

Postmodern Oriental Studies: Background and Consequences

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Abstract

This paper explores the epistemological and sociological background of postmodern oriental studies and its consequences using an empirical-analytical method that concentrates on the epistemological dimensions of the discourse of oriental studies in analyzing its various evolutionary phases as they relate to the evolutionary phases of science and the acquisition of human knowledge. While it is true that the changes that science and human knowledge have gone through in the past few centuries have had an effect on the techniques, concepts and general discourse of oriental studies, and that these have had a moderating effect, but it nevertheless seems that the West is still intent on rekindling the spirit of classical orientalism, which marginalized the East and looked upon it as an object of exploitation and colonization, in the postmodern period also, albeit in a more subtle and covert fashion. In this paper, in addition to the above considerations, we shall also point to some of the positions and findings of thinkers such as Edward Sa'īd, Zīāuddīn Sardar, and Leela Gandhi with respect to new approaches to oriental studies.

Keywords: orientalism, oriental studies, post-colonialism, modernity, postmodernity, Edward Said, discourse.

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Introduction

In this essay, we will be looking at the phenomenon of oriental studies in the postmodern period, and specifically at the background that provided it with its formative elements; as well as to the consequences that follow from such studies. The study of other peoples and nations has generally existed from ancient times, where people established relations with other tribes and nations to the extent of their abilities in order to attempt to fulfill their respective needs; and this connection and relationship provided the occasion for their becoming familiar with the individual and social lives of other peoples. At first glance, oriental studies seems to fall into this category, where [the initial assumption is that] certain nations and peoples are engaged in the study of the natural environment, history, and ways of the East, and that the outcome of their research is ordered in a discipline which goes by the name of oriental studies. Now as a matter of course, the question naturally arises to anyone who is looking into the matter as to whether or not oriental studies and the efforts of the orientalist who are engaged in this discipline are a sincere and unbiased effort at trying to understand the societies of the East; and to what extent the orientalist have been successful in studying the societies of the East through a lens which is unbiased and which therefore provides an image that is a realistic representation of the realities of the East?

Of course, this question and questions like it obtain concerning the question of knowledge and understanding more generally. Thus, the question has arisen from the dawn of human thought as to what extent that which exists in one's mind is a true reflection of the real, external world; and whether or not that which is in the mind conforms to reality, or whether that which is in the mind has no relation with any "outside" world. The way in which this question is framed and answered has

resulted in the formation of different [philosophical and ideological] outlooks and positions. If we grant this basic point that on its surface, oriental studies should also be considered to be a part of the greater whole of human knowledge generally, [we will see that] the changes that have occurred throughout the evolution of human knowledge have brought about concomitant changes in oriental studies, and that this discipline has been affected by the changes in perspective which have occurred in the sciences and in human knowledge more generally. The aim of this paper is to carry out a summary investigation into the history of the changes in scientific thinking in the last few centuries, and to consider the effect that these changes have had on the phenomenon of oriental studies, with particular attention being paid to the period which has come to be known as the “postmodern” period. Thus, we shall first begin with a review of the various stages which oriental studies have gone through.

The Various Stages of Oriental Studies

There is no consensus on the question as to when Oriental Studies began, or on the stages that it has gone through. There are many opinions concerning the various ways in which these stages can be categorized, but there is one turning point which all of these opinions share in common, and that is the advent of Islam. It is well known that the West strove to understand the ways of the East prior to the advent of Islam, but that its efforts in this period pale in comparison with its efforts in and after the second Islamic century, where the religion of Islam set foot on the European sub-continent.

After the conquest of Andalusian Spain and Sicily and some of the other Islands in the Mediterranean, Europe looked upon the East with a new focus. And this was because, in the East, the Persian and Byzantine

empires met with repeated defeats, which in turn further united the warring Arab tribes, transforming them into a terrible fighting force which was able to go up against and defeat the greatest of the world powers of the era and to advance into the heart of Europe. It was this very phenomenon which terrified the Europeans and caused them to want to understand the secret to this unprecedented historical phenomenon so as to be able to defeat it and to stop its advance.¹

Thus, on the basis of the advent of the Islamic conquests, it can be said that while it is true that oriental studies had its various evolutionary stages and phases prior to Islam, that nevertheless, its importance after Islam's advent and the vast volume of work that was produced by orientalists with their various and sundry motivations and aims [in the wake of these conquests], overshadows the work that preceded it to the extent that the two cannot even be compared. Thus, [we will limit our study to] the latter period, which can be divided into four distinct phases.

The First Stage. This stage can be said to have started with the conquest of Andalusian Spain and southern Italy and Sicily and some of the other Islands in the Mediterranean, and the flowering of scientific thought and activity in these regions. The stage drew to a close with the end of the Crusades.

The Second Stage. This stage can be said to have started with the end of the Crusades and to have lasted to about the middle of the 18th century.

The Third Stage: This stage can be said to have started around the middle of the 18th century and to have continued to the end of the Second World War.

The Fourth Stage. This stage can be said to have started the end of the

1. Dasūqī, 1367, p. 63.

Second World War and to continue to the present day.¹

There are, of course, different opinions concerning the beginning of the phenomenon of orientalism as a formal and professional trade, but these are not at radical variance with the above schema. For example, there are those who maintain that the phenomenon of orientalism as a formal profession started at the beginning of the 18th century, because the term “orientalism” can be seen to have been introduced into the literature of Western cultures around the middle of the 18th century. And similarly, there are others who maintain that the phenomenon of orientalism started from the 16th century in Europe, because the institutions of Oriental and Islamic studies were founded there over the last four centuries. Others hold that the West began thinking about gaining knowledge of Eastern civilization instead of engaging it militarily in the 14th century after the Crusades, so that it could come to terms with the East on the basis of more realistic solutions.²

These other positions can be summarized with the four-staged categorization of oriental studies as follows: that although oriental studies existed from antiquity, but given the advent and [unprecedented] development of Islam in the East as well as the development of science and technology in the West, this field of study became more and more complicated on an almost daily basis, being attached as it was to the changes which were occurring in science and in the field of politics. It is thus possible to divide the field of oriental studies on a rational and logical basis in accordance with the field’s accommodations to these political stages.

1. *Ibid.* pages 61-62.

2. *Zamanī*, 1387, p. 79.

The Evolution of Science in Recent Centuries

One of the primary claims of this paper is that the changes in the evolving world of science and [the definition of] human knowledge has had an effect on the phenomenon of oriental studies, and that this effect is pronounced and prominent to the extent that it is possible to divide the field of oriental studies into different stages on the basis of the effects that these changes have had on the field. We shall now proceed to a summary examination of the historical evolution of science and the acquisition of human knowledge in the last few centuries, and will highlight the characteristics and attributes of the field of oriental studies in each of these evolutionary stage, paying special attention to the exploration of the situation of oriental studies in the postmodern period.

The evolution of science and the acquisition of human knowledge can be divided into three periods. In each of these periods, in addition to the fact that science has its own distinct definition, its scope and jurisdiction are also distinct from those in the other two periods. These periods can be characterized as follows: the period prior to Empiricism (the pre-Modern period); Empiricism (the Modern period); and the period following Empiricism (or the postmodern period).

1. The Period Prior to Empiricism (Pre-Modern)

In the period prior to Empiricism or experimental science, which takes up a large part of the history of science, science can be said to have certain attributes which we shall point to briefly:

1. Science is a true form of knowledge which in addition to discovering certain truths and realities, is in [full] accord with [or is a true representation of] these truths and realities.

2. The experimentation and empirical verification method is considered

to be one among other methods for the acquisition of knowledge, but is considered to be of a lower rank compared to other methods.

3. The experimental/ empirical method, the rational method, and the intuitive method, all have proper standing in terms of their efficacy for the acquisition of knowledge in this period, despite the fact that their objects of knowledge are different; but these methods have efficacy and applicability in their respective fields and jurisdictions. For example, the experimental/ empirical method has efficacy with respect to physical or sensate matters; and the rational method has efficacy with respect to non-physical matters.

4. There are principles of thought which precede science, such as the law of contradiction, the law of the excluded middle (or third), the principle of identity, the principle of avoiding infinite regresses, and similar principles are considered to be scientific or to be obvious and therefore do not stand in need of proof or are utilized as basic axioms (which are proven in other sciences); but in any event, what is important to note is that a scientific tenet does not become binding on the basis of an unscientific one.

The above definitions and characterizations of the science of the pre-empirical period are a collection of descriptions which from a historical point of view obtained in the intellectual history of humanity prior to the dawn and eventual predominance of the positivistic [weight of] meaning that science later took on. This kind of definition [of science and true knowledge] was accepted and prevailed in the domains having to do with religion, in the metaphysical speculations of ancient Greece, in the world of Islam, and even in the philosophical systems of early modernity. In these definitions, science has its own methodology and is juxtaposed against other forms of knowledge which, despite their useful and effective

functionality, are considered to be unscientific, such as poetry, oratory, and rhetoric.¹

Because this stage of the history of science does not bear directly on our subject matter, it was mentioned in passing and in order to provide context and background; and this summary treatment should suffice to provide the reader with the ability to distinguish the differences that arose in the definition of science between this pre-empirical period and the next ones, which are the empirical and post-empirical (or postmodern) periods.

2. The Empirical or Modern Period of Science

From about the 15th and 16th centuries, the West was witness to gradual changes in the fields of religion, science, and politics (as they applied to the individual and to society at large). The factors which sparked these changes and ushered in the new world can be seen in the new discoveries which occurred in the natural sciences, and which were at variance with the official doctrines of the Catholic Church. Galileo's proof of the heliocentrism of the world by use of the telescope can be cited as a specific example, where his discoveries were met with the opposition of the Catholic Church, which declared heliocentrism to be formally heretical. Heliocentric books were banned and Galileo was ordered to refrain from holding, teaching or defending heliocentric ideas, and was kept under house arrest until his death in 1642. Parallel to the attenuation of the hegemony of the Church and the expansion [of the influence] of the new sciences, changes were occurring in the fields of ontology, epistemology and even in the field of spiritual anthropology or the way man himself was conceived. In the 17th century a series of intellectual changes occurred which came to be known as the Enlightenment which

1. Parsañia, 1389, pages 44-45.

was nothing more or less than the continuation of the intellectual conflict and struggle between the scientists and thinkers who were committed to the findings of the natural sciences and the Catholic Church – the movement which Christopher Dawson has famously characterized as the Second Reformation. In the Age of Enlightenment, there was a move on the part of the scientists and philosophers who were committed to the new sciences toward the presentation of a rational explanation [of the way of the world and how it works] without relying on traditional beliefs. Speaking summarily, we can point [to the effort] to establish the independence of reason, and its separation from the hegemonic bindings of tradition, religion, and the like, as the consequences of the struggles of this movement. During the Age of Enlightenment in the 17th and 18th centuries, empiricism had yet gained a dominant position. Although empirical research resulted in rapid successes and gained the allegiance of many, but nevertheless, the modern Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th centuries was intermingled with a species of rationalism and on the reliance of reason, and the presence and influence of rationalism precluded science from being limited to its empirical form, where propositions and hypotheses were subject to experimental verification or falsification. Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz were among the rationalist philosophers who did not consider their rational deductions and the results of their research to be unscientific.¹

The positivistic definition of science reached the peak of its power in the 19th century and through to the middle of the 20th century. August Comte is the preeminent representative of the positivist strain in the 19th century. He divided the intellectual history of man into three eras: the era of priestly and theological thought, the era of philosophical thought,

1. *Ibid*, p. 23

and the era of scientific thought. Thus, from his perspective, scientific thought is the correct substitute for religious and philosophic thought and has rightly replaced it. From his perspective and from that of those who defined science by its new definition, this new kind of knowledge was capable of encompassing the functions of philosophical and theological knowledge.

What occurred in the 19th century and after that was a change in the meaning of science, in the sense that as a result of the dominance of empiricism and physical or sensate verifiability with respect to epistemological considerations, empiricist science was presented as the only avenue for man to understand and relate to the external world. Now it is obvious that if physical sensations are the only way in which reality can be accessed, and scientific knowledge is defined as that knowledge which is responsible for discovering reality, then scientific knowledge will be a knowledge that is attained [only] by way of the senses, or at least, is one which is verifiable or falsifiable by means of the senses. Thus, the 19th century should be considered as the beginning of the dominance of empiricism, and it is precisely in this century that the meaning of science gradually changes from its previously held definition, and takes on its new definition, which is the experiential and positivistic meaning of science which is held to this day.

The conceptions of science and knowledge and man and his being went through major changes in the minds of modern thinkers who place the natural world as their starting point rather than the various metaphysical speculations which are the starting points of medieval theology and premodern philosophy. Modern philosophers insist that reason and rationality are the main tools for understanding nature. Contrary to these, premodern thinkers relied on tradition, faith and mystical [intuition].

Modern philosophers emphasized autonomy and man's ability to develop his own character – in contrast to the pre-modern emphasis upon dependence and original sin.¹ Modern thinkers emphasize the individual, seeing the individual as the unit of reality, holding that the individual's mind is sovereign, and that the individual is the unit of value—in contrast to the pre-modernist, feudal subordination of the individual to higher political, social, or religious realities and authorities.²

Although the new definition of science gave the glad tidings of a new era in which man would have a greater mastery over nature and would therefore be able to improve his living conditions, but from the closing decades of the nineteenth century, new questions gradually began to emerge concerning the relationship between the positivistic definition of science [and knowledge] to that of ethics, and metaphysical and spiritual [realities]. In this era, scientific knowledge is still considered to be an independent circle among the other circles of human knowledge, where [knowledge obtained from] the senses constitute the principle source of scientific knowledge. And if it is the case that the mind is engaged in hypotheses which go beyond that which can be observed by the senses as a part of the processes which bring about scientific knowledge, these types of activities are considered to maintain the [epistemological] independence of scientific knowledge and are considered to be distinct from other mental speculations on account of their being anchored to the empirical world of the sense by way of their experimental verifiability.

At this point, the scientific community gradually became aware of the limitations of a science which is limited to that which is experimentally verifiable or falsifiable. Because modern science limited its sources

1. Stephen Hicks, *Explaining Postmodernism*, Ockham's Razor Publishing, 2011.

2. *Ibid.* p. 7.

of knowledge to the world of the sense and of physical experience, it considered the rest of human knowledge to be “unscientific”, including knowledge which was based on reason, inspiration, and revelation; and it was this exact same act of limitation and restriction which became its Achilles’ heel, because this restriction prevented it from being able to have an opinion on ethical or normative propositions, nor could it involve itself in questions having to do with the truth or falsity of rational or metaphysical speculations; and this [position] was [maintained by this restrictive definition of science] while the reliance of empiricism on induction without recourse to rational findings is something that is incomplete, and it is not possible to reach an inductive conclusion without recourse to universals and [particular categories which are part and parcel of] rational thought and knowledge, without which experience and induction cannot attain to any scientific value.

This definition of knowledge brought about a period in intellectual history known as modernity, which is usually associated with the following attributes: progress, optimism, rationality, the search for absolute truth by way of science and technology, and finally, the idea that the knowledge of one’s true self is the basis of all other knowledge.¹

The above attributes and values are considered to be the ideals of the era of the Enlightenment. In other words, the ideals relate to the era of the Enlightenment whose wellspring can be found in 17th and 18th century Europe, and which spread and gained predominance rapidly within Western thought. A glance at the ideals related to the era of the Enlightenment which were founded on a new definition of scientific knowledge reveals that they consisted of rational enquiry and a belief in progress. On one hand, these values and ideals considered rational

1. Glenn Ward, *Postmodernism*, 2010, p. 21.

enquiry to be the principle upon which the search for all true knowledge should be based; and on the other hand, they believed that progress could only be achieved by way of rational methods which would bring about a world of order, security, social understanding and happiness.

2a. The Internal Contradiction of the Project of Modernity

As we pointed out above, the Age of Enlightenment and Modernity were erected on a specific understanding of science, and were based on the [epistemological] independence of reason. And while it is true that the empirical aspect of modernity won out over its rational aspect, but nevertheless, objectivity or the unmediated recourse to the objects of scientific knowledge without any preconceived mental or historical notions was one of the characteristics of modernity. One of the assumptions of modernity was that science was always supposed to rule the day, and that reason was supposed to be present [in all judgments and activities], so as to preclude any judgement that was made without recourse to reason or on questionable grounds. But a glance at the history of modernity will obviate the fact that like any other historical phenomenon, it too is accompanied by doubts and much disputations and disagreement. On the basis of Arnold Toynbee's description of modernity, it might be possible to describe it as a unique project without being accused of exaggeration. But this fact notwithstanding, the general philosophy of this era can be described as being the belief that societal progress is achieved by way of man's incremental progress in his self-awareness which is in turn achieved by way of a systematic rational methodology.

The prominent thinkers of this era were Kant, Hegel and Voltaire. The positive aspect of this way of thinking was the strengthening of human rights throughout the world, which ultimately resulted in the French

Revolution of 1789 and ultimately in the Declaration of Human Rights. Its negative aspect is that because these thinkers and those who followed in their footsteps considered and still consider their European values to be the most advanced values in the world, they proceeded in their arrogance to impose these values on others. These thinkers considered Europe to be more civilized than the rest of the world; consequently, this dangerous idea came into being that the other less civilized countries and peoples and races of the world should therefore be colonized and exploited and “civilized”.¹

The interesting point to note regarding this arrogant position of the aforementioned philosophers which includes such great minds as that of Emanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel is that it was the patent and latent stipulations of these thinkers which enabled the promotion of Eurocentrism and which brought about a warped and unrealistic sense of perception in the field of oriental studies in Europe and America, because if an orientalist believes European civilization to be the peak of world civilization and to believe that his or her current state is or should be the criterion by which others should be judged, then his or her encounter with the East and other cultures will be a contemptuous and non-scientific one – an encounter to which, alas, we continue to be witness to in spades.

3. The Post-Empirical or Postmodern Period of Science

As has already been stated, the first principles which empiricism accepted severely restricted the method which it defined as scientific, and this brought on a crisis [within itself] because empiricism was dependent on induction, [and induction could not be whole absent conditions which were excluded by empiricisms excessively restricted methodology], and

1. *Ibid*, p. 22.

an induction which is incomplete has no useful scientific value; and this brought about much deliberation among a large number of the philosophers of science. In this context, the work of Karl Popper, Imre Lakatos and Paul Feyerabend and their attempts at coming up with solutions to this problem sheds some light on the cause of the crisis itself, as well as how solutions to it were sought in empirical science and philosophy.

Because of the challenge that it faced by reason of this internal crisis, empirical science could no longer reasonably justify its own first principles and assumptions and fed on matters which were not scientific [according to its own definition]; and it was because of this [reaction to the crisis] that the claims of empiricism lead to the intermingling of science with unscientific thought.

[Meanwhile,] the postmodernists did not agree among themselves about the extent to which scientific knowledge could be influenced from other sources [of knowledge]. Lyotard, Satir, and Derrida considered metaphysics to be the main element in the formation of scientific thought, whereas Foucault, having been influenced by Nietzsche, believed social power to be determinative, and under Heidegger's influence, Hans Georg Gadamer considered tradition to be decisive. According to postmodern definitions, science cannot have an identity that is independent from history and culture, and the influence of culture and the knowledge that is inherent in it cannot be [adequately] explained by the way in which scientific knowledge is used.¹

Because of the above-mentioned considerations, neither does postmodern "science" lay any claim to discovering reality, nor does it place any importance on any discourse concerning the correspondence [of a given theory of finding] with truth [i.e. the correspondence theory of

1. Parsania, 1389, p. 33

truth]. The criterion of postmodern science revolves around its practical utility and internal consistency. Thus, according to this definition, science is neither separate from history, nor from the geographical location of the scientist. If the science of the modern period claimed universality and [the function of] discovering [the truths of a world which was objectively] real, postmodern science has penned itself up in geography, culture, and history. The postmodern outlook has led to a kind of pluralism in that which is considered to be scientific knowledge and had ended up in skepticism, the relativistic value of knowledge, and even in the relativity of reality itself.

The postmodern era of science is best considered as a logical outcome of the era of modernism and the thought of the Enlightenment, because the path that modernity follows with empiricism and [empirical and logical] positivism cannot but lead to what it has resulted in. Nowadays, almost all of the achievements and ideals of modernity are looked upon critically by the postmoderns, and the aggregate of this critical comportment with respect to [the definition of] science has comingled with certain aspects of behavioral and intellectual models, and has resulted in a new era which goes by the name of postmodernity. When postmodern society is contrasted with the society of the modern era, it usually comes out in a negative light. It has certain characteristics and attributes, some of which are the following: excessive or wasteful consumption, pessimism, irrationalism, hopelessness, and frustration concerning the idea of [attaining to] a knowledge that is absolute.¹

Lawrence Cahoon states in the introduction to his anthology *From Modernism to Postmodernism*² that “while no categorization can be

1. Ward, 2010, p. 22.

2. Blackwell, 1996.

adequate to capture the diversity among postmodernists,” he posits that five prominent postmodern themes can be distinguished, and that four are objects of its criticism, and one constitutes its positive method. Cahoon states that “postmodernism typically criticizes: *presence* or presentation (versus representation and construction), *origin* (versus phenomena), *unity* (versus plurality), and *transcendence* of norms (versus their immanence). It typically offers an analysis of phenomena through constitutive otherness.” He then goes on to provide the following explanations of these five postmodern themes:

1. *Presence* refers to the quality of immediate experience and to the objects thereby immediately “presented.” What is directly, immediately given in experience has traditionally been contrasted both with representation, the sphere of linguistic signs and concepts, and construction, the products of human invention; hence, whatever is mediated by the human factor. Postmodernism denies that anything is “immediately present,” hence independent of signs, language, interpretation, disagreement, etc.

2. *Origin* is the notion of the source of whatever is under consideration, a return to which is often considered the aim of rational inquiry. Inquiry into origins is an attempt to see behind or beyond phenomena to their ultimate foundation. For modern philosophies of the self (e.g. existentialism, psychoanalysis, phenomenology, even Marxism), the attempt to discover the origin of the self is the road to authenticity. Postmodernism in the strict sense denies any such possibility. It denies the possibility of returning to, recapturing, or even representing the origin, source, or any deeper reality behind phenomena, and casts doubt on or even denies its existence.

3. *Unity*. In virtually every kind of intellectual endeavor, postmodernism tries to show that what others have regarded as a *unity*, a single, integral existence or concept, is plural. This is to some extent a reflection of

structuralism, which understood cultural elements - words, meanings, experiences, human selves, societies – as constituted by relations to other elements. Since such relations are inevitably plural, the individual in question is plural as well. Everything is constituted by relations to other things, hence nothing is simple, immediate, or totally present, and no analysis of anything can be complete or final.

4. *Transcendence*. The denial of the *transcendence* of norms is crucial to postmodernism. Norms such as truth, goodness, beauty, rationality, are no longer regarded as independent of the processes they serve to govern or judge, but are rather products of and immanent in those processes. It is in effect the rejection of idealism, and of any dualism which asserts that some things (e.g. norms) are independent of nature or semiosis (sign-production) or experience or social interests. This leads postmodernists to respond to the normative claims of others by displaying the processes of thought, writing, negotiation, and power which produced those very normative claims. It does not mean that postmodernists fail to make their own normative claims, but that they unleash a form of critical analysis which makes all normative claims problematic, including their own.

5. Lastly, there is a characteristic strategy of many forms of postmodernism, which is the complex application of the four themes just mentioned. The strategy is to use the idea of constitutive otherness in analyzing any cultural entity. What appear to be cultural units - human beings, words, meanings, ideas, philosophical systems, social organizations – are maintained in their apparent unity only through an active process of exclusion, opposition, and hierarchization. Other phenomena or units must be represented as foreign or “other” through representing a hierarchical dualism in which the unit is “privileged” or favored, and the other is devalued in some way... In a philosophical

system, a dualism like that between “reality” and “appearance” involves the construction of a kind of waste basket into which phenomena that the system does not want to sanctify with the privileged term “real” can be tossed (mere “appearances”). Only in this way can the pristine integrity of the idealized or privileged term be maintained.

Postmodernism challenges the presuppositions of modernity and the ideology of the Age of Enlightenment that assumes that the world is knowable by means that are absolute and objective, and considers all of its superficial claims concerning the veracity of knowledge to be hypocritical. The reason for the political condition of postmodernism is due to the Enlightenment project – with its emphasis on material progress, reform, and the utilization of bureaucratic tools for success – drawing to its historical end. Dan Laughey characterizes postmodernism as a reaction to the elitism of high modernity and as a rejection of realism or attempts to represent reality as objective.¹

The obliteration of faith at the hands of science and reason is characterized by postmoderns as being [a symptom of a condition in which] no commonality of opinion or faith or belief that is solidly grounded and sustainable exists in the present era, and that seeking pleasure, individualism, and living in the moment are the dominant desires and the zeitgeist of the era.²

Relying on the postmodern outlook, we can summarize their take as follows: 1. The rational era of modernity is passing; 2. There are no universally applicable and organizing ideas that are valid and sustainable concerning culture and society; 3. There are no such things as cultural values which are stable and sustainable; 4. Experience and “reality” are

1. Quoted in Mehdi-Zadeh, 1391, p. 289.

2. *Ibid*, p. 291.

not real (empty) and are not sustainable; 5. The characteristics of the newly emergent culture is that it is eclectic, jocose, and shocking.¹

Given the divisions which we delineated concerning oriental studies, and bearing in mind the evolution of the meaning of science and their respective eras that we discussed, we can now arrive at the basic conclusion that the fourth stage of oriental studies which started after the end of the Second World War and which continues to the present, and draws its sustenance from the furrow of thought and knowledge known as postmodernism, has certain unique and exclusive attributes and characteristics. Naturally, the discipline of oriental studies, which is immersed in the semantic and intellectual environment of postmodernity, is not exempt from its intellectual and epistemological findings and implications and conclusions or from its general outlook.

Up to this point, then, we examined the background which enables us to enter into the postmodern condition which oriental studies finds itself – a discipline which has an intimate relationship with the way in which science and human knowledge are defined and conceived; and we demonstrated how the ideals and values of the Age of the Enlightenment collapsed wholesale due to the shortcomings that the Enlightenment thinkers and the Age of Reason had in their overly narrow empiricist definition of science, and how this situation reached a point where new ideals which are at odds with those of the Enlightenment's began to take shape.

We mention in passing that during the Age of the Enlightenment and up to the Second World War, oriental studies continued its existence on the margins of the internal contradiction of modernity which we mentioned; and this is because on one hand, modernity maintains

1. *Ibid.*

slogans which are normative and judgmental and which proclaim enmity with exploitation and colonialism; and on the other hand, their most prominent philosophers make statements which promote ideologies such as Eurocentrism, the superiority of the European race, the primacy and superiority of European civilization, and so on.¹ And it is exactly in this [self-]contradictory situation that oriental studies has been in that we see an exponential growth in orientalist activities; undertakings which are, alas, written in a literature that is brimming with confusion, disrespect, and contempt for the civilization that is being studied, and is by and large filled with unrealistic judgments and unfounded conclusions.

Orientalism under Postmodern Conditions

As stated earlier, although modernity and the age of the Enlightenment proclaimed slogans such as objectivism, equality, liberty, and rationality; and claimed to give glad tidings of a better world; but at the same time, it suffered from an internal contradiction, and that was the idea of the superiority of the European civilization over the rest of the civilizations of the world, and of the ideology of the irrationality of the cultures and mores of all other peoples. According to this ideology, [the culture and values of] the European race were to be the criteria against which all other races were to be judged, and the rationality of European and Western man was to be the criterion against which the rationality of all other peoples was to be measured. At the same time, the basic ontological assumptions of modernity and its conception of man and human knowledge was approaching a major crisis point because of the internal contradictions of its worldview which had to do with its over-restrictive definition of science and its irrational rationalizations of the unfounded epistemological claims of empiricism.

1. Gandhi, 1388, p. 242.

Empiricism had limited scientific knowledge to experiential knowledge, and fostered the unfounded belief that human knowledge was to be cleansed of any and all non-empirical knowledge. As a result of the efforts of the philosophers of science and the sociologists of knowledge in their struggle with the strictures of empiricism, it unexpectedly understood that non-empirical forms of knowledge surround and envelop empirical knowledge and are an inextricable part of it. As mentioned earlier, Lyotard, Satir, and Derrida considered metaphysics to be the main element in the formation of scientific thought, whereas Foucault, having been influenced by Nietzsche, believed social power to be determinative, and under Heidegger's influence, Hans Georg Gadamer considered tradition to be decisive. The multiplicity of the conceptions of knowledge gave rise to widespread changes in the fields of science, culture and politics, some of which we shall point to below:

1. Modernity, which claimed universality and was considered to be superior [to other ideologies], which other peoples were supposed to adopt and become modern in order to benefit from (on account of some sort of geographical predeterminism [which the European subcontinent was the beneficiary of]), was no longer superior but found itself in a crisis of its own making.

2. European and Western rationalism, which relied on the growth of empirical knowledge and the superficial successes of that species of rationalism for having become the criterion and standard to which others must strive to achieve, gradually and only superficially stepped back from this claim, and an alternative ideology began to take shape among the European intelligentsia that each nation and people should be judged on the basis of epistemological criteria that are native to their own lands and cultures.

3. The process of the liberation of colonized countries from the hegemony of Western powers gradually began and, as can be seen, these independence movements gained strength in the period after the Second World War and in the second half of the 20th century. This development ran in parallel to the development of the postmodern era, which similarly reached maturity in the second half of the 20th century.

4. The flood of criticism was directed at modernity's achievements, and toward its rationalism, politics and culture; and there was hardly any achievement of modernity's which escaped being the subject of criticism, most of which originated in France and Germany and were directed at British empiricism.

5. The other nations and religions of the world, including Islam, occupied themselves by thinking of ways of reviving their historical identities and repelling the threats which the hegemonic dynamics of European modernity posed to them; and it is in this exact timeframe which the greatest volume of studies on the part of the Moslems concerning the actions of the orientalists is manifested, and the process of their critical reaction against orientalism reaches its maturity.

6. European thinkers began to look upon other countries and peoples and their cultures differently, reexamining the output of oriental studies during the heyday of modernity; and this was made possible as a result of the new intellectual environment which was ushered in by the epistemological tools of the postmodern era. As an example, we can point to the work of Edward Said who, as a non-Moslem intellectual who turned to the opus of the orientalists by using the Foucauldian conception of the discourse of knowledge and power. Thus, a new genre of literature was born which came to be known as "post-colonialist" studies.

7. As a result of the waning of the star of the West and modernity's

universal claims, Moslem and other eastern thinkers not only began a critique of Western oriental studies, but gradually laid the groundwork for a reverse “oriental” studies of their own. In such “oriental” studies, the West is projected as the “Other” and the thinkers of the East are considered the “Us” who proceed to study themselves in the mirror of the West. In this situation, the Eastern mentality and Eastern presuppositions and priorities take precedence, and in effect, the tables are turned and the “orientalism” turns into a sort of Occidentalism or study of the occident.

Post-Colonial Studies

As has already been stated, in the postmodern conditions which began to prevail even in the English-speaking world after the end of the Second World War, certain aspects of oriental studies began to appear in the form of post-colonial studies, part of whose subject was to take on the erroneous elements of the outdated orientalism of modernity which preceded it. Specifically, any research which was critical of imperialism and the hegemonic ambitions of the West and which generally fell into the category of post-colonial studies was supported by eastern intellectuals, all of which could be characterized as being reactions against the Eurocentric approach of the orientalism of the modern period.

Because of the nature of its genesis and due to the objects of its research, post-colonial studies are in direct tension with the institutionalized outlook of the status quo. This discipline strives to change and eliminate the structure of the production of knowledge which is historically rooted in various historical and geographical aspects of modernity. Post-colonial studies explore the experiences of exploitation, violent repression, resistance, race, gender, representation, otherness, homelessness and emigration in the context of the historical, philosophical, scientific, and

linguistics discourses of the West.¹

The above approach blames the values and intellectual traditions and literature of the West because of its support for a kind of repressive ethnocentrism and racism, because Western intellectual models and Western literary discourse predominate the other non-Western cultures and ways of life throughout the globe, which it thereby marginalizes or ignores. Of course it is important to note that the advent of post-colonial studies means that exploitation and colonialism are a thing of the past. Ziauddin Sardar opines in this regard: “Orientalism caused a general category of critical studies to sprout up like mushrooms in different forms, such as post-colonial studies, and post-colonial discourse. The phrase post-colonial studies does not mean that colonialism has ended; rather, post-colonialism analyzes the way in which the historical reality of European colonialism is sustained in order to create a relationship between that which is Western and that which is non-Western after states which had been colonized have gained their independence.”²

The following thinkers can be said to have played an active role in strengthening of post-colonial studies: Edward Said, Aijaz Ahmad, Gayatri Spivak, Homi K. Bhabha, Cornel West, Bell Hooks, and Leyla Ghandi. What is interesting to note is that most of these scholars are either African-Americans or scholars who were originally from the East. For example, Gayatri Spivak, the Indian literary theorist, feminist critic, and postcolonial theorist, is a founding member of the Subaltern Studies Collective, as well as of the Institute for Comparative Literature and Society. She is a fierce critic of post-colonial exploitation. She avers that the Third World is a Western construct which is created for the purposes

1. Mehdi-Zadeh, 1391, p. 207.

2. Sardar and von Lowen (sp?), 1388, p. 117.

of the subjugation of non-Western peoples and cultures to the bonds of imperialistic representations, and [for the purposes of justifying] the way in which the West treats non-Western peoples and cultures. Spivak considers the West's idolizing of natives to be a Western delusion because with this outlook, they think of them as unsullied treasure troves of purity and as an endless source of information, and in this way they prevent non-Western cultures from being able to create their own world.¹ Or the case of Bell Hooks, who is an African-American writer who is concerned about black identity and its denial at the hands of colonialists. Another thinker is Leyla Ghandi, the grand-daughter of Mahatma Ghandi, the leader of the anti-colonialist movement in India, who is active in postcolonial studies and researches the situation of previously colonized countries and how they are treated by the West, and how Eastern scholars react to these Western actions.²

We continue this essay with an explication of the situation of oriental studies in the period following the Second World War which has come to be known as the postmodern period, by presenting the thought of two thinkers who have been active in the field of oriental studies: Edward Said and ZiauddinSardar. We shall point to the way in which each thinker confronts the accomplishments of oriental studies of the modern period, juxtaposing them with that of the postmodern period.

Edward Said and the Discourse of Orientalism

The book *Orientalism* by Edward Said is a prominent and classic example of a study in the genre of post-colonial studies which examines the way in which the West conceives of and represents the East. Said utilizes the analytical capacities of the postmodern Foucauldian

1. *Ibid*, p. 119.

2. Ghandi, 1388, p. 11.

definition of discourse for his analysis of the way in which the East is represented in the West. Like Nietzsche, Foucault believes that power plays a fundamental role in any study of society. Foucault referred to the new human sciences as the “human sciences regime”, whose nature he believed was a manifestation of the dominant culture of its era. He insists that “truth” and power are always connected. For Foucault, there is no such thing as truth absent power, or power absent [some representation of] truth. For him, truth is neither the reward of free souls, nor the child of seclusion or prolonged isolation, nor yet the reward of those who have had the good fortune of being able to free themselves. Rather, truth is a global phenomenon, and is something that is strictly a product of different types of coercion and compulsion. Every society has a certain regime of truth; or in other words, each society has a number of different discourses which are acceptable to the regime of truth which therefore grants these discourses permission to play the role of a discourse which provides the mechanisms and exemplary models which enable the individuals in their respective societies to differentiate between “true” and “false” propositions. Foucault adds that the nature of the mutual bond between truth and power varies throughout history, and that it is only through a genealogical analytic (*tabarshenasī*) that the true nature of this bond can be understood.¹

Given this, it is clear that Foucault’s conception of truth is in direct opposition to that which obtained in the Age of the Enlightenment. During the Age of the Enlightenment and modernity, truth was considered to be something that was objective and essentially separate from power, and was something that was usually characterized as being in opposition

1. Continental Philosophy of Social Science - by Yvonne Sherratt, 2008, p. 217 (of the Persian translation).

to power. But contrary to this belief of the Age of the Enlightenment, Foucault conceived of truth and power as inseparably intertwined and thought of truth as a worldly phenomenon which came into being in relation to power or a given power structure; and this new conception of truth/ power is one which is postmodern.¹

For Foucault, discourse is the linguistic form of knowledge and power and the bond between the two, i.e. discourse is that truth which is related to power, and this [insight] is utilized by Edward Said in his critique of orientalism, which he characterizes as a discourse. It is in this context that he analyzes the representations of the East by the oriental studies of the West. Foucault states that “knowledge is not purely a representation of reality; rather, truth is a construct of discourse, and it is the various regimes of knowledge which determine what is ‘true’ and what is ‘false’.” Today, there is a common principle in discourse analysis and that is a critical view toward knowledge which is taken for granted as self-evident, i.e. that which is considered to be knowledge by all, and whose status as knowledge is considered to be obvious. Discourse analysis which is a discipline which is inspired by Foucault initially criticizes this obviousness, and then proceeds to analyze the way in which such knowledge was produced and generated. Most of the approaches which are current in discourse analysis use Foucault’s approach as their model and consider it to be an organized collection of propositions which set certain limitations for [these] propositions to be meaningful[ly applied].²

In *Orientalism*, Edward Said explains the characteristics of the discourse of knowledge which was produced in the nineteenth century by academically trained researchers, by travelers’ memoirs, poets and

1. *Ibid*, p. 218

2. Marianne W Jørgensen and Louise J Phillips, *Discourse Analysis as Theory and Method*, 2004.

novelists. And this was a knowledge which viewed the East not as a society and culture which operated in accordance with its own internal dynamics, logic and conditions, but one which was nothing more than a reservoir to be drawn from for the benefit of increasing the wealth of Western knowledge. Like Foucault, Said considers discourse to be the linguistic form of knowledge and power and the inextricable bond between the two, and emphasizes the fact that from a historical perspective, the West used its power to expand its [self-interested] representations of the East – representations which have become a vast source of knowledge about the East. Said adds that an orientalism which does not present the countries of the east in the true light of what they actually are is [part of] a discourse which allowed the West to administer, control and even produce the East politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and in the imagination, in the period that followed the Age of Enlightenment; a complex East which was suitable as an object of study in university faculties, for displaying in museums, for theoretical explication in treatises in the fields of sociology, biology, linguistics, history, and so on. This type of power has a direct relation to the procedures which Foucault described as knowledge-power.¹

Edward Said's discussion concerning orientalism is very similar to Foucault's discussion of power-knowledge. A discourse produces, by means of different interpretive procedures, a form of knowledge which is racist about the Other (the East), which is intensely involved in the functions and activities of power (imperialism). Said similarly believes that the texts which are produced by oriental studies are infused into the West's awareness by way of hegemonic filters such that their ideological biases take on objective form based on the great divide that separates

1. Edward Said, *Orientalism*. P. 73.

east and west. Said envisages the east as being Europe's silent "Other Civilization", and believes the subservient status which the orientalists allocate to the East simultaneously serves to form and buttress the superior position of the West. [This discourse] produces [an image of] the East which is aboriginal and fatalistic, and emotional and bereft of all rationality and, [by contrast, produces] a West that is rational, democratic, and progressive. The West is always in the center, and the East is always the Other who is on the margins, and whose marginal existence affirms the West's centrality and superiority.

Edward Said's analysis of orientalism in his seminal work of the same name places him in the company of the most prominent postmodern critiques of orientalism. In this work, in addition to criticizing the modern approach to oriental studies, he engages in a representation and analysis of orientalism under the auspices of a Foucauldian analytics of the relationship between European power and the knowledge that it produces. And as a final word on Edward Said and as a segue to the thought of Ziauddin Sardar, we can quote Sardar as saying that while Edward Said's was a step forward in the critique of the West's inhuman and unrealistic evaluation of the East, that there are others such as Aijaz Ahmad and Ziauddin Sardar himself who accuse Said of perpetuating the Eurocentric outlook and of affirming the superiority of Western man; but this discussion would take us beyond the scope of this paper.¹

The Orientalism of Ziauddin Sardar

Our second example of scholars who are critics of orientalism is Ziauddin Sardar, who is a British thinker of Pakistani extraction. While it is true that Sardar approaches the critique of oriental studies differently, but he

1. Sardar, 1386, p. 113.

nevertheless benefits from the capabilities of the world of postmodernism in his critique. Sardar considers himself to be a critical traditionalist and views Western orientalists from a non-Western perspective. He does not believe orientalism to be neutral or unbiased, but rather presents it as a phenomenon which has an agenda and is biased towards that agenda. Sardar believes that orientalism is [partly] responsible for the fact that while we live in a world where reality is understood and expressed and experienced through a great variety of different avenues, it is nevertheless understood as being the basic opposition of one camp against another. Sardar believes that in order properly to discuss the subject of orientalism people must be prompted to overcome misunderstandings and to examine that which has been ignored, so that the false lines of thought which have arisen due to distortions and falsifications through the centuries are separated [from the truth, which can then stand out unhindered].¹

Sardar states his aim in penning his book *Orientalism* as being “the refutation of the idea and the proving of the point that despite the fact that orientalism’s expiration date has expired, that nevertheless, this project is after new provinces to colonize. Sardar posits that after having established itself in the academic community and among literary circles, orientalism has rolled up its sleeves and readied itself for entering the fray and to dominate the mediums of film, television, and DVD’s. Thus, he says that today, the reach of orientalism is not limited to that which has traditionally been defined as the East; rather, its jurisdiction envelops the land which gave birth to it as well, i.e. Europe.”²

Sardar admits that postmodernism has brought about a relatively acceptable capacity for freedom of action with respect to critical thought

1. *Ibid.*

2. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

and studies, and the analysis of the genealogy of science and intellectual history [is thought to be a fruitful line of research]; but he stresses that the gaze of Western orientalism to the outside has not been one that is directed toward an object that is steady and determinate. He states that orientalism is a kind of inner deliberation; thus, its objects have been the problems, fears, concerns and desires of the West which have been embodied in an artificial construct known as the East. For Sardar, the quiddity of the East is a collection of ever-changing and indeterminate variables; it is something that is equivalent to that meaning which a given writer or observer desires at any given time. Sardar believes that the history of orientalism is a historiography which has put the West in motion; or, to be more precise, it is not the history of the West's motion toward a partnership with the East or [even] an understanding of the East. These [kinds of actions] are scant and exceptional. The East of the orientalist is an artificial tool by means of which the West opens and explains its current concerns and gives them a sort of objective reality and proves [its own position for itself concerning] them.¹

In as much as Sardar believes orientalism to be a kind of inner deliberation [on the part of the West], he insists on characterizing the whole orientalism scene as an element of the imagination. For example, he points to sexual pleasure in the conscience of the West and says, "Sexual pleasure within the Western psyche is always associated with the notion of Original Sin; within the Catholic psyche it retains the implication that the only perfect life is the celibate life, sex always has the overtones of sin and temptation." Therefore, normative sexual relations are deeply rooted within the religious assumptions and beliefs of [Christian and Catholic] orientalism, such that in the eyes of the West, the east is filled with all

1. *Ibid*, p. 24.

sorts of strange and sinful sexual pleasures which are shrouded in ancient traditions and mysteries.¹

Thus, [the myth of] the lascivious but obedient Eastern woman and the aggressive and powerful but merciless Eastern man continue to exist in the literature of Western orientalism, which is nothing but a kind of wishful thinking or imagination [that is being projected onto the East] as a result of the sexual deprivations of Westerners whose sexual privation has its roots in their religious beliefs, in an effort at a gratification [that is perverse as well as being vicarious]. In a statement that is postmodern in the sense that postmodernism is the end of all metanarratives, Sardar states: "If we consider orientalism to be a metanarrative, then orientalists will appear as a group of wolves who are intent on tearing religion, culture and Islamic civilization to pieces, and orientalism can easily be envisaged as a grand conspiracy against Islam and against any and all non-Western cultures."²

While postmodernist critical theory and postcolonial studies are the result of the superficial freedom which eastern nations have gained from the direct hegemonic rule of colonialism; and while these disciplines have also provided an opportunity for Eastern thinkers to proffer their own criticisms [about the West]; this does not suffice to make Sardar optimistic about [the future that] this new condition [bodes]. He sees the changes in oriental studies as being completely superficial and inconsequential, and sees them as taking place in ways that are clear to see and in a predetermined framework. He affirms that orientalism will continue under the auspices of postmodernism in fulfilling its continuing role of caricaturizing the ideologies and religions and cultures of Asia as

1. *Ibid*, p. 13.

2. *Ibid*, p. 85.

a preliminary and necessary step for their suppression and repression. This process, Sardar says, can already be seen in a large quantity of postmodern products, and particularly in the computer games and game-nets which are available, many of which are based on Hollywood films.¹

Sardar believes that the period of Eurocentric orientalism is in the process of being replaced by the American pole, and emphasizes the fact that Europe itself is now being seen and presented through an American aperture, which is an [ironic] expansion of the reach of [the tentacles of] orientalism to the shores of Europe itself.²

Conclusion

In this paper, we examined the background and consequences of postmodern oriental studies. The thesis of the paper was that the evolution of the meaning and definition of science in the last few centuries has made its effect felt to a greater or lesser extent in all cultural, social and political phenomena. Science as defined by modernity leads to a world in which there is a single standard for culture, which is the Western European culture; and a world in which the Western European brand of rationalism and progress are the models for the values and actions of others, who must conform to these models absolutely. Other nations must either be reformed or conform themselves to the Western way of life. On this basis a colonializing regime dominates the whole world, and the culture of the West, using all of the tools at its disposal, is injected into every corner of the globe. In this period, the discipline of oriental studies is one that is pretentious, application-oriented, controlling, and is a literature that is full of contempt for the Eastern people who are the objects of their supposed

1. *Ibid*, p. 164.

2. *Ibid*, p. 166.

objective studies. Orientalism in this period is a weapon in the arsenal of the West for the subduing, administration and control of the peoples of the East, and no objective perspective can be found therein; and as a consequence of the chaotic nature of the tension between modernity and postmodernity and the position of modern science between the two, there is no one to stand up to the claims of the orientalists and modern science. [The West claims that] historical progress [along Western lines] is unavoidable, so that the fate of Eastern man is either that he will pass through the period of modernity which the West has already traversed and become “civilized”, or that he is doomed to remain in the “pre-civilized” era.

The awe-inspiring Western spirit of this modern era prevents even the Easterners themselves from raising voices in criticism and resistance. But with the advent of the postmodern period of science in the second half of the 20th century, cracks begin to appear in this otherwise solid edifice. Modernity is no longer considered to be predominant or invincible, and the West is stripped of its privileged status, and the “natives” become unruly, dancing to the tune of independence and driving out the colonizers from their countries; and, paying due homage and respect to their own customs and traditions, the peoples of the East join the postmoderns in utilizing the internal contradictions of Western modernity against itself. Orientalism becomes an analysis of its own genealogy, wherein the ways and means of its production of knowledge are placed on the examination table.

Edward Said, who was a public intellectual and a professor of literature at Columbia University, turns his gaze on the discipline of oriental studies and, pointing the finger of blame to the West’s inhumane treatment of the East, ends up founding the academic field of postcolonial

studies. And scholars from the East or with an Eastern heritage such as Leela Gandhi, Aijaz Ahmad, Maryam Jameelah, Ziauddin Sardar, and Hesham Ja'it, taking advantage of the intellectual environment opened by postmodernity, seriously engage orientalism in radical critiques. We provided an explication of some of the ideas of Edward Said and Ziauddin Sardar as two exemplars of this kind of postmodern critique. In closing, we have to say that we agree with ZiauddinSardar's conclusion which is that while we are generally optimistic about the relative increase in freedom in the West and an attenuation of its radically anti-Eastern stance, we also believe that the West will continue using its technological and economic advantages to pursue its policies of wanting to gain complete hegemonic mastery over the East. Thus, because it's relative freedoms and the supposed attenuation of its hegemonic policies are only superficial and for public consumption only, as it were, its orientalist agenda will continue with its same historical purpose but in a different form; so that all such orientalist studies, even those which are apparently presented under the guise of a postmodern critique, can and should be examined under this same light.

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