



A study on the evolution of the concept and application of "Orientalism"

Elnaz Maleki^{1*}

^{1*} Assistant Professor, Department of Persian Language and Literature, Faculty of Letters, Van Yüzüncü Yıl University, Van, Turkey.

***Corresponding Author**

E-mail: elnazmaleki@yyu.edu.tr

ABSTRACT

Orientalism (known as Istishraq in Arabic) is a significant academic discipline that explores the languages, histories, religions, and various cultural aspects of Eastern societies. This field has a long-standing and continuous tradition and has profoundly influenced the study and understanding of Islamic civilization. This research investigates the historical evolution of Orientalist thought to clarify the stages of its development and establishment. Emphasizing the importance of a realistic analytical approach, the study examines Orientalist ideas through a sociological framework. Initially, key definitions and concepts related to Orientalism are outlined, followed by a discussion of Edward Said's influential perspectives on the subject. Subsequently, the study reviews the origins and historical progression of Orientalism, its different manifestations, the rise of colonialist ideologies, various phases of Orientalist thinking, as well as its causes and consequences. Additionally, it highlights the areas where Orientalist bias and colonial exploitation have been most evident. The paper concludes with a summary of findings and final reflections. The analysis suggests that a deeper understanding of this intellectual tradition can shape the way we engage with Orientalist discourse. Furthermore, the study reveals that Orientalist stereotypes concerning ethnic groups and minorities persist within the examined sources.

Keywords: Orientalism, History of Orientalism, Colonialist ideas, Forms of Orientalism.

Introduction

The foundation and core of Orientalism rest on creating divisions, distinctions, and hierarchies between the East and the West, with the underlying goal of asserting Western superiority and control over the East. In essence, Orientalism mirrors the process of Western colonization of Eastern societies. Numerous works produced by Orientalists have, in fact, facilitated Western domination and aggression toward the East.

Moreover, many scholars argue that expansionist agendas, racism, and ethnocentrism have deeply influenced much of this scholarship, casting doubt on its objectivity and fairness. As a result, Orientalism is often viewed as a political tool used by Western powers to undermine the cultural heritage, ethical values, and religious beliefs of the East—thereby dismissing claims of pure knowledge and neutrality as fundamentally flawed.

If we understand “the East” within the term Orientalism to specifically mean the Islamic East, then it extends beyond a mere geographical notion. Similarly to how “the West” has evolved into a concept that transcends physical boundaries despite its geographic origins, “the East” here signifies an intellectual and ideological construct in contrast to Western ideology. Consequently, the Islamic East may encompass regions such as Spain and the European territory of Al-Andalus.

During this period, the Orientalist establishment, largely influenced by the Papacy, adopted a passive stance toward Islamic civilization. They engaged with Islamic philosophers, scholars, and texts under the pretense of scholarly inquiry. However, in the process of reinterpreting the ideas of Muslim thinkers, they often introduced distortions and misrepresentations as part of their analysis.

In reality, the East and its people are often positioned as a “problem” to be examined—viewed by Western observers as fundamentally “other” or “foreign.” Conceptually, Orientalists tend to adopt an essentialist perspective toward Eastern countries, cultures, and populations, frequently expressed through ethnocentric attitudes and, at times, slipping into outright racism. Consequently, Orientalist scholarship typically regards Eastern individuals primarily as “Easterners” before recognizing their shared humanity. As Edward Said highlighted, although Orientalism may no longer exist in its original form, its discourses and theoretical frameworks about the East continue to persist within academic institutions and universities. With this in mind, the present study aims to critically examine Orientalist ideas and viewpoints with careful and rigorous scrutiny.

The Meaning and Concept of Orientalism

There is significant disagreement among researchers and scholars regarding the concept of Orientalism. Even the definitions proposed for this intellectual movement lack unanimous agreement in many respects.

For example, should scholarly work by Western academics about Eastern societies automatically be classified as Orientalism?

Is Orientalism specifically the perspective of non-Muslim European and American scholars toward Eastern cultures? Or does the term also include Christian and Jewish researchers who, often driven by colonial motives, have studied Eastern religions—particularly Islam?

Moreover, can Eastern scholars who examine their own cultures, traditions, and customs through Western methodologies and aims be considered Orientalists as well?

These questions highlight the ongoing debate about the precise meaning and scope of the term "Orientalism."

What stands out most in interpretations of this term is the distinction made between two regions of the world—namely, the East and the West. A central question emerges: does this distinction refer merely to physical distance or geographic borders, or does it represent a deeper divide between two sets of values, or the contrast between two fundamentally different cultures? This issue is central to studies of this nature, and in a sense, it helps explain some of the biases, assumptions, and critiques directed at the Orientalist enterprise.

Throughout history, Western attention and intellectual interest have consistently focused on the “East” and its peoples. However, the term “Orientalism” (Arabic: *Istishrāq*) first appeared in 1779, when it was included in the Oxford English Dictionary. Later, in 1838, the word was adopted into the scientific vocabulary of the French language. In some Arabic sources, the phrase ‘**ulama’ al-mashriqiyyāt** (scholars of Eastern studies) is used as an equivalent to this Western term.

The term covers all fields of study related to the languages, histories, religions, sciences, customs, and arts of Eastern nations. In European thought, the “East” refers to all countries located to the east of the European continent. From this perspective, Eastern nations are generally divided into three regions: the Near East, the Middle East, and the Far East (Desouqi, 1999: 88).

It is important to note that the use of the term Orientalism did not begin exclusively in the late eighteenth century. Instead, its long historical roots laid the groundwork for its broader adoption in later periods (Zahr al-Din, 1993: 83). Many definitions have been offered for *Istishrāq* (Orientalism), with variations arising from differing viewpoints.

Salih Zahr al-Din defines *Istishraq* as follows: "*Istishraq* is a newly used term adopted by the Lebanese in the 19th century for a new field of knowledge in which Westerners examined the works, histories, myths, languages, customs, religions, and civilizational characteristics of Eastern nations. They named this field *Istishraq*, and its practitioners *Mustashriqun* (Orientalists). The term *Istishraq* derives from the Arabic morphological pattern *Istif’āl*, indicating a process in which scholars sought to understand various aspects of the East." (Zahr al-Din, 1993: 83)

Part, a German Orientalist, believes: "*Istishraq* is the science of Oriental studies or the science of understanding the Eastern world." (Zahr al-Din, 1993: 83)

Albert Dietrich, another German Orientalist, states:

"An Orientalist is a researcher who investigates and seeks to understand the East, and will not reach accurate conclusions unless he is proficient in Eastern languages." (Ali al-Saghir, 1986: 11)



Dehkhoda writes in his dictionary that scientific research conducted by Western scholars about the peoples, civilizations, religions, literature, and history of the East is called *Orientalism* (Dehkhoda Dictionary, Vol. 9). Accordingly, an Orientalist is a Western scholar who investigates the culture and civilization of Eastern peoples.

In any case, the concept of *Orientalism* is a translation of the Arabic word *Istishraq*, which is derived from the word *Sharq* (East), meaning light, brightness, and sunrise. Therefore, an Orientalist or *Mustashriq* is someone who seeks to understand the East and follow the path toward the light—without elements such as religion, sect, ethnicity, race, service or betrayal, or geographic region influencing the formation, orientation, analysis, or combination of this term—although most definitions emphasize the research of Western scholars in this field.

The terms *East* and *Orientalism* can be viewed from several perspectives:

- **Geographical perspective:** The East refers to Asia, the Middle East, and the non-European world.
- **Ideological perspective:** Mostly a Muslim East contrasted with a Christian West.
- **Political perspective:** In fact, it refers to a threat perceived by the Christian West and capitalist world.
- **Academic perspective:** A discipline that discusses, writes about, and teaches the East. The Orientalist judges the East and studies its issues. In a broader sense, it refers to a special way of thinking that fundamentally separates East from West and creates a calculated chain of "attentions" toward the East.

In reality, Orientalism is the will and specific intention to understand and know the "East" (Asgari & Fouladvand, 1982).

From an objective and historical viewpoint, Orientalism expresses a form of Western domination over the East, and as Edward Said puts it, it is a process that allows the West to rule over the East it has constructed and fabricated itself.

To summarize the above definitions, Orientalism generally has at least three meanings: The first, a broad meaning, is a style of thought based on an ontological and epistemological distinction between East and, mostly, West. Therefore, a vast group of writers—including poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and royal administrative officials—have accepted this fundamental difference between East and West and used it as the starting point for their theories, epics, stories, social descriptions, and political narratives concerning the East, its people, their customs, mentalities, and destinies. This kind of Orientalism spans from Aeschylus to Victor Hugo, Dante, and Karl Marx (Said, 2003: 16).

A simpler definition of Orientalism is an academic one. It is a term used in universities. An Orientalist is someone who researches, teaches, and writes about the East; anthropologists, sociologists, historians, linguists, and others are part of this group (Said, 2003: 15).

According to Said, there has been a continuous exchange between these two types of Orientalism—the academic concept and the more or less fictional one. This interaction took on a systematic form from the eighteenth century onward and has resulted in a third meaning of Orientalism that is more historically and substantively defined than the previous two (Said, 2003: 16). Here, Said considers Orientalism as an institutionalized entity with a personality dependent on the East. "Dependent" in the sense that it legitimizes various theories about its subject, describes and explains it, teaches it, organizes it, and evaluates it. The essence of Orientalism is a Western style connected to creating domination, restructuring, and possessing the discourse of authority and power over the East.

Edward Said and Orientalism

Experience is one of the most fundamental yet often overlooked concepts in both modern and pre-modern scientific thought. Here, experience does not refer to empirical laboratory testing but rather to a broader understanding that has sparked extensive debate among different schools of thought. The main disagreement between positivists and anti-positivists centers on the nature and role of experience. Positivism—especially in its most radical form, logical positivism—aimed to establish a linguistic framework capable of explaining the entire world independently of lived experience. Thinkers like Nietzsche indirectly challenged this view, but it was the Frankfurt School, particularly Theodor Adorno, that offered a more direct critique. Adorno's work, both in content and form, sought to expose what he called the "totality," which he saw as characterized by the neglect and forgetting of genuine human experience. The theoretical legacies of Nietzsche and Adorno were transmitted to Edward Said through Michel Foucault, notably Foucault's focus on marginalized voices. Said himself, as an individual of Eastern origin



(Palestinian descent) living in the West, felt that his own lived experience was missing from Western scholarly narratives. He explored this issue in his book *Orientalism*, arguing that although Orientalism may no longer exist in its original form, its ideas and representations of the East and Eastern peoples continue to be taught and circulated in academic institutions.

Said draws on Foucault's concept of discourse identity, as outlined in *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, to define Orientalism. He regards Orientalism as a discourse because, without this framework, it would be impossible to comprehend the fully organized system through which European culture, especially after the eighteenth century, was able to govern and even construct the East politically, socially, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively (Said, 2003: 17).

Said regards Orientalism as a cultural institution primarily rooted in English and French contexts, from which numerous works—what he terms Orientalist texts—have emerged. He critiques these works as not only distorted but also as part of a broader conspiracy. His first argument is that “Orientalism has no real connection to an actual East.” His second argument addresses the relationship between East and West, claiming it to be hierarchical and unequal, with Orientalism serving as a key expression of European power over the East (Said, 2003: 18). At the same time, Orientalism presents itself as objective and scientifically honest, distancing itself from political and other interests. Consequently, Said concludes that what Orientalism portrays is detached from the real Far East, and its meaning and content are shaped more by the West than by the East itself.

Said does not focus on uncovering hidden meanings within texts, as he believes that in cultural exchanges, what often circulates is not the truth or essence but rather a form of performance. Instead, he examines two key aspects: first, from a methodological standpoint, he investigates intellectual authority or strategic positioning—how an author's stance relates to the orientalist subjects they discuss. Second, he analyzes the relationship between texts and the strategic ways in which groups, types, or even branches of texts build and reinforce power and authority both among themselves and within the broader culture (Said, 2003: 45).

Another important point in Orientalism is that these texts continuously reference one another. Orientalism is a system of quotation among authors' works, and for this reason, Said (unlike Foucault) places special emphasis on the author or the work. He carefully studies each work with the goal of revealing the dialectic between that specific work or author and the massive structure of works to which it contributes. From Said's perspective, liberation from the orientalist gaze requires the study of the entire complex body of knowledge and power. Said believes Orientalism has encompassed many minority groups: Armenians, Jews, etc. Thus, it can be said that Said seeks to revive experience: the experiences of Easterners, Muslims, Jews, Arabs, Armenians, and Turks—experiences that orientalist studies have ignored or denied. This point served as a motivation and a sign for thinking more concretely about the orientalist gaze on a group (the Turks) whom Edward Said merely mentioned by name.

The experience of living with the mentioned national and ethnic identities is undoubtedly different from the representations shaped and presented by Orientalists.

The Christian activist and many others—those who themselves have been victims of the orientalist gaze but unconsciously apply that same perspective to Easterners (in this case, the Turks)—both use the same method. Despite his generalizations in the form of labeling—a method that can be seen as the very approach that once invalidated his own lived experience—the Christian activist still adheres to the stereotype already embedded in his mind and treats it as truth.

The History of Orientalism

Anyone familiar with the study of religions, sects, civilizations, and cultures knows that Westerners were not the first to examine other societies. Long before the rise of Western civilization, Greek and Eastern scholars were already researching and exploring the cultures of different peoples. Notable figures such as Al-Mas'udi (287–348 AH), Al-Ya'qubi (d. 284 AH), Ferdowsi (329–411 AH), Al-Biruni (362–440 AH), Rashid al-Din, Ibn Battuta (703–779 AH), and others carried out studies in these fields—primarily aimed at transmitting and sharing knowledge and culture. Their efforts to introduce their fellow citizens to the customs and traditions of other lands are truly admirable and commendable.



However, there are differing views on the origins of what is now commonly known as Western Orientalist research—both in general and more specifically regarding the religions of the East, particularly Islam. Some scholars trace the beginnings of Orientalism to around 1250 CE, when the Christian scholarly community in Vienna decided that leading universities and academic centers such as Paris, Oxford, and Salamanca should establish chairs dedicated to the Arabic language. This initiative is often attributed to Ramon Llull, who believed that mastering Arabic would provide a deeper understanding of Arab culture, customs, and beliefs—and thus make it easier to exert influence over them (Said, 2003: 95).

Others trace the origins of this phenomenon to an earlier period, when parts of Eastern and Southeastern Europe came under Muslim rule and the Muslim European caliphate was established in the expansive territory of Al-Andalus. This era provided Christian Europe with its first substantial exposure to Islam and Muslims. According to this view, the pioneer of Orientalism was a Spanish Jewish cleric named Petrus Alfonsi, who converted to Christianity in 1106 CE (Khakrand, 2003: 85). He was the first to translate and transmit Eastern stories into Latin and to promote Islamic sciences in Europe. Following the West's defeat in the Crusades, European interest in the study of Islamic beliefs, culture, customs, civilization, and history became more formalized. People from various social backgrounds—merchants, travelers, dervishes, ambassadors, and envoys—journeyed to the farthest reaches of the Islamic world, gathering information about “everything” and “everyone.” These efforts resulted in thousands of books, travelogues, notes, studies, and memoirs.

Still others consider *Peter the Venerable of Cluny* as the first planner of systematic Orientalist and Islamic studies. It is said that the first Latin translation of the Qur'an was completed under his supervision (Abdollahi, 1993: 64).

In any case, the term "Orientalism"—encompassing all branches of knowledge related to the study of Eastern nations of the European continent—first appeared in the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1769 CE and was later included in the *French scientific lexicon* in 1838 CE.

From the late 19th century onward, the need to academically train individuals familiar with Eastern issues and holding specialized viewpoints was accepted as a necessity. As a result, chairs were established at universities and academic institutions across Europe to train experts in Islamic and Iranian studies. These individuals were also granted formal advisory positions.

Scholars such as the Englishman A.J. Arberry (1905–1969), the Dutchman Erpenius (1584–1624), the Austrian Steinschneider (1861–1907), the Englishmen E.G. Browne (1862–1926) and Margoliouth (1858–1940), Palacios (1871–1944), the Jewish scholar Ignaz Goldziher (1850–1921), Henry Corbin (1903–1979), the Christian scholar William Montgomery Watt (b. 1909), Wilferd Madelung (b. 1930), and the German Annemarie Schimmel (b. 1922) were all graduates of prestigious universities and among the founders and key contributors to Orientalist research centers. For many years, these scholars have gathered at leading institutions such as the Leiden University Center for Oriental Studies, the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London, and numerous other centers. Utilizing the latest methodologies and modern scientific tools, as well as the advancements brought by the Industrial Revolution, they have conducted extensive research in this field (Badavi, 1996: 74–76).

Late twentieth-century developments—such as the emergence of various movements in the Islamic world, particularly in Egypt and Pakistan, events in Afghanistan, and notably the inspiring success of the Islamic Revolution in Iran—opened new horizons for Europe and sparked a growing and more serious interest in Islamic and Orientalist studies.

The Course of Orientalism

Edward Said places particular emphasis on the course of Orientalism from the 18th century onward and identifies four intellectual currents within it:

1. The expansion of Europe and its penetration into the East.
2. Historical comparison (information about the East and the Islamic world in relation to the West).
3. A romantic interest, inclination, and outlook toward the East, for which he gives examples such as *Herder* and *Mozart*.
4. The classification of human groups—such as the American man, the Asian man, the European man, and so on.



From a positional standpoint, the East and its people are treated as a “problem” to be studied—figures who, regardless, are viewed as “strangers” by the West. Content-wise, Orientalists often adopt an essentialist perspective on Eastern countries, nations, and peoples, which tends to be ethnocentric and, at times, even racist. This approach reduces the Eastern person to primarily being an Easterner—only secondarily acknowledging their shared humanity.

Forms of Orientalism and the Emergence of Colonial Ideas

Throughout history, different forms of Orientalism have existed—British, French, American, German, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, and others. These varieties of Orientalism emerged alongside Western colonial expansion. Over time, the French and British forms that dominated the nineteenth century gradually gave way to American Orientalism, representing a new and evolving form of colonial influence.

The foundation of Orientalism is based on separating, distinguishing, and discriminating between East and West, with the goal of asserting the superiority and dominance of the West over the East—in other words, the colonization of the East by the West.

Many texts written by Orientalists provided a favorable context for Western aggression toward the East. For example, Edward Said notes that the travelogue of *Count Volney* essentially served as a manual for conquerors and colonialists.

After the collapse of the socialist system in the East, centered around the Soviet Union, Western powers felt the need for a rival—or even, in their own view, an enemy—to assert their presence and superiority. Following the fall of socialism, their finger pointed toward the Islamic world. The effect of Orientalist scholarship has been to portray Eastern and Islamic societies as stagnant and to distort them in contrast to the West.

Western mass media became one of the tools and instruments used by Westerners to amplify this stagnation and intensify distorted images of the East and the Islamic world. The presence of oil and other vital resources in the Third World, especially in the East and Islamic countries, played a major role in this dynamic.

What ultimately challenged and transformed the course of Orientalism were the liberation movements and large-scale revolutions in the East and across the Islamic world—struggles that fundamentally rejected Western domination and hegemony over the East.

In his book *Orientalism*, Edward Said describes the interaction between the West and the East—particularly the Arabs—as a one-sided relationship. The United States (as a symbol of the West) imports only a very limited number of products from the East—mainly oil and cheap labor—while Arabs (in the East) are consumers of a vast range of American goods, both material and ideological. Said believes this has led to a massive homogenization of tastes, symbolized not only by jeans and Coca-Cola (and now fast food products like McDonald's), but also by the cultural images of the East disseminated through American mass media, which audiences consume uncritically. As a result, Arabs are seen the same way they are portrayed in *Arab-Hollywood*.

Drawing on the ideas of Michel Foucault, Edward Said sees the discourse of Orientalism as a Western style of creating dominance, restructuring, and exerting authority and power over the East. He argues that the relationship between East and West is one of power, domination, and various degrees of complex superiority.

Without analyzing Orientalism as a discourse, one cannot understand the systematic structures through which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the East politically, sociologically, militarily, and beyond. Orientalism stands as a significant symbol of the exercise of Euro-Atlantic power over the East.

Orientalism encompasses three overlapping domains:

1. The four-thousand-year history of cultural relations between Europe and Asia
2. A scholarly discipline that, since the early 19th century, has produced experts in Eastern languages and cultures
3. A set of general concepts, stereotypes, and ideologies related to the East

Edward Said argues that these divisions are inescapable. Even when we acknowledge the Orientalist distinctions between “them” (the West) and “us,” a powerful network of political and ideological forces continues to shape modern knowledge. No one can completely free themselves from the East/West, North/South, or poor/rich dichotomies. Furthermore, we cannot simply ignore these divisions or deny their existence.

Periods of Orientalism



A researcher of the history of Orientalism clearly realizes that the first steps of this study must begin with the Church and understands that the first generation of Orientalists emerged from among monks and priests. Orientalism has several historical and chronological periods, which can be divided as follows:

- **First Period:**
This began after the Muslim conquest of Andalusia, the flourishing of scientific life there, and the conquest of the Mediterranean islands and southern Italy. This period of Orientalism ended with the conclusion of the Crusades.
- **Second Period:**
This started after the Crusades and continued approximately until the mid-18th century.
- **Third Period:**
It began around the mid-18th century and lasted until the end of World War II.
- **Fourth Period:**
It began after World War II and continues to the present day.

The Early Steps of Orientalist Thought (First Period)

After the Muslim conquest of Al-Andalus and the Mediterranean islands, Europe turned its attention toward the East and became acquainted with the culture and sciences of the Muslims, which represented the highest model of progress and civilization. European centers and capitals underwent transformation by acquiring Muslim knowledge and culture and by uncovering the secrets behind their power and advancement. The methods Europe employed to achieve this transformation included: the migration of European youth to Islamic cultural centers—particularly to Al-Andalus—to acquire knowledge; sending official educational delegations to these centers; establishing friendly relations between certain Muslim rulers, such as the correspondence between Harun al-Rashid, the Abbasid Caliph, and Charlemagne, the Emperor of France; founding schools in Europe modeled after those in Islamic lands; employing Muslim scholars and teachers alongside European instructors who had completed their studies in Islamic territories; and finally, translating the Islamic scientific heritage into Latin, which was the scholarly language of Europe at the time.

The **translation movement** began in the 9th century CE and ended after the fall of **Toledo** in 1085 CE. The Archbishop of Toledo established a translation society, and some Muslims who had learned Latin worked there. This society translated the entire Islamic scientific heritage—from philosophy and literature to cosmology—into Latin. At that time, **Sicily** was among the most important centers of the translation movement, significantly influencing Europe. Muslims ruled Sicily for more than two and a half centuries (212–484 AH) and spread a brilliant civilization throughout the land, playing a decisive and transformative role in the European scientific renaissance and intellectual development.

Thus, Europe learned the language of the Muslims and translated their knowledge into its own language. Schools were established in the style of Islamic schools, and the scientific teaching methods used in Muslim schools were adopted. Islam, which spread rapidly across a vast area of the world, became a long-term challenge for Europe. For this reason, tensions arose in various arenas against Islam. The Church reacted by sending priests to Islamic lands and establishing some schools to teach the Arabic language. The activities and sermons of these priests in Islamic territories represent the **initial steps of Orientalist thought**.

The views of the first generation of Orientalists toward Islamic beliefs were highly problematic. Therefore, it can be said that Orientalist thought **emerged under the shadow of Church politics**.

Orientalist Thought After the Crusades (Second Period)

The end of the Crusades marked the beginning of a new phase in Orientalist thought, which lasted until approximately the mid-18th century. The characteristics of this period are as follows:

1. **The West Recognized the Superiority of the East**
During the Crusades, the West realized that the East was superior in terms of thought, civilization, and economy. It also understood that it needed to follow the path the Easterners had taken.
2. **Increased Focus on the Arabic Language and Islamic Civilization**



Arabic received heightened attention and was granted its own academic chair. Additionally, the establishment of educational institutions, scientific centers, and universities dedicated to studying Islamic civilization increased.

3. **Transfer of Islamic Heritage to Europe**

During this period, the transfer of Islamic heritage to Europe intensified. Those involved competed to acquire as many Islamic books and resources as possible and bring them to Europe. It is certain that the Islamic heritage transferred to Europe played a significant role in inspiring the Renaissance (the European scientific revival) and Europe's emergence from the dark, anti-scientific Middle Ages.

4. **Widespread Conflict with Islam**

Some Orientalists traveled to Islamic lands to collect manuscripts and promote Christianity. Thus, Orientalism was both a scholarly pursuit and a form of Christian missionary activity, with some spending many years in Muslim lands for this purpose.

Petrus Alfonsi (d. 1156 CE) was the first zealous Christian monk who advocated armed and intellectual struggle against Muslims. Among his efforts to promote Christianity among Muslims was organizing a group of translators to study Islam and translate certain specific books. However, these translated books were mostly authored by Jewish converts to Christianity or Arab Christians, and thus were far removed from authentic Islam; they were closer to myths and superstitions than to a scholarly or scientific body of work. Although this missionary effort ultimately failed in its goal, it laid the groundwork for extensive study and research on Islam and the Quran's language, leading to the translation of many Islamic books into Latin and later other European languages. It also resulted in the translation of the Bible into Arabic.

5. **Translation of the Holy Quran**

In this phase of Orientalism, the Quran was translated into several European languages. The first translation was done at the Monastery of Cluny under the supervision of Petrus Alfonsi. This translation lacked the spirit, meaning, and intent of the Quran. It remained in manuscript form for four centuries before being printed in Basel and widely distributed in January 1543 CE. This printing marked the beginning of the widespread translation of the Quran into European languages, with the Quran eventually being fully translated into 21 European languages. In the 16th century, some Europeans dared to publish the Quran alongside the original Arabic text, which angered and distressed the Pope.

6. **Orientalist Thought from the Crusades until the End of World War II (Third Period)**

The third period of Orientalist thought, which roughly began in the mid-eighteenth century and lasted until the end of World War II, is considered one of the most ideologically driven phases of Orientalism. The defining features of this period include: the emergence of the term "Orientalism"; the organization of meetings and conferences on Oriental studies; the establishment of Orientalist societies; the publication of Orientalist journals; the involvement of world governments in the field of Orientalism; the founding of Orientalist centers and institutes; the continued transfer of Islamic heritage to Europe; the education of Muslim students by Orientalists; and a focus on research and study of Islamic heritage—particularly the Qur'an and its exegesis. A common belief among the majority of Orientalists during this period was the view of Islam as a human, rather than divine, religion; the rejection of the prophethood of Muhammad (peace be upon him); the portrayal of Islam as opposed to civilization; and the depiction of Islam as a threat to Christianity. However, there were some who did not adopt a hostile or anti-Islamic stance, instead approaching Islam with strict scholarly integrity, benefiting from its teachings, and in some cases even converting to Islam.

Orientalist Thought After World War II (Fourth Period)

In summary, this period of Orientalist thought is characterized by significant shifts and transformations in the views of Orientalists concerning many Islamic and Quranic matters. Although some Islamic scholars continue to regard Orientalists with suspicion and distrust—and some even view this methodological change as merely political or superficial—the recognition of the Quran as a revealed text, revised perspectives on the compilation of hadiths, the issue of the Quran's collection, and other related subjects collectively reflect positive progress toward a more balanced approach. Naturally, biased Orientalists remain distinguishable from the rest. (Desouki, 1997)



Origins and Consequences of the Orientalism Movement

Although obtaining an accurate understanding of the origins of Orientalism and commenting on the nature and consequences of this phenomenon requires a more comprehensive and serious investigation, it can be generally stated that alongside constructive goals, the main driving force behind these studies has been colonial ambitions. (Desouki, 1997: 107)

It is undeniable that part of these studies have been based on understanding the East as a distinct cultural geography, a unique literary and artistic corpus, and societies with special and different characteristics; carried out through scientific methods and aimed at enlightening human historical knowledge. Considering all humans as descendants of a single ancestor, the innate human need for mutual understanding, the natural curiosity about humanity, and the upward trajectory of human societies can be regarded as the origin of this belief.

For this segment of research and scholars who have conducted Orientalist studies with such goals, several examples can be cited. These intellectuals, with fairness and scientific methodology and relying on primary and credible sources and documents about Islam, Muslims, and the cultures, customs, and traditions of the East, have engaged in research. Some of them have even come to recognize the truth of Islam and embraced it.

Leopold Weiss, an Austrian Orientalist, through his studies came to believe in the truth of Islam, converted to Islam, and adopted the name *Muhammad Asad*. He exposed many distortions by Orientalists and church officials.

Henry Corbin, a believer in the East who also converted to Islam, fulfilled his heartfelt passion by learning Arabic and Persian and deeply benefiting from the works of Muslim thinkers. He is another seeker of truth in this field.

Professor Wilferd Madelung is another scholar in the field of Islamic studies, especially on Islamic sects, Shia Islam, and the theological and religious movements of early Islam. Madelung's latest work, the result of over three decades of research, has been translated into Persian under the title *The Succession to Muhammad (PBUH)*. Although some points in this book differ from the analyses of the Imami Shi'a regarding the early history of Islam, the author's analytical approach to the issue of succession—relying on many of the most authentic sources of Islamic history and Shia references, and grounded in the Quranic verses—is a unique feature of this type of research and indicates the scientific and fair-minded spirit of the author.

Alongside this group of researchers, figures like **William Montgomery Watt** can be mentioned, who belong to a second category with a more moderate tone. As Professor Seyyed Jafar Shahidi notes, the bitterness and animosity present in the works of some of Watt's contemporaries is much less evident in his writings.

An important point not to be forgotten about some of these Western scholars' slips regarding Islamic history is that most of them are Christians. The general Christian view of prophecy and the personalities of divine prophets differs significantly from the belief Muslims hold through the teachings of the final prophet (PBUH). Therefore, it is unrealistic to expect scholars like Montgomery Watt to judge Islamic history and the life of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as Muslim historians do. (Montgomery Watt, 1386 [2007]: 209-219)

To clarify this point further, one can refer to the writings of some Muslim scholars from various sects, noting their mistakes and distortions in dealing with the history of Islam, Islamic sources, and the understanding of the Qur'an. These scholars were born Muslim, nurtured in the embrace of Islam, and often grew and were strengthened with its support; yet their works cannot even be compared to some writings by Christians and church authorities. Remarkably, such writings and ideas continue to increase. Furthermore, there is no shortage of differing views and conflicting accounts in some Islamic sources regarding the nature of historical events or the number of important occurrences in Islamic history—views that today are wholly rejected by Islam and sound reason. Therefore, we hold that research in Islamic history is scientific and truth-revealing only when it meets criteria such as “rational possibility,” “reliable sourcing,” “content consistency,” “compatibility with established historical facts,” and “external evidence,” and when it does not contradict the Qur'an or authentic traditions.

On the other hand, many believe that expansionist policies, racism, and ethnocentrism have overshadowed much of this research and effort, casting suspicion over them. Some have even considered Orientalism as a part of Western political strategy — a channel for the West to trample upon the cultural heritage, ethical principles, and religious values of Eastern peoples — rejecting claims of knowledge and impartiality.

The evident and hidden intertwining of academic Orientalism with political aims has reached the extent that even some Orientalists have become serious critics of it. One researcher writes:



"If an Orientalist says, 'The yogurt is white,' always keep in mind that either the yogurt is not white at all, or proving the yogurt's whiteness is just a pretext to deny the blackness of coal." (Nicholson, 1378 [1999]: 20)

Ann Marie Schimmel describes the quality of Orientalism's relationship and especially the Church's attitude toward Islam:

"Of all the religions Christianity has encountered, Islam has been the most misunderstood and consequently most severely attacked. The image that medieval narrators have of Islam and its Prophet Muhammad is truly distorted and falsified. This distortion sometimes reached such extremes that Muhammad — usually spelled and pronounced as Mahomet in the West — was regarded as a kind of supreme deity, and there were claims about the worship and veneration of golden statues of him." (Schimmel, 1382 [2003]: 11-18) The comparison of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) to a "golden idol" or a "golden statue," which was common in early 19th-century German Romantic poetry, represents an extreme misunderstanding of a religion that strictly forbids even the smallest signs of idolatry and where the Prophet himself is regarded as no more than an ordinary human and servant of God. Between 1143 and 1616 AD, a few scholars emerged who, without missionary motives, gradually developed an interest in the Quran and Arabic language. But in the 16th and 17th centuries, despite increasing familiarity with Arabic and Islamic history, a number of works deliberately anti-Islamic were composed. To illustrate the mindset of enlightened thinkers of this period, Schimmel quotes **Hermann Samuel Reimarus** (1694–1768), who wrote:

I am convinced that among those who accuse Islam of deficiencies, only a few have actually read the Quran, and among those who have read it, even fewer have tried to interpret its words and phrases correctly and properly.

The colonial interests of both France and England during the 19th century led to the production of a significant volume of literary works and writings about the customs and behaviors of Muslims.

In the 19th century, a scientific and investigative approach to Islam began. In 1842, **Gustave Weil** attempted to describe the life of Muhammad (PBUH) by separating what appeared to be historical events from the myths and stories later created by his devoted followers. In the following decades, **William Muir**, **Alois Sprenger (Austrian)**, and **D.F. Margoliouth** tended to portray Muhammad negatively, depicting him as emotional, excitable, or ill, or at best, merely a social reformer.

Karl Heinrich Becker once wrote: "We know much to fictionalize Muhammad, but little to treat him fairly." (Schimmel, 1382 [2003]: 11-18)

One Orientalist who conducted extensive research on Islamic history and was heavily criticized even by non-Muslims is **Henri Lammens**. The fair-minded Christian scholar **George Jordac** expressed regret over the bias of this Belgian priest and considered such works to be contrary to scientific spirit and methodology. (Jordac, pp. 238-248)

The Cambridge History of Islam is one of the recent works by Orientalists on the history of Islam, presented as a new approach aimed at expanding understanding and perception of Islam. Edward Said—a well-known Palestinian Christian scholar residing in the United States—writes about this work:

"...Not only does *The Cambridge History of Islam* deeply misunderstand and misrepresent Islam as a religion, but it also lacks any coherent idea of history itself... In the hundreds of pages that make up the first volume of this history, the meaning derived from Islam is expressed as a series of endless wars, reigns, deaths, rises and falls, comings and goings—most of which are written with a terrifying monotony." (Said, 2003: 538-539)

Areas of Betrayal by Orientalism and Colonial Powers

A summary of how Orientalism, driven by colonial motives, has betrayed the historical reality of Islam, including:

1. Extensive efforts by Jewish and Christian agents to frame Islam as merely a derivative of previous religions, ignoring that similarities among Abrahamic faiths arise naturally from monotheism.
2. Active denial of Shi'a theological and jurisprudential foundations, falsely attributing Shi'ism to Zoroastrian or Iranian emotional origins, and denying its Arab roots and early existence post-Prophet Muhammad's death.
3. Encouraging pure otherworldliness and excessive focus on Sufism, thereby emptying Islam of its social and political roles.



4. Biased propaganda portraying Islam and Muslims — especially Prophet Muhammad — as bloodthirsty, violent, and cruel.
5. Accusing the Prophet of idolatry and of absorbing Islamic concepts from Jews and Christians.
6. Sowing distrust among Islamic sects by exploiting ethnic, religious, linguistic, and regional differences.
7. Strengthening nationalist and separatist sentiments such as Pan-Turkism and Pan-Arabism, which contributed to the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire.
8. Misrepresenting Islamic social reformers and scholars, opening the door to insults and disrespect.
9. Promoting slogans of freedom and non-interference, undermining social pillars like *Amr bil Ma'ruf* (commanding good), *Nahy anil Munkar* (forbidding evil), and jihad.
10. Reducing Hajj to a purely Arab pagan ritual accepted by Muhammad for economic convenience.
11. Vilifying the hijab and diminishing the role of Muslim women, thus destabilizing the strong Islamic family system.
12. Distorting the Prophet's Mi'raj (Ascension).
13. Distorting Shi'a Quranic interpretations.
14. Misrepresenting Islam's view on human nature, thought, and numerous other issues, all seen as colonial motivations or consequences of Orientalism. (Amini, 1996 [1375]: 323-330)

Thus, the claim that Orientalism reflects the West's boundless enthusiasm to understand the East and its mysteries is strongly questioned and denied. Here, as scientific evidence, we limit ourselves to citing some statements and writings of prominent figures in this phenomenon, highlighting what is regarded as their acts of betrayal.

Ignaz Goldziher writes:

“The development of Islam carries a certain Hellenistic influence, and the emergence of its legal doctrines during the Abbasid caliphate reflects Roman law and politics, while also showing the impact of Persian ideas and philosophies. The mysticism of that era is nothing more than Indian philosophy and Neoplatonism... Muhammad, its founder, introduced neither new ideas nor fresh insights about the relationship between humans and the transcendent. The message of this Arabian prophet is merely a compilation of religious information and beliefs that he acquired or encountered through interactions with Jewish, Christian, and other figures, deeply influenced by them. These ideas left such a profound impression on him that he regarded his inner inspirations as divine revelation.” (Shokuri, 2001: 5–7)

In his book, Brockelmann, while attributing idolatry to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), writes:

The narratives indicate that during his travels, Muhammad established relations with some Jews and Christians. Gradually, the One God (Allah) replaced other deities in his heart; however, it appears that in the early years of his prophethood, he accepted three idols that were placed in the Kaaba, which his compatriots called the daughters of God and which are referred to as the *gharāniq* in one of the verses. (Baalbaki, 2005)

Petrushevsky, the renowned Russian author, in his book *Islam in Iran*, after discussing the Twelve Imams of Shi'ism, writes quoting D. B. MacDonald:

“This tradition—the succession of the twelve Imams—was certainly established only in the fifth century AH, and the Imami Shi'a were also called *Ithnā'ashariyyah* (the followers of the twelve Imams).” (Petrushevsky, 1996: 274)

While the author himself counts the succession of the twelve Imams up to the first half of the third century AH in earlier pages of his book, his claim that the succession of the twelve Imams was established in the fifth century AH is itself surprising.

Conclusion

This study examined the development of Orientalist thought, highlighting the diverse perspectives surrounding the concept of Orientalism. It demonstrated that the definitions offered for this discourse lack consensus across various dimensions. Central to the analysis was the figure of the "Eastern human being," which served as the focal point for Orientalists and framed the broader distinction between the East and the West. The term "Orientalism" was shown to encompass all fields of knowledge related to the study of the languages, history, religions, sciences, customs, and technologies of Eastern peoples.



The study then explored Edward Said's definition of Orientalism, emphasizing his view of it as an institutionalized discourse deeply intertwined with the East. This discourse, Said argues, is dependent on the East insofar as it engages with, legitimizes, describes, explains, teaches, organizes, and judges it. Fundamentally, Orientalism functions as a Western method of dominating, reshaping, and exerting control over the East.

Overall, Said's concept of Orientalism reveals the potential for resistance—a form of resistance distinct from direct confrontation and possible only within discursive frameworks. His critical reading of Orientalist texts, developed over centuries, uncovers the hidden layers of power embedded within these discourses. The lesson for both Orientalists and those affected by Orientalism—namely, Eastern peoples—must be one of restraint and rejection of retaliation. Said himself warns against Easterners adopting Occidentalist attitudes that replicate Orientalist practices. Drawing on Michel Foucault's theories, Said characterizes Orientalism as a Western discourse of dominance, restructuring, and authority over the East. He argues that the relationship between East and West is fundamentally one of power, domination, and complex hierarchies of superiority.

Ultimately, this study demonstrates that Orientalists have maintained a colonialist and biased perspective toward Eastern nations, peoples, and cultures. This perspective often manifests ethnocentrically and, in some cases, verges on racism. The findings reveal how Orientalists, through a colonial and despotic gaze, have sought to undermine the language, culture, religion, and history of Eastern peoples, frequently engaging in practices tantamount to ethnic, linguistic, and cultural erasure.

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