Chapter seven: Conclusion

The argument of the thesis is now substantially complete. In conclusion, some implications of the study need to be brought out. As stated in the opening chapter, a secondary aim of the study is to underscore the essentialist and hence partial nature of Edward Said’s depiction of the West in his celebrated *Orientalism*.

Said’s book come out in 1978 and ever since then has become a primer of the Postcolonial Theory. The whole discourse was inspired by Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) which suggested that if the underdogs of civilization have to live with self-respect, they must try to undermine wherever they could the cultural ideology which has brought them to that ignoble status. Fanon’s book was largely addressed to the Africans under the French colonial rule. The task of undermining the dominant cultural ideology was carried out with remarkable zeal and enthusiasm by Edward Said in his *Orientalism* in an altogether different context of Arab-American relations, which he went on to generalize into the East-West encounter.

Said accuses the West of superiority complex regarding itself as the ‘Civilization’ and the East as its opposite. The Western view of the Orient is hunted by two stereotypes of the Primitive and Exotic. According to him, such a view was institutionalized throughout the West in the 19th century. Edward Said was a political activist, in fact a top-ranking officer of the PLO, residing in the U.S. Quite naturally he sees the Western attempt to study the East as politically motivated. In the concluding chapter called ‘Crisis’ in the first section of *Orientalism*, he advances his interpretation of the Western interest in the East.
Once we begin to think of Orientalism as a kind of Western projection onto and will to govern over the Orient, we will encounter few surprises. For if it is true that historians like Michael, Ranke, Tocqueville and Burckhardt *emplot* their narratives ‘as a story of a particular kind’, the same is also true of Orientalists who plotted Oriental history, character, and destiny for hundreds of years. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the Orientalists became a more serious quantity, … because the Oriental-European relationship was determined by an unstoppable European expansion in search of markets, resources, and colonies, and finally because *Orientalism had accomplished its self-metamorphosis from a scholarly discourse to an imperial institution.* \(^1\)

Giving only his word for the complicity of Orientalism in the transition from a “scholarly discourse to an imperial institution”, Said, grudgingly through, acknowledges its achievements in a highly perfunctory manner and that too not without his caveat about the impossibility of “disinterested” work. For in the very next paragraph he states,

So far as its strictly scholarly work was concerned (and I find the idea of strictly scholarly work as disinterested and abstract hard to understand; still, we can allow it intellectually), Orientalism did a great many things. During its great age in the nineteenth century it produced scholars; it increased the number of languages taught in the West and the quantity of manuscripts edited, translated and commented on; in many cases, it provided the Orient with sympathetic European students, genuinely interested in such matters as Sanskrit grammar, Phoenician numismatics, and Arabic poetry. Yet…Orientalism overrode the Orient. \(^2\)
It is clear from this style of argumentation that the alleged transformation of Orientalism from a scholarly discipline to an imperial institution is largely a matter of strong assertion and reiterated opinion. While Western imperialism is a fact of history, it is difficult to imagine Max Mueller, Jones or Schlegel going to the extent of learning an alien script, language and culture out of sheer political motivation of governing the Orient. Said’s perception of the West in mainly the result of his confusion – deliberate or otherwise – between politics and literature, his failure or unwillingness to distinguish between Napoleon and Edward Fitzgerald or Richard Burton or the great teachers of Sanskrit at Harvard like Charles Lanman and J.H. Woods. Consequently Said’s depiction of the West and the Westerner – no matter what he is, an officer, a novelist or just a common person – as an accomplice in the Imperialist Project appears far too sweeping and totalizing.

By tracing the Sufi element in Emerson and Thoreau the study hopes to have shown that while the picture of the West delineated by Edward Said in *Orientalism* with its machinery all set up for domination may be true in the field of politics, administration, and sociology, we get a very different picture in literature. In fact, Emerson and Thoreau participate in the 19th century American tradition of writers who were deeply influenced by the Eastern thought and literature. For instance, Walt Whitman’s ‘A Passage to India’ is well-known. Similarly, T. S. Eliot was able to study Sanskrit and Pali at Harvard; that it was possible for him to do so is indicative of such a facility being available since a long time before him. Similarly, Eliot recalls nostalgically his first encounter with Omar Khayyam.

I can recall clearly enough the moment when, at the age of fourteen or so, I happened to pick up a copy of Fitzgerald’s *Omar*, which was lying about
and the almost overwhelming introduction to a new world of feeling which
this poem was the occasion of giving me. It was like a sudden conversion;
the world appeared a-new painted with bright, delicious and painful
colours.³

In England in 19th century Edward Fitzgerald brought Omar Khayyam
onto the international map through his translation of Rubaiyat. Even before
him, Richard Burton had translated The Arabian Nights. In fact, Burton
migrated to Iraq and lived in Baghdad completely assimilated with the
Islamic culture.

To regard all these creative writers and scholars as agents of
imperialism, to paint the multifoliate reality with the same political brush is
simplification at its highest. And such exercises have invariably some
political agenda at heart. It would be disingenuous to suppose that Said is
not aware of these complex layers of reality. And yet he undertakes the
exercise at simplification. The reason is not far to seek. At the end of his
longish ‘Introduction’ while talking about the personal dimensions, Said
naturally becomes somewhat autobiographical and regrets the fact that in
America the Arab cause finds no sympathizers as Zionism does.⁴ And here
is, as it were, the raw nerve of Orientalism. Piqued by the apathy, Said goes
into a sulk and taking advantage of the democratic surroundings spins out a
complex web called Orientalism. Almost in vengeance for the lack of
takers in the U. S. for the political causes dear to him, Said, by presenting
an exclusively negative picture of Oriental studies and by ignoring the
positive achievements of the German Indologists and philologists, has
turned them into a West-wide conspiracy from times immemorial to run
down the East, in which all Western writers from diverse fields, even all
Westerners are ipso facto accomplices.
This study through the example of Emerson and Thoreau, two major American writers of the 19th century, hopes to have shown that while, as Said says, institutions with imperial designs might have been set up at that time in the field of administration and politics, the picture does not hold good in the field of literature. It should not be forgotten that Emerson got to know the Persian poets through German translations. Hence, a further line of research would be to examine the Persian influence on writers like Goethe and Schlegel. Similarly, it would be fruitful to go into the relationship of Richard Burton and Edward Fitzgerald with the Persian literature and culture. The capacity of literature to cut across the boundaries of time, place, and culture is a fact of our reading experience and is, indeed, the sole justification of literary studies. Any attempt, therefore, which seeks to undermine the transcendence of literature is regrettable. In his brilliant attack on Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, Dr. V. M. Madge brings out the dangers of mixing literature with politics and sociology, and of distorting literary texts in the service of a political ideology.

Such totalizations and distortions of texts are but natural when they are to be bent to a predetermined anti-Western conclusion, when they are to be used only to topple a particular political ideology or cultural discourse. As a result, Said’s *Orientalism*, far from giving us demonstrably better new ways of looking at literature, has only succeeded in establishing a school of Resentment, pompously called Post-colonial Discourse whose sole aim is to spew out its anti-Western poison in an effect at spreading its Poetics of Hatred. And hatred has no place Literary Studies, which is based and built on notions of imaginative sympathy, love and understanding.\(^5\)

Literature transcends cultural boundaries and the study of literature brings together people of diverse cultures. And any attempt to divide
them in the name of race, nationality, culture or gender goes against the very grain of literature.

At a time when political relations between countries are so tense and nations view each other with hostility and suspicion; it is significant to remember that the literary relations between them have not always been so acrimonious. Iran (Persians) and America can be good examples for the matter. Though now-a-days the world is a witness of political conflicts between these two countries, the literary relations are an exception. It is praiseworthy and pleasantly surprising to mention that the best selling poet of America in 2006 was not Whitman, Dickinson, Frost or Emerson but a Sufi mystic; Jelaleddin Rumi, who was born on the borders of the Persian Empire (Iran). Rumi is one of the best known Sufi poets but digging deep into the realms of Persian literature one can find a wealth of Sufi poetry which even today retains a universal and timeless appeal. Khayyam a well-known poet of Persian Literature and writer of such famous quatrains attracts the minds of many philosophers and literary writers like Fitzgerald who had eminently translated Khayyam’s quatrains into English. And it is fantastic to mention that there are many courses on Persian Literature in well-known universities of the world even America.

This study strongly evidenced that literature can fly as a bird wherever its desire leads and whenever it is free. With many examples it has shown that Emerson as the father figure of American literature and Thoreau the hero of simplicity in America were extremely influenced by Eastern Literature especially Persian and Indian. Sufism being a well-known philosophy of the world fascinates many writers and scholars and there are even PhD courses in it.

The study has traced out many salient features of Sufism both in Emerson and Thoreau’s prose and poetry. So the political relations cannot
stop the transcendental and literary relations of the people and literature can tie up the loose threads of relationship and can bring even enemies to union.

There seem to be no better words than those at the end of Dr Madge’s quotation to conclude the thesis. Sympathy, love, and understanding – do the Sufis after all, say anything different?
Notes and References:


2. Ibid. p. 96


4. Said. P. 27