purely a creation of the colonizer. This creation is controlled by the doctrinal and theoretical urge to define the orient in intellectual standards guided by the determining historical works which have been revisited from time to time but hardly ever challenged.

The pronouncements made about the orient are the ‘purest form of Romanticism’ (137). By the time of Renan, as noted by Said, the ideas regarding the orient had become a necessity for the European scholar. All of European scholarship by then was based upon a comparative study of oriental scholarship and its European counterparts in religion, culture, philology and science (141), and the stereotypical notions about the orient were a prerequisite to define the west as superior to the east. It is as though the orient is placed in the laboratory, or the museum where it can be dissected and displayed and talked about in exaggerated forms and treated as something which is at the disposal of the European scholar who has the authority to define it at will. Renan’s ‘philological laboratory’ becomes the ‘locale of his European ethnocentrism’ from where the power is processed. (Orientalism 146)
The idea of a constructed orient indicates a fabricated identity. For Said, the construction, or fabrication of the orient is not only a romantic endeavour for the orientalist but also a ‘messianic’ opportunity. The orientalist approaches the orient as a romantic experience which can enrich the former with its spirituality and antiquity, but is simultaneously an area which requires the orientalist’s intervention so as to evolve itself into a modern and scientific entity (154). The orientalist assumes the role of a generous benefactor bringing about the redemption of the orient.

According to Said, the orientalist approaches the orient as a place in the past one has to return to. It is a home coming in some ways as it allows one to be free from the material bondages of the western world: a place of pilgrimage and cleansing. This romance attached to the orient makes it a poetic ‘restorative reconstruction’ to create knowledge about the orient and make it accessible for the westerner (168). But the spiritual treasures of the orient are not raised to a point where it can be elevated from its positional inferiority.

Whatever utility the Orient possessed for resolving European problems there was an overriding consensus built and set into concrete by the intellectual temper of the Enlightenment, the stasis of the Orient, in contrast to the progress of the West. (Sardar 38)

At the same time, there are a few aspects of the orient which are not easy for the Europeans to digest. These need to be deleted or appropriated. This entails modifying the observed fact to make it fit for European consumption. The orient is then ‘reborn as European right-to-power over it’ and the identity of the orient is created out of the historically brought forward discourse and personal fantasies of the colonial masters (179).

The field of orientalism derives its identity from its relationship with other schools of study, social institutions and political fact, and by and large denotes

a sort of consensus: certain things, certain types of statement, certain types of work that have seemed for the Orientalist correct. . . Orientalism can thus be regarded as a manner of regularized (or Orientalized) writing,
vision, and study dominated by imperatives, perspectives, and ideological biases ostensibly suited to the Orient. The Orient is taught, researched, administered, and pronounced upon in certain discrete ways. (Orientalism 202)

The language used by the orientalist then becomes an endeavour for the perpetuation of western empire and not the orient, and this language with its ‘metaphors’, as Said quotes from Nietzsche, becomes ‘canonical, and obligatory to a people’. It becomes a set of ‘illusions’ which have been so engrained in the psyche of the people that their counterfeit can barely be identified (Orientalism 203). The ‘orient’ does not stand for the identity of the colonized people, but rather denotes the field of meanings attributed to the term.

The discursive representation of the orient, then, does not depict it but only offers a representation which is embedded first in the language and then in the culture, institutions, and political ambience of the representer . . . implicated, intertwined, embedded, interwoven with a great many other things besides the “truth”. (272-3)

The imperial process necessitates the confinement of the orient by the orientalist in patterns bound by him, so that his authority in displaying the orient is maintained. It is thus that the orient is defined as stagnant and homogeneous to maintain a stereotypical ‘other’ for the occident.

Discussing the change that has come about with the advent of capitalism and globalization, Said states that the orient is ‘dehumanized’ for American consumption and policy (291). The orientalist’s propaganda now includes a detailed philological study of the orient so as to employ the diplomatic policies for global economics. The supremacy is established in the corporate machinery of seemingly fair and open markets. However, the dogmas regarding oriental inferiority, antiquity, inability to define itself and ability to incite fear in the “civilized” world are as rampant as ever. The orient is still defined by a reductive reaction of the orientalist to the oriental experience.
The traditional construction of orientalism is manifest with newer and more contemporary discourses. The orient becomes a fragmented and ‘amorphous’ other in postmodern terms (Sardar 116), embodying newer essentialisms with the traditional discursive attributes.

[New] formulations of Orients emerge from the repository of shared Orientalist understanding, that is assimilated by cultural osmosis from many disparate strands and locations. . . . In postmodern times, “the Orient” has been globalized, it is located everywhere and everywhere it can be subjected to Orientalization, from the one ruling perspective that defines itself as the West. (Sardar 114)

The present state of third-world identity, with its inferior and essentialist status even in fragmentation and multiplicity, points towards a continued significance of the study of the discourse of orientalism and its application. Calling for a sceptical attitude towards discursive systems, Said suggests that in the current scenario an attempt towards recounting an authentic idea of third-world identity can be achieved only in a space which allows multiple voices and their interplay. Said’s deconstructive analysis of the discourse of orientalism belongs to what Aijaz Ahmad identifies in his 1995 essay ‘Orientalism and After’ as the

well-known intellectual tradition of writers debunking the great monuments of their own academic discipline or examining the complicity of intellectuals in dominant ideologies and fabrications of illegitimate power. (173-4)

This tradition of criticism involves a re-reading of canonical texts so as to unravel the strategies of power implicated within them. In ‘Orientalism Reconsidered’, Said again marks his interest in charging against the ‘metropolitan power’ with a ‘decentred consciousness’ (214). Said gives immense significance to the post-colonial ‘revisionist’ works which allow the repeated perusal of the colonial experience so as to break down the absolute identities of “self” and “other” (Orientalism 352).
Said's research is centered on the creation of the discourse of orientalism and its application. His analysis of third-world identity as reflected through the discourse of orientalism ostensibly debunks the canonical version of the binary opposition between the east and the west. However, Said nowhere rejects the opposition between the orient and the occident. In the three aspects he employs to study the discourse of orientalism – academic, ontological and historical – the orient is always in a position of powerlessness against the west, as a laboratory subject of observation, an inferior alter-ego, and a colonial subject respectively. In strengthening the polarity between the east and the west by his ‘remorseless drive to judge the texts of orientalism into a straightforward “for” and “against” division’ (Young, *White Mythologies* 177-8), Said becomes rather anti-occidental in his perception of orientalists. It is thus that Bart Moore-Gilbert criticizes Said for ‘homogenizing the sites of enunciation of Orientalist discourse . . . suppressing important cultural and geographical, as well as historical differences in the varied cultures of Western imperialism’ (45).

With plentiful references to Foucault and Gramsci, Said develops a theory regarding the creation of the discourse of orientalism. The west creates the idea of the oriental ‘other’ so as to define its ‘self’ in opposition to it.

The history of Orientalism shows that it is not an outward gaze of the West toward a fixed, definite object that is to the east, the Orient. Orientalism is a form of inward reflection, preoccupied with the intellectual concerns, problems, fears and desires of the West that are visited on a fabulated, constructed object by convention called the Orient. (Sardar 13)

Since this knowledge about the orient was to define the west by default, as an opposite of the former, the orient was made to inhabit everything that the west despised or lacked. Said goes as far as to suggest that the west sees the orient as ‘a sort of surrogate and even underground self’ (*Orientalism* 3). Critics agree with Said:

Orientalism is surrogate self-definition of the dominant culture as much as deployment of the difference of an Orient. (Sardar 116)
Moore-Gilbert however finds a complexity in Said’s definition of the orient as an ‘underground’ self, which implies that the west defines the orient as an object that is outside but still inside, in so much as it is a far off experience and an inferior image of the self at the same time (44). But Said nowhere claims to define the orient. He believes that his work is just an attempt at understanding orientalism as it is designed by the west. Said does not suggest that the orient is an ‘underground self of the west, but rather that it serves as one for it. Further, the Foucauldian analysis of orientalism by Said brings forth the concept of defining identity by difference.

In line with Antonio Gramsci, Said believes that there is a relation between what is defined as the ‘civil’ and the ‘political’ society (6). The former consists of schools and families, and the latter consists of social and political institutions. The civil society is affected by the political society through ‘consent’ rather than direct rule. According to Said then,

In any society not totalitarian ... certain cultural forms predominate over others, just as certain ideas are more influential than others; the form of this cultural leadership is what Gramsci has identified as hegemony. (7)

Said mentions that the European had an invincible ‘positional superiority’ (7) over the orient in every relationship with the latter. In the absence of any great resistance to the superiority of the west by the colonized, the orientalist continued to strengthen the discourse of orientalism to propagate and immortalize imperial rule.

But hegemony through consent is not everlasting and is consequently questioned. This raises doubts about Said’s and Gramsci’s assumption of a silent and ‘consent[ing]’ orient. This explanation assumes a stereotypical response to colonial rule and does not consider any subjectivity of experience. The colonized are seen as inert and devoid of agency. In such a state of affairs, the colonized would have continued to be under imperial rule and there would have been no attempts towards deconstructing the myths of orientalism. The large body of work on orientalism bears testimony to the fact that the
proposition of a ‘consenting’ oriental is unreal and does not explain transformation through resistance (Ashcroft, Post-Colonial Transformation 40).

Said is of the view that oriental identity is created out of literary and historical narratives. He asserts that no artist or critic of any sort can be delinked from the conscious or unconscious experiences of his life and its environment. This environment contains the social and political reality as well. A writer or a critic is then always tinged and impressed with, violated by, the gross political fact . . . [No] production of knowledge in the human sciences can ever ignore or disclaim its author’s involvement as a human subject in his own circumstances, then it must also be true that for a European or American studying the Orient, there can be no disclaiming the main circumstances of his actuality: that he comes up against the Orient as a European or American first, as an individual second. (11)

With this backdrop of social and political influence, the artist or critic of the eighteenth century west saw the orient first as a place where Europe had economic interests, and then as a place of real experience. These interests seemed to the west the foundation on which the history of the new world could be constructed.

Said concludes that no writing can be termed ‘nonpolitical’ as all writing is influenced, directly or indirectly, by the socio-political scenario (10). By so relating the concept of politics and literary criticism, Said defies the ‘suprapolitical objectivity’ claimed by the so called ‘true’ knowledge (10). He also brings together two supposedly distant streams in a relation that cannot be severed. Even an ardent critic of Said, Ziauddin Sardar, credits him for adding the new dimension of literary criticism to the erstwhile historical study of orientalism making it a multidisciplinary exercise. Further, with reference to Foucault and his theory of generating power through knowledge, Said brings the ‘repackaged critiques of Orientalism into a new strategic location’ (Sardar 67).

But with this relation between the political scenario and culture, there appears the problem of locating the critic. If all knowledge is affected by the political and social scenario of the artist or critic, then how can any knowledge be objective? Said suggests that a critic be simultaneously inside and outside the text, so as to provide his subjective
experience with a sense of objectivity. But what Said fails to explain is the method to ‘effect critical distance’ (Young, White Mythologies 168). Said himself admits in ‘Orientalism Reconsidered’, that it is impossible to produce knowledge that is non-dominative and non-coercive . . . in a setting that is deeply inscribed with the politics, the considerations, the positions, and the strategies of power. (200)

Despite this acknowledgement of incapability to define the role of the critic, and the rather humanitarian and progressive intention of questioning the hegemonic overtones of narratives of identity that he states in his Afterword to Orientalism (351), Said does not succeed in resolving the issue. With every effort to objectively debunk the previous narrative, a critic creates a new and different, but inevitably influenced view about identity, and the authority granted to intellectual rhetoric creates a new narrative to debunk. The creation of a ‘true’ knowledge that is not affected by the critic’s historical, social, geographical, economic, political, cultural and intellectual environment is a euphoric idea which cannot be fulfilled.

According to Said, the discourse about oriental identity was handed down to the west by the long history of a rampant myth of orientalism that had been in currency since Homer. This myth was turned into a sort of discipline by the Napoleonic invasions of Egypt in the 18th century. Said notes in Orientalism:

[A]fter Napoleon, then, the very language of Orientalism changed radically. Its descriptive realism was upgraded and became not merely a style of representation but a language, indeed a means of creation . . . . the Orient was reconstructed, reassembled, crafted, in short, born out of the Orientalist’s efforts. (87)

In ‘Orientalism Reconsidered’, he restates that the orient was created by the west in the 18th century, ‘leav[ing] the Orient far behind’ so as to advance colonial rule over it (202). It can be said then, that the historical discourse about the orient served as the raw material which could be manipulated to create an orient that justified colonization. It is observed
with respect to Said’s Orientalism that it uncovers the way by which a discourse upon repetition becomes a knowledge tradition [which] is so integrated with structures of economic or political power that it becomes handmaiden to colonialism; indeed, it articulate[s] the forces of colonial aspirations and justifie[s] colonialism in advance. (Sardar 69)

One may say that the orientalism in practice since the times of Homer had begun to be used as a political tool in the 18th century with colonialism. The 18th century, simply put, marks the beginning of colonial or political orientalism.

This aspect of Said’s theory has been carelessly missed out by critics who challenge the relationship between colonialism and orientalism as presented by him (Ahmad, ‘Orientalism and After’; Irvin 285-6). Through a play on words singled out to manipulate meaning, Ahmad concludes rather irrationally that colonialism was, according to Said, ‘a product of Orientalism itself’ (‘Orientalism and After’ 181). Academic orientalism had been in practice since the times of Aeschylus. Ahmad acknowledges that orientalism had ‘already been set in motion... in the earliest of the Athenian tragedies, not in general but in the specific regularities which will henceforth determine its structure: Asia’s loss, Europe’s victory; Asia’s minuteness, Europe’s mastery of discourse...’ (180). But the Athenian tragedies were not designed to assist a political venture. They were reflective of the historical state of affairs (Irwin 11-12). The future colonial relation between these communities was incidental. That the orientalism of the 18th century drew its legitimacy in part from the long history that preceded it was only reflective of its political intention and colonial point of view. It would be too simplistic to conclude that the historical discourse about the orient led to the Napoleonic invasions or colonization, or that the accounts of Napoleon’s invasions created a discourse about the orient which in turn led to colonialism (Moore-Gilbert 41). But colonialism and orientalism are, to a great extent, co-dependent forces, not entirely responsible, but still historically necessary, for each other.
A similar misreading is offered by Sadik Jalal al-'Azm, when he concludes in a totalizing fashion that to Said orientalism as a discourse was solely responsible for colonization and that he was forcing a relationship between ‘Academic Orientalism’ and ‘Institutional Orientalism’ (7). Jalal al-'Azm wonders that had the long tradition of Cultural-Academic Orientalism fashioned a less peculiar, more sympathetic and truthful epistemological framework, then the Powers would have acted on the Orient more charitably and viewed it in a rather favorable light. (8)

Critics like Ahmad however disagree with the idea that a discourse about a particular community can lead to its colonial occupation. Ahmad denies the significance granted to orientalism in colonial terms and explains that colonialism was a function of imperial capitalism (‘Orientalism and After’ 184).

What Jalal al-'Azm and Ahmad fail to observe, however, is that Said nowhere mentions that orientalism was the only reason for colonization. Said suggests that the discourse of orientalism served as a basis for ‘cultural hegemony’ which granted a ‘positional superiority’ to the westerner ‘in a whole series of possible relationships with the orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand’ [my emphasis] (7). Said goes as far as to acknowledge that orientalism is not ‘representative and expressive of some nefarious “Western” imperialist plot to hold down the “Oriental” world’ (12). What is more, Said has, probably intentionally, avoided the term ‘colonization’ in Orientalism as far as possible, because his primary concern is to deconstruct the discourse of orientalism and not that of colonization.

Said suggests that the myths about a decadent orient served as a justification for colonization and the exercise of hegemony over it. The colonizers as well as the colonized were made to believe that the occupation of the orient was an act of humanism rather than material advancement. For the colonizer such a humanist projection was used to justify the colonial rule to the west and to create a discourse of western superiority and magnanimity in the colonies. Through the gamut of knowledge about the orient, recycled and reiterated over time, western man was universally accepted as the higher being.
charged with the messianic task of humanizing the colonized peoples. With an imputed Darwinism of ‘survival of the fittest’ (Spencer 444), the white man became the self-proclaimed “fit” race without whose guidance and governance, the “unfit” non-white races would perish. What Kipling termed the ‘white man’s burden’ (280), and Marx observed as a ‘regenerating’ ‘mission’ (Surveys 320), was in fact an acknowledgement of the belief that it is only through western control and supervision that the orient can be revived from its endless decadence. As Young remarks in *White Mythologies*:

> [F]rom the colonial perspective, humanism began as a form of legitimation produced as a self-justification by the colonizers for their own people, but later . . . humanism was utilized as a form of ideological control of the colonized peoples. (161)

E. M. Forster, in *A Passage to India*, presents this inherent belief of the colonizer in the civilizing mission through Ronny Heaslop, the hero who ardently believes that he has been chosen to undertake the enormously difficult task of organizing the ‘muddle’ that was India. But paradoxically, the façade of humanism created by the colonizers led to a disillusionment in the ‘mission civilisatrice’ (Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 33) and finally resulted in a decolonizing mission. Fanon criticizes the so-called humanism of the colonizer in his revolutionary work, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961):

> Leave this Europe where they are never done talking of Man, yet murder men everywhere they find them, at the corner of every one of their own streets, in all the corners of the globe. For centuries they have stifled almost the whole of humanity in the name of a so-called spiritual experience. (251)

Aimé Césaire similarly reacts:

> My turn to state an equation: colonization = thingification. I hear the storm. They talk to me about progress, about achievements, about diseases cured, improved standards of living. I am talking about societies drained of their essence, cultures trampled . . . institutions undermined, lands confiscated, religions smashed, magnificent artistic creations destroyed,
extraordinary possibility wiped out. . . . I am talking about thousands of men sacrificed to the Congo-ocean. . . . I am talking about millions of men in whom fear has been cunningly instilled, who have been taught to have an inferiority complex, to tremble, kneel, despair, and behave like flunkeys. (21-22)

Similar echoes of disillusionment in western humanism are evinced in Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, where Marlow realizes ‘the horror’ of it all through the suffering of Kurtz (106); and in Sally Morgan’s My Place, where Arthur Corunna derides the white man’s pretence of humanism and philanthropism (266-8). In the preface to Fanon’s work, Jean Paul Sartre confesses passionately:

Chatter, chatter: liberty, equality, fraternity, love honor, patriotism and what have you. All this did not prevent us from making anti-racial speeches about dirty niggers, dirty Jews and dirty Arabs. (Wretched of the Earth 22)

Said similarly observes that for the colonizer

the Orient and everything in it was, if not patently inferior to, then in need of corrective study by the West. . . . Orientalism, then, is the knowledge of the Orient that places things Oriental in class, court, prison or manual for scrutiny, study, judgment, discipline, or governing. (Orientalism 41)

This seeming generosity of governance on the part of the west was based on a discourse of oriental inferiority vis-à-vis the west. In an analysis of individual writers and officers of the west, Said shows how they viewed the orient as a homogenously inferior and stagnant category for which a European make-over was imperative. Said explains that the orient was granted a politically manufactured identity which served two main purposes for the western ruler: first, it provided an opportunity to create an identity for the ‘self’ in opposition and superiority to the oriental ‘other’; and second, it supported the western claim to colonial advancement. This is not to say that colonial rule could not be established without orientalism, but that the discourse about an inferior orient eased the colonial invasion.
The politics of identity manifested itself in the intensification of oriental inferiority vis-à-vis the west. Said elaborates through references to literature, history and documented accounts of colonialism that oriental identity was a crafted definition, seldom based on individual experience and depicted in timeless terms. The philosophy of humanism was a garb to disguise the political intentions underlined in the creation of an oriental identity. However, the concept of humanism was applied in absolutely non-humanist terms in imperial colonies.

Similarly, Said dismantles the pretense of western humanism with western scholarship. It is worth mentioning however, that Said’s argument against the so-called humanism of the west that favoured the ‘white man’, originates in the west. According the Young, Said uses western theory to debunk a western discourse (White Mythologies 171). His dependence on western criticism is an incongruity. In his attempt to counter the western constructs of oriental identity, Said employs arguments from the west alone and does not allow the orient to have a voice. He seems to debunk western discourse about the orient by referring to their narratives and does not let the ‘real’ orient, if there is one, speak. Further, if a critic’s social and political environment influences his writing, as Said himself explains with reference to the relationship between ‘civil’ and ‘political’ society (Orientalism 11), then how far can one depend upon western criticism of western systems? Along with that, if Said suggests that western representation of the orient is not real (174), he must provide a few instances of the orient defining itself, even if one is to finally conclude that there is no ‘truth’, in Nietzschean terms (Nietzsche, ‘On Truth’ 359). It is for the lack of a second voice that Said’s work sounds ‘monologic’ (Moore-Gilbert 51; Ning 61). Ironically the western voices which have ‘always silenced the Orient’ are the only voices heard in Orientalism besides Said’s (Ahmad, ‘Orientalism and After’ 172; Warraq 266).

Said is charged for ignoring the work of theorists like Tibawi, Djait, Hodgson and Alatas, who came before him and questioned the discursive identity of the orient as presented in the works of the orientalists. But their eastern origin and their political location in colonized countries caused their voice to be deprived of the international audience that Said commands owing to his own location in a metropolitan Western
University. Critics also accuse him of denigrating Islamic scholarship as grotesque and fanatic when he develops a polarity between the east and the west as the religious and the secular worlds respectively (Sardar 75-76).

Paradoxically, the success of Orientalism is based on the very dynamic that sustained Orientalism as an arch discourse in the first place. (Sardar 68)

In other words, the counter-discourse which is supposed to come from the orient still comes from the western/powerful narrator. Further, Said’s dependence on western theory is bound to complicate things when he claims to demystify western discourse about the orient. Said condemns oriental identity as created by the west but does not provide any solution or alternative ideas for the orient. The western definition of the orient is rejected because of the colonizer’s political intentions and lack of experience. However the attack on orientalism is again from a source which is equally lacking in experience and can be guided by the politics of criticism.

There are some problems with Said’s treatment of orientalism as a discourse too. Said’s dependence on Foucault is somewhat unrealistic. Foucault suggests that the imperial discourse is used for the hegemonic purpose of creating a subject identity against which a ruling identity can be designed (Ashcroft, Post-Colonial Transformation 40). Foucault’s analysis of the society ‘privileges discourse and language as the prime determinants of social reality and . . . power as “decentred”, “impersonal” and arbitrary in terms of its “social interests”’ (Moore-Gilbert 41). Said also acknowledges a dependence on Gramsci’s theory of hegemony which suggests that domination of a community is possible only through ‘consent’ by the dominated (Orientalism 11). Such suppositions are rather simplistic and ignore the possibility of resistance and revolution. In order to merge Foucault’s discourse theory with the Marxist perspective of power as a source of control through repression, and the Gramscian concept of hegemony, Said presents orientalism as a scheme which is totalitarian, direct and consciously orchestrated (Moore-Gilbert 41). Whereas Foucault describes power as the unconscious creation of systems of knowledge which privilege a certain power, Said defines it as a conscious design whereby things are
projected with an intention to power. This is not to say that the colonizer did not have an intention to power, it just suggests that it cannot be possible that the westerners had a homogenous desire to create a colony wherein the malicious and treacherous interests of their community can be fulfilled, and had the synchronization to bring it about in such a universal manner. This would entail that the oriental identity created by the west was not entirely rooted in colonial desire and could have a strain of reality in it, even if in the smallest detail.

Said’s inability to make up his mind regarding the influence of individual authors on the creation of the discourse about third-world identity is highly problematic and comes as a conflicting idea. At times, Said seems to side with Foucault in saying that every author bears an indelible imprint of the ideas preceding him and his actuality and cannot write beyond their influence (Orientalism 11, 204). At other times, however, Said expresses his utmost belief in the ‘determining imprint of individual writers’ (23). This incongruity in Said’s founding ideas poses a problem of approaching the politics of identity governing the discourse about the third world (Irwin 290).

Further, Said seems to ignore the fact that Foucault belongs to the anti-humanist mode of thought and applies his theory to understand the humanism of Auerbach (Moore-Gilbert 41). Unlike Foucault, Said believes in the centrality of European identity and its power to create history for the world. Further, he suggests that there runs a singular discourse between the Greek and European mode of thought about the orient, thereby connecting the Greek and European identity in line with the humanist tradition. Finally, Said elevates the canon of ‘great books’ to the level of something that can create or destroy power. Though he attempts to discredit their power, he still uses a similar kind of canonical western critical system to do so (Ahmad, ‘Orientalism and After’ 167-8). These fundamental differences between Said and Foucault make his reliance on the latter questionable and rather flimsy.

In addition to this, Said supports Renan’s view that the orient was a sort of object of study in a ‘laboratory’ where the western ruler stands ‘creating, confining and judging the material he discusses (Orientalism 143). Such a description is not only dehumanizing but also unrealistic in presuming total inaction on the part of the orient. Said asserts this
dehumanizing view in ‘Orientalism Reconsidered’ where he states that ‘the Orient’s actuality receded inexorably into a kind of paradigmatic fossilization’. This ‘fossilization’ leaves the orient as a powerless laboratory subject on which the anthropology of the west can be defined (203).

With reference to the western projection of the orient, Said notes that the west reverted to a ‘classically standard image’ (154) of the orient, which was eventually ‘racist . . . imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric’ in its approach (204). This static picture of the orient becomes timeless in Said’s theory and almost always depicts a racist treatment of the orient as an entity incapable of evolution and change. But Said ignores the fact that the same western history which he condemns has presented various faces of the orient. Western history presented the orient and its evolution through the colonial rule, resistance and finally revolution. He ignores that ‘the West has always engaged in (re)negotiations of power with the East, which is never conceived of as absolute’ (Moore-Gilbert 51). Said is accused of presenting the orient as a perpetual victim, lacking agency and ‘wallowing in self-pity’ portraying the west as a constant tormentor universally denigrating the east without mercy or exception (Warraq 29, 267).

Later, however, Said contradicts his own version of the western discourse of orientalism as timeless and homogenous when he talks about ‘latent’ and ‘manifest’ orientalism. Said explains that the orient slips farther and farther from western imagination and experience. This vision of a far receding orient is ‘latent’ orientalism which includes the inherited fantasies and imaginations that can not be reached or fathomed. ‘Manifest’ orientalism (206) is experienced by the traveller or trader and exaggerated to include the whole orient in a textual representation. Said suggests that the classical ideas about the orient are juxtaposed with the real experience of the orient. These perspectives from narratives of different times exist in a ‘tension’ with each other, but finally ‘converge’ (Young, White Mythologies 170). In Said’s words,

[W]hat the scholarly Orientalist defined as the “essential” Orient was sometimes contradicted, but in many cases was confirmed, when the Orient became an actual administrative obligation. [my emphasis] (223)
Said seems to point at a difference between the earlier and later experience and narration of the orient by the west. This implies that the western discourse about the orient is not, after all, timeless, as suggested by Said. Further, the concepts of ‘latent’ and ‘manifest’ orientalism are presented in an essentially binary arrangement which creates a problem of analysis with respect to narratives of colonialism. Said presents these two aspects as sometimes contradictory but later converging, but does not clarify the link between these ‘stark’ alternatives (Moore-Gilbert 42-3).

It is noteworthy that the western conception of oriental identity differs from the historical discourse about it. The ‘latent’ identity of the orient is one which stretches beyond western limits of absorption. In every experience of the orient, there is something that remains obscure. This obscurity, no matter how different in each circumstance, is collectively termed oriental mystery (Orientalism 206). Eventually mystery comes to be imagined as an essential part of oriental identity in western perception. The textual experience of the orient, or the ‘manifest’, differs from the ‘latent’ identity. This difference can allow an alternate identity for the third world. It can be used to offer a sense of evolution to third-world identity. But the western observers cannot allow such a contradictory perception to persevere. The reasons for this practice range from political motivation to salability. The western critic cannot offer an alternate and/or popularly undesirable oriental identity to the western readers. The difference between the old and the new perception of the third world is negotiated in the spaces of oriental mystery. In keeping with the age-old discourse about third-world identity, the meager experience of the orient is used as a sample to represent the third-world at large. But Said can be accused of homogenizing the third-world as well. Not only does he restrict his study of orientalism to the Arab world (Ning 61; Sardar 70; Warraq 266), he also uses it as the absolute reflection of colonial practices ignoring the difference of colonial treatment, identity politics and reactionary/revolutionary methods employed in various parts of the third world (Young, White Mythologies 171).

Said’s almost obsessive urge to combine various theories of power and presenting the west as a scheming perpetrator against the orient makes him almost create a discourse about occidentalism: ‘a stereotyping in reverse’ (Sardar 71). He ends up creating an
essentialist image of the occident vis-à-vis the orient, so much so that he concludes at one point that

\[\text{every European in what he could say about the Orient, was consequently a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric. [my emphasis]}\]

*(Orientalism 204)*

The fact that he does this reflexively reaffirms the Foucauldian theory of discourse being an unconsciously perpetuated social belief. What is more, Said’s deep-rooted belief in the essential occidental identity as opposed to the oriental identity makes him assert the polarity between them that the west had been strengthening. Said becomes rather anti-occidental in his perception of orientalists. He is accused of ‘homogenizing the sites of enunciation of Orientalist discourse . . . suppressing important cultural and geographical, as well as historical differences in the varied cultures of Western imperialism’ *(Moore-Gilbert 45)*. Said’s work appears to be a strategic move against all western attempts to know the orient, ignoring what could just be ‘disinterested intellectual inquiry’ *(Warraq 38)*.

The ontological definition of orientalism, as presented by Said, suggests that it is ‘a style of thought based upon the ontological and epistemological distinction between “the Orient” and (most of the time) “the Occident”‘ (2). Said here creates a ‘fixed’ identity of ‘a Europe . . . which has always had an essence and a project, an imagination and a will; and of the “Orient” as its object — textually, militarily and so on’ *(Ahmad, ‘Orientalism and After’ 183)*. The unchanging object-subject relationship strengthens the opposition between the two discursive categories. Further, Said dates the discourse of orientalism and hence a European idea about the orient back to the times of Homer, which suggests that the European conception of the orient is homogenous and timeless. The acceptance of an ‘ontological distinction’ between the orient and the occident is what Jalal al-‘Azm calls an ‘orientalism in reverse’ (18). Said explains that there exists an ontological distinction between the orient and the occident ‘to the decisive advantage of the latter’ *(Jalal al-’Azm 6)* even prior to any colonial advancement made by it *(Orientalism 42)*. This is suggestive of Said’s belief in this ontological difference. Said
attempts to expose the discursive biases with relation to ‘Ontological Orientalism’ (Jalal al-'Azm 18) but he himself seems to believe in these differences.

However Said cannot be blamed altogether for homogenizing western ideas about the orient. He explains the difference between English and French colonialism though the difference of perspective between Edward Lane and Chateaubriand as colonial travellers. The British show an impersonal and scientific treatment of the orient, whereas the French show a rather aesthetic interest in the orient (Orientalism 192). However, Said can be accused of creating absolute representatives out of Lane and Chateaubriand and categorizing French and British colonialism on these representative figures (Moore-Gilbert 46).

In an interview with Bhattacharaya, Kaul and Loomba, Said defends himself against critics who accuse him of homogenizing the imperial conception of the orient.

[If] it was homogenous, I wouldn’t have spent so many pages talking about it and giving, adducing, so many examples. The point is that it is not homogenous. (4)

But then again,

[T]here is a kind of deep structure of Orientalism, which is able to multiply and proliferate in all kinds of ways. Orientalist writers all depart from the same premise, that there is a line separating ‘us’ from ‘them’. [my emphasis] (4)

Said defends himself against critics who accuse him of homogenizing the west but eventually makes a sweeping statement about all western writers and their perception of the orient as an essential and absolute ‘other’.

Critics like Bernard Lewis suggest that Said ignores the scholarship of orientalists and accuses them falsely of discursive practice. Lewis, in a rather ‘ludicrous’ manner (Sardar 69), juxtaposes European conceptions of the orient with the European revision of Greek literature and the culture of Hellenism. He suggests that just as the revival and description of Hellenic literature and culture by Europe was not a political endeavour,
similarly, orientalism should not be tainted with such accusations (49). Said answers Lewis in the Afterword of 1995, where he sheds light on the incomparability of orientalism with a revival of Hellenic literature on the ground that while the former is done with the intention of empire building, the latter is purely an academic adventure (343).

Robert Irwin similarly accuses Said of undermining the intellectual intention of orientalists in his book For Lust of Knowing. There is however a basic difference between Irwin and Said with respect to their definition of the term orientalism. Said gives three definitions for the term in the Introduction to orientalism: academic, ontological, and political or historical (2-4), whereas Irwin understands orientalism only as a scholarly enterprise concerning the orient, completely devoid of political overtones. Irwin defends orientalists by suggesting that their intentions were purely intellectual, (therefore the title: For Lust of Knowing), and had no political leanings. But Irwin ignores the political repercussions of these seemingly ‘supapolitical’ (Orientalism 10) intellectual endeavors and the fact that they were designed within the limits of the contemporary social ideologies. These social ideologies, repeated and reiterated through literature, strengthened the social beliefs about the orient, thereby creating what can be called a discourse. The orientalists wrote for and by the taste of western academia, and those who wrote in Arabic and Persian reproduced the existing western academic notions about the orient, so that they can serve as hegemonic texts. But Irwin ignores these factors in his obsessive endeavor to prove that Said was being exceedingly anti-occidental by discounting the work of orientalists.

Ibn Warraq treads on lines similar to Irwin and Lewis and observes that the curiosity in Europeans to know more and more about far away lands and their cultures drove them to oriental studies. Further he suggests that there is a substantial time gap between the first accounts of oriental history and culture by the west and the annexation of the orient by imperial powers. Said’s observation that there is a deep complicity between oriental scholarship and oriental occupation stands refuted by Warraq (45). Through extensive references to Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Herodotus, Aeschylus,
Xenophon, Dante, and many other western scholars, Warraq attempts to present Said’s criticism of orientalism as a fraudulent representation of western scholarly attempts.

To Said, the various works of orientalists attempt to construct oriental identity, and ‘the construction of identity is bound up with the disposition of power and powerlessness in each society, and is therefore anything but mere academic wool-gathering’ (Orientalism 332). Even an ardent critic of Said like Jalal al-’Azm clarifies that Said ‘at no point seeks to belittle the genuine scholarly achievements, scientific discoveries and creative contributions made by orientalists and orientalism over the years’ (5). Said acknowledges the fact that orientalism and orientalists have made constructive and positive contributions in the area of ‘Sanskrit grammar, Phoenician numismatics, and Arabic poetry’ (Orientalism 96).

But despite this acknowledgement, Said seems to be essentially anti-occidental, especially in his treatment of Dante. Said discusses Dante’s Inferno as a representative text of occidental ideas, oriental identity and culture. Said describes that Dante places Mohammad in the eighth circle of Hell, in close proximity to Satan himself, who lies beyond the ninth circle. Before Dante reaches Mohammad, he passes by sinners of a lesser order: ‘the lustful, the avaricious, the glutinous, the heretics, the wrathful, the suicidal, the blasphemous’ [my emphasis] (68). Dante places Islamic scholars like Averros, Avicenna and Saladin in the first circle of Hell for having deviated from the true path of Christianity. Dante sees Islam as a deviant sect misguided by a heretic who was once a Christian: Mohammad. It is arguable that Dante’s projection of Islam is not an anti-oriental propaganda but rather a matter of personal religious belief. Further, Dante’s treatment of Islam was not a part of the universal western perception of Islam. Through a study of Dante’s contemporaries like Boccaccio, it can be observed that various texts saw the orient differently in those times and that Dante was not part of a discourse production (Irwin 43-47; Moore-Gilbert 58-9). Moreover, Dante places devout Christians in Hell too, so his work cannot be termed as Christian propaganda against Islam (Ahmad, ‘Orientalism and After’ 189; Irwin 42). Though Said may be criticized for excessively charging Dante, it is nevertheless noteworthy that Dante considered following Islam heretic and punishable. This belief, to begin with, signifies a belief in the inferiority of
the orient vis-à-vis the occident, a belief in the ontological distinction between the two, which serves as the foundation for the discourse of orientalism to take shape.

Though it is maintained that Said sees the west as east’s ‘other’ in homogenous and totalizing terms (Ning 58-9), and that he creates a discourse about imperial treatment of the orient, Said innumerably warns his readers against such presumptions and discourses. But Said’s warnings and defenses against the creation of such essentialisms remain ineffective considering that his deconstructive efforts have repeatedly been pronounced as an oblique acceptance of the polarity between the east and the west. Said maintains throughout his work that he only aspires to question the structures of power and canonicity through his work. He expresses his concern for revising the Eurocentric perspective through his work. He accepts that the east and the west are different from each other, but the discourse of orientalism ‘implies hostility, a frozen reified set of opposed essences, and a whole adversarial knowledge built out of those things’ (Orientalism 352).

Further Said suggests that the differences between these two categories may not be ignored but brought to a ‘new way of conceiving the separations and conflicts. . . . going beyond the stifling hold on them of some version of the master-slave binary dialectic’ (Orientalism 352-3). It is notable however, that this acceptance of difference and defensive reaction of Said towards accusations of anti-Occidentalism come after a gap of seventeen years of criticism. There is a marked difference in Said’s aims towards the study of the discourse of orientalism between 1978 and 1995, the years of publication of the work Orientalism and the later appended Afterword respectively.

Said abstains from any direct and defined solution to the problem, but just reiterates the necessity of accepting difference in humanist and constructive ways, rather than in xenophobic terms. Said seems to present a solution in euphoric celebration of difference. But this conclusion seems misplaced after a long critique of orientalist attitudes towards the orient and a repeated denouncement of them. Throughout his work, Said maintains that the western conception of the orient was unreal, but towards the end he accepts the unreal definition in suggesting that one should acknowledge these differences with a secular view. Said’s refusal to give any solution for orientalism comes
as a silent acceptance of it (Young, *White Mythologies* 167). By not offering a solution to the problem of orientalism, and denying the possibility of a dissipation of difference itself (*Orientalism* 352), Said resolves the conflict between the polar identities and fixes the hierarchy and division of power between the two (Bhabha, ‘Difference’ 200).

Said seems to accept not only the polarity of identities, but also the gendered representation of the orient as a woman who is acquired by the western man. The essentially masculine symbolism of the colonizer’s experience of the orient is described in *Orientalism* and used as a basis for discussing the western approach towards the orient (184-189). Said explains Nerval’s experience of the orient in the following terms:

> The Orient symbolizes Nerval’s dream-quest and the fugitive woman central to it, both as desire and as loss . . . [of the] . . . vessel of the Orient. [my emphasis] (184)

And then again, with reference to Flaubert, Said concludes that

> [T]he Orient seems still to suggest not only fecundity but sexual promise (and threat), untiring sensuality, unlimited desire, deep generative energies. (188)

The orient is defined in terms of the sexual experiences of the colonizer. That Said never questions the symbolism of femininity with reference to the orient suggests his acceptance of the metaphor (Moore-Gilbert 213-4). However, in ‘Orientalism Reconsidered’ Said addresses the question of gendered orientalism. Said suggests here that his intention was to simply reiterate the fact that the colonizer treated the colonized in an essentially male centric manner (212). However, his failure to criticize such feminization of the orient in the text points to an unconscious acceptance of it.

It is noteworthy however, that even if Said would have questioned the polarity between the east and the west, or the gendered definition of the orient, there would still have been an anomaly. The discourse of orientalism has been denounced as a set of myths and fabrications designed and authorized to suit the western intention of empire building, and/or self definition. But was the discourse purely based on European
intentions? If the discourse was altogether false, how could it have helped in perpetuating centuries of western power and dominance on the east? Said at one point suggests that the discourse about orientalism, as created by the colonizers, was not true, and then establishes that this very discourse was used to extend control over the orient. It is hard to believe that the western ‘pseudoknowledge’ about the orient could have supported centuries of imperial rule (Warraq 44). On the other hand, if this construct regarding the orient could create an empire for the west, it is not altogether false perhaps, and includes some strains of reality as experienced by the western scholars (Sardar 72; Young, White Mythologies 169). It can be suggested then that the orientalist versions of the east and its religious and social behaviors are not altogether false or condemnable (Jalal al-'Azm 11-12). One may understand then that the discourse about the orient is not a collection of pure falsehoods, or ‘a creation with no corresponding reality’ (Orientalism 5), but has some reality. It is just that the discourse of orientalism is not entirely true, and the timelessness and homogeneity associated with it are definitely debatable.

Critics also point out that if Said finds no representation ‘true’ or ‘real’ in line with Nietzsche then how can he call the western definition of the orient a false account (Ahmad, ‘Orientalism and After’ 193-4; Jalal al-'Azm 9). But Said is not to be mistaken here for professing the idea of a real orient which has been misunderstood by the orientalist. He admits that there exists no representation of the real orient, but that orientalism ‘operates as representations usually do, for a purpose, according to a tendency, in a specific historical, intellectual, and even economic setting’ (273). Said nevertheless rejects the orientalist’s representation of the orient as untrue. This absolute denial of the orientalist’s representation, by default, points towards the possibility of a real representation, and this reality itself is questioned by Said’s own thesis about the “truth” behind representations. Critics refute Said’s grounds for questioning the authenticity of orientalism if ‘the line between representation and misrepresentation is always very thin’ (Ahmad, ‘Orientalism and After’ 193; Warraq 23).

Ahmad accuses him of grounding his argument in the nihilistic assumption that every representation is a misrepresentation. But Said’s view, or Nietzsche’s, does not implicate the absence of all meaning and reality. It rather suggests that any representation
can be construed variously depending upon its context (in this case the location of the critic), so any representation can be a misrepresentation (Menon 2135). Said explains his stand with a reference to Shakespeare and how his works are revised and re-presented by people generation after generation. Every scholar attempts to define Shakespeare with a new perspective. But that does not mean that a real Shakespeare does not exist without these perspectives and representations (‘Orientalism Reconsidered’ 200). Said here seems to suggest that no representation can be a ‘true’ account of any object, because every representation is embedded in the cultural and ideological baggage carried by the one who undertakes the task of representing things. The western account of the orient is not true but that does not mean that a true orient does not altogether exist. However, the problem of the real orient persists despite this explanation. A true Shakespeare can exist, as suggested by Said, because whatever that ‘true’ Shakespeare was, it is not a mutating and organic being anymore and is open to various definitions. The orient however still exists and a representation of this living, evolving, interacting, experiencing entity cannot be understood in terms as simplified as Said seems to suggest with the current example. Moreover Shakespeare was a single person and his works have a single original reality unlike the orient that is a multiple and mutating whole and cannot be categorized in one unitary identity.

Said has been criticized for overemphasizing the significance of literature (Irwin 308) and exaggerating the significance of orientalism with reference to colonization. He acknowledges that an encounter with an alien culture leads to the creation of certain myths so as to make it comprehensible to the observer. Such domestication has not been condemned by Said either (Orientalism 60). But in the case of orientalism, which roughly translates as the creation of certain myths about the far off orient for western consumption, Said does not observe similar levels of acceptance. But it cannot be overlooked here that the domestication of the orient was not for western consumption alone, but to make it suitable for western occupation. Further, Said does not intend to condemn the creation of a myth about the orient or the categorization conducted to make it comprehensible, but to explain that it is a discourse and not the reality.
In Orientalism, Said primarily focuses on third-world identity as reflected in the eyes of the west. Said suggests that the western idea of oriental identity is one created out of an essentialist and foundational belief in the idea of the latter’s inferiority vis-à-vis the former. The orient embodies the stark opposite of the west. Said’s approach towards identity is undoubtedly polarized in Orientalism. Since “the orient” represents what the west is not, it is not the real orient but rather a western imagination. He iterates on the western inability to identify the ‘real’ orient. By this rejection, he hints at there being an orient that the western eye is incapable of catching. This leads to two rather opposing results: first, the identity of the orient has to essentially be something, because it is necessarily not what the west supposes it to be; secondly, since that ‘real’ orient is not, and according to Said cannot be defined, the space of oriental identity is open to myth and imagination.

Further, Said’s study of oriental identity is restricted in scope and time. He studies the discourse in a temporal stillness, and passivity where hardly any ‘emergent’ or ‘residual’ forces are experienced (Williams, ‘Base and Superstructure’ 40). The scope of his analysis is also restricted to the politics of identity and the psychological overtones of creating the ‘self’ by creating a suitable ‘other’. Said does not delve into the area of cultural politics and identity metamorphoses in this analysis.

From a postcolonial point of view, Said’s efforts at challenging the previous notions about oriental identity have been enormously significant. The fact that his work has been discussed and argued upon endlessly bears testimony to its importance. Said wrote Orientalism in 1978, yet somehow, despite the stringent, and at times denouncing criticism levelled against his work, it continues to be an important document constantly undergoing close readings and re-readings.

Said explains his intention in the Afterword appended to Orientalism in 1995. According to him, Orientalism is to be seen as ‘a multicultural critique of power using knowledge to advance itself’ (336). Said reminisces his own situation as a migrant from the orient to the west and highlights that he has been through the ‘procedure of crossing, rather than maintaining barriers’ [my emphasis] (336-7). Hence he intends his work to reflect a study in critique and not a reaffirmation of ‘antithetical identities’ (339).
Through a process of demystification of the polar constructs of identity, Said claims to bring identity in a space where it can be observed outside the stringent categories of ‘self’ and ‘other’. Such an exercise helps understand the diasporic identity of people scattered throughout the world:

Said’s paradox of identity is indicative of the complex identities of diasporic and post-colonial peoples throughout the world today. Paradoxes linked to this question of identity run through Said’s work, but far from being disabling, such paradox is a key to the intellectual force of his writings, locating them firmly in a world in which ideology has material consequences and in which human life does not conform neatly to abstract theory. (Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 2)

Referring to the forces of post-modernism and post-colonialism, Said expresses his intention of debunking the meta-narratives of Eurocentric perspectives. His intention is to bring about a situation where the categories of east and west can be finally deconstructed and the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ can be seen as complimentary identities rather than adversaries of each other.

In this context, surprisingly, Said becomes the pioneer of the theory of multiculturalism and hybridity which Bhabha and his contemporaries are accredited with. Said gives immense importance to the dismantling of the structures of power so as to find a synthesis of opposing identities. In ‘Orientalism Reconsidered’, Said demands a more vigorous ‘crossing of boundaries, for greater interventionism in cross-disciplinary activity’ (215). Said suggests that it is only through a thorough deconstruction of the existing dominative structures that the identities of the ‘self’ and ‘other’ can be reconstituted (215).

However, Said conducts a more elaborate critique of colonial interaction which is accepted as the foundation for ambivalent attitudes between the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ in Culture and Imperialism (1993), which is discussed in the next chapter.
Notes

i. Raymond Williams uses the terms ‘emergent’ and ‘residual’ in his essay ‘Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory’, to describe cultural evolution and social development. The term ‘residual’ is used to denote those cultures and values which cannot be exercised within the parameters of the dominant culture, but which continue to live as a residual undercurrent and can resurface to challenge the dominant discourse. ‘Emergent’ cultures refer to those cultures and value systems that develop in response to domination. Together, the ‘residual’ and ‘emergent’ cultures challenge the dominant discourse and cause social evolution.