

Review of
Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge.
By Wael B. Hallaq. New York:
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In his introduction to *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge* Wael Hallaq, gives us a profound nautical metaphor which captures the essence of his relationship with his antecedent, Edward Said's *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (1978) as being neither to improve nor displace it. "Said's work", he writes, "provides me with the flare, though not the tools, to navigate my seas. If the metaphor is at all apt, I might say that in this work I hijack Said's ship to reequip it for the exploration of oceans that he could see dimly from afar, if at all" (8). Hallaq's book in review here, it can be said therefore, is simultaneously about as well as not about Said's celebrated work which remains the standard in setting

the terms of the debates around any critique of orientalism. He acknowledges his debt early in the book that it was Said who “lifted orientalism from its uninterrogated subterranean normativity to a focus of critique, if not doubt” (6) and that “without his contribution, [he] very much doubts that this book would have been possible” (viii). However Orientalism is not the *terminus ad quem* of *Restating Orientalism* but only becomes an indispensable point of entry into the real forces that precipitate the actions that orientalism is accused of performing and the attributes that it is accused of having.

In brief, Hallaq’s book then, as implicit in its subtitle, is concerned actually with developing a critique of the entire range of modern knowledge structures – and central to it the modern subject and its constitution as the agent underwriting those structures – that produce, envelop and envelop orientalism. European colonialism has been inherently genocidal and it is the entire production of knowledge, not just orientalism, which has gone into its making. In doing this it makes its departure from the parameters of colonial discourse analysis which Said was instrumental in establishing, but which also, in the form of postcolonial studies, has been unable to achieve much because, in its oppositions and resistances to late modernity its literary approach makes for, to use Foucauldian terms, “immediate struggles” that look not for the “chief enemy” but for “immediate enemies”. Approaching orientalism merely as a field of specialization

within the academia that has been inflicted with certain epistemological problems or for that matter simply uncovering traces of racist discourse in European literature does not do anything substantial in explaining the structural base – and the genocides that are embedded within it – that make orientalism possible. It only ‘scapegoats’ orientalism and fails, even refuses, to “appreciate the full force of orientalism’s destructive power as a *modern form of power*” (10).

We might as well start with how Said’s problematic critique becomes nothing less than a function of the very discursive formation he purported to critique –reinforcing its formation and reasserting its power while so brilliantly exposing it. This comprises largely the first three chapters of the book. Hallaq locates the origins of Said’s problem with the problematic adoption of Foucault’s understanding of the place of individual agency in the formation of power discourses. Said had himself acknowledged that *Orientalism* could not have been written without Foucault’s concepts of discourse and discursive formations and also his view that representations are always influenced by the systems of power in which they are located. However, Said’s critics had detected major inconsistencies in his use of Foucault’s concept of discourse where Said appeared to be alternating between the idea that true representation is theoretically possible and the opposite that all representation is necessarily misrepresentation. Said had been aware of this

fundamental paradox inherent in his book but was able to explain it as part of his design – to expose a problem using a method that was Foucauldian but also to suggest an exit from that problem using a method that was anti-Foucault. This was a result of Said's gradual disenchantment with Foucault that was reflected clearly in his *The World, the Text and the Critic* (1983) where he outlined his credo of the politically engaged intellectual, a position he considered Foucault – with his political quietism emanating from his overwhelming sense of everything being historically determined - to have moved away from in his later years.

Critical theory which had been marked in its early phase with a desire to transform society had gradually turned, on being transported to the American academia, into a mere academic exercise, retreating into a labyrinth of textuality. For Said, reading texts for their play/pleasure (*jouissance/plaisir*) should be of less value than the concrete effects of 'word politics' - and to do this the critic must first understand her involvement with the 'Text'. What they failed to understand was their contribution in creating an aesthetic category called literature, a cultural agency, that became more and more blind to its actual complicities with power. Said elaborated this thesis further in his *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) and gave a call to revive the 'responsibility' which had been abdicated by the scholar – the humanist who rises above the particular conditions of its production to furnish 'universal hu-

man truths'. Said's perceptive insights into the oppositions between scholarly objectivity and worldly motives, discursive regimes and authorial intentions may have proved liberatory for a generation of scholars, but in its humanist claims appeared to mimic the essentialising discourse it attacked. His strongly felt need to break free from the sophisticated intellectualism of undecidability and the political quietism of advanced theory with his own brand of 'insurrectionary scholarship' brings the age old discrepancy between the finitude of the thinking rational subject and the infinite variety of the world back to a full circle, by bringing the 'subject' – diagnosed in much poststructuralist and postmodern thought as the source of epistemological poverty that informs Western humanism - back to the forefront.

When Hallaq writes that *Orientalism* unwittingly reinforced the very discursive formation Said set out to critique, it is this deeply held hope and belief in the modern project as an extension of the Enlightenment sensibility that is emphasised. If there is any response to the legitimacy of imperialism that orientalism creates, it is not to replace but re-integrate the deprived periphery to the powerful centre more fully. The anthropologist James Clifford had written that Said adopted the conscious position of 'oppositonality' that 'writes back' against "imperial dominance from the position of an oriental whose actuality has been distorted and denied - and yet – a wide range of humanist assumptions escape

Said's oppositional analysis, as do the discursive alliances of knowledge and power produced by anti-colonial and particularly nationalist movements" (Clifford 1980, 214). Taking Clifford's argument further, Hallaq pulls the rug beneath the feet of the liberal and secular humanist whose anthropocentrism is structurally entwined in violence and genocide because it is "incapable of sympathy with the non-secular Other" as it is "anchored perforce, in a structure of thought (generated through the Enlightenment and culminating in the modern condition) wholly defined by modes of sovereign dominance" (5). He even attributes the canonicity and popularity of Said's groundbreaking *Orientalism* to its ability to consolidate rather than critique what the moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre calls liberalism's "interminable disagreement" (5).

Thus making the liberal subject and its sovereignty the locus and focus of a restructuring critique Hallaq exonerates orientalism as a "symptom, rather than the cause or chief culprit, of a psychoepistemic disorder plaguing modern forms of knowledge to the core" – and this includes a range of fields like science, engineering, history, philosophy, economics, law and business schools, all generally considered as neutral even though they have for long served ideological purposes. The main thrust of the book's argument – that when we deal with orientalism we would be terribly amiss if we do not approach it as the distillation of the foundational crisis knowledge is

thus strongly reinforced in chapters 3, 4 and 5. They deal with problems that had been absent in Said's book and continue to be largely so in the discourses that he generated – primarily the sovereignty of the Western subject. He cites the German philosopher Max Scheler who had effectively argued that the modern Western man's inherent "struggle for knowledge" that "grows out of an innate drive impulse" actually "sprung from an underlying a priori will- and value-structure centered upon the desire to dominate the material world" (91). The primitive origins of this belief he locates in the European Christian dogma that was transformed into secularized forms mainly through the genocides of the 'long sixteenth century': "The process of secularization brought about by the century heralded the need to break away from the ethical constraints that Christianity seems to have wanted to escape but could not fully accommodate"(87).

A viable alternative is provided in chapter 2 through the case study of premodern Islamic societies which never produced anything like *Orientalism* because in its schema the basis of knowledge was humility and gratitude of the subject in relation to nature. The story of the reconstitution of the modern subject is not entirely complete in this book at least and draws the readers back to the entire oeuvre of the writer - from his erudite *Sharia: Theory, Practice, Transformations* (2009) through *The Impossible State* (2013) to his future project that he tentatively titles 'Reforming Modernity'. Elucidating further on

the concepts of sovereignty, materialism, gratitude and humility through the writings of the Moroccan moral philosopher Taha Abdur Rahman's theories on the subject, where the relationship between man and nature is defined not in terms of domination but custodianship, Hallaq posits this ethical base of responsibility as the building block of the concept of the new human. To study *Restating Orientalism* is therefore to drive us to find alternatives about who we are.

Works Cited

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