

Contemporary Manifestations of Orientalist Thought in Media Discourse

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Abstract: This article explores the persistence and transformation of Orientalist thought within contemporary media discourse. While Edward Said’s seminal work *Orientalism* (1978) exposed the historical construction of the “Orient” as a site of exoticism, backwardness, and danger, current global media—ranging from news coverage to Hollywood productions and digital platforms—continue to reproduce these stereotypes in more sophisticated forms. By analyzing media narratives on Islam, the Middle East, and non-Western societies, the article demonstrates how Orientalist discourse adapts to postcolonial and neoliberal contexts, reinforcing asymmetrical power relations and legitimizing geopolitical agendas.

Keywords: Media discourse, Orientalism, postcolonialism, neo-Orientalism, global information flows, stereotype, ideological influence.

Introduction: Orientalism, as conceptualized by Edward Said, represents not merely a body of academic knowledge about the East but a discourse of power, producing the Orient as Europe’s cultural and political “Other”. In the twenty-first century, despite globalization and the rise of multiculturalism, Orientalist tropes have not disappeared; instead, they have been rearticulated within new media environments. Contemporary media discourse remains one of the most powerful instruments for shaping public opinion about non-Western societies. Through mechanisms of representation, selective framing, and agenda-setting, media continues to define the “self” of the West in opposition to the constructed “otherness” of the East. The twenty-first century is characterized by the processes of globalization, the accelerated circulation of information, and the powerful influence of rapidly expanding digital platforms. These features of the age exert a profound impact on all spheres of life, and in particular, on the political dialogue between Eastern and Western cultures.

METHOD

In the historical development of relations between East and West, the phenomenon of Orientalism has occupied a decisive place. Although in the present era

it has undergone distinctive transformational changes, the orientalist mode of thought—explained by Edward Said primarily in his works “*Orientalism*” and “*Culture and Imperialism*” as the decisive framework through which the West has constructed its understanding of the East—continues to persist in contemporary times in dialogue with the latest tendencies. This is because traditional orientalist discourse, which depicts the East as “exotic”, “backward”, or a “source of threat”, still survives in modernized forms within various discursive fields, particularly within the media sphere. Such representations remain a key factor in shaping the culture of communication between East and West, as well as influencing social consciousness and political outlooks.

Although Orientalism initially emerged in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as a scholarly endeavour aimed at studying the East in scientific, cultural, and political terms, it later became integrated with imperial objectives and transformed into one of the principal intellectual instruments of imperialism. More precisely, in Edward Said’s formulation, Orientalism evolved into a system of knowledge that legitimized Western control and domination over the East. While Said conceptually demonstrated how

Orientalism, as the main field through which the West sought to understand the East, ideologically served the cause of Eurocentrism, it remains evident today that the traditional patterns and clichés of Orientalism continue to operate within modern technologies. In particular, contemporary media discourse offers ample evidence of these traditional stereotypes reappearing in modernized forms, thus constituting a pervasive reality of our time.

In the twenty-first century, characterized by globalization, the rapid flow of information, and the widespread use of new communication technologies, cultural and political relations between East and West are vividly manifested within the media sphere. Yet, in this process, the traditional orientalist mode of thought—once expressed in literature and cinema by portraying the East through Western eyes as ‘different,’ ‘exotic,’ or ‘dangerous’—continues to persist in various forms across contemporary media. As Edward Said emphasized, “Orientalism is a system of knowledge that ideologically legitimizes the West’s control and domination over the East”. Today, this very approach endures within media discourse, taking shape through modernized stereotypes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In contemporary times, one of the most powerful instruments of Orientalism—the Western mode of understanding and explaining the East—is, without doubt, the mass media. “The media serves as a primary tool in maintaining Western superiority and promoting imitation of it.” In particular, Disney, one of the world’s largest and most global media companies based in the United States, holds significant influence not only within the American media industry and popular culture but also on a global scale. For example, in media representations of the Islamic East within the framework of “Islamophobia”, terms such as “Islamic terrorism” are frequently used, whereas expressions like “Jewish terrorism” or “Christian terrorism” are hardly ever encountered.

Because for the powers, major corporations, or states that hold control over the mass media, principles such as impartiality and objectivity are not the primary goal; rather, their aim is guidance and propaganda. As a result, the views and critiques of scholars such as Leonard, O’Leary, and Maalouf—who have pointed out the double standards present in the media—often fail to reach the wider public.

The author of the book “The Three Actors of Global Strategy: Hollywood, Pentagon, and Washington”, actor Jean Michel Valantin, interprets Hollywood’s activity as an “industry” and emphasizes its collaboration with the Pentagon. According to Valantin,

“Hollywood is the only major institution that, while being an industry, also embodies cultural identity, and is capable of mobilizing the necessary resources to produce large-scale national security films in every genre — from war movies to romantic dramas”.

According to the author, Hollywood produces series in order to justify and legitimize the theses that “America is a chosen, elite nation” and that it is “waging a just war to save the world.” However, to avoid drawing attention to the fact that only such films are being made, productions on other topics are also created. Disney, Netflix, and many series and films from Hollywood — all of them, in fact, are postcolonial manifestations based on orientalist doctrine.

Edward Saidning “Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World” (“Islomni yoritish: OAV va mutaxassislar bizning dunyoni ko’rishimizni qanday belgilaydi”) asari G’arb mediyasi va ilmiy ekspertlar orqali musulmon dunyosi qanday tasvirlanishini chuqur tahlil qiladi. Saidning ta’kidlashicha, G’arb ommaviy axborot vositalari Islomni asosan siyosiy zo’ravonlik, fundamentalizm va terrorizm bilan bog’lab, uni yagona “xavf manbai” sifatida ko’rsatadi. Natijada, Sharq jamiyatlarining ijtimoiy-madaniy xilma-xilligi va ularning real hayoti soxta, stereotipik obrazlar ortida yashirib qo’yiladi.

Another important point in the book is that journalists and “experts” writing about Islam are usually not from the Muslim world, but rather from Western academic and political circles. Their portrayals are accepted as “expert opinion” and are transmitted to the public as truth. As a result, the perspectives of Muslims themselves are marginalized, and their voices remain unheard.

According to Said, this situation represents the modern continuation of “Orientalism.” Just as Western scholars in the nineteenth century and earlier portrayed the East as an “exotic, irrational, and dangerous” space, today’s media reproduces and disseminates these very perceptions in renewed forms on a global scale. For instance, the widespread use of the label “Muslim terrorist,” while terms such as “Christian terrorist” or “Jewish terrorist” are almost never used, is one of the clearest examples of this process.

Overall, Said’s *Covering Islam* exposes how Western media politicizes reports and representations of the Islamic world, merges them with stereotypes and notions of threat, and consequently shapes public opinion in a one-sided manner. Studying this approach serves as an important theoretical foundation for understanding the intrinsic connection between media and Orientalism.

Especially after the events of September 11, 2001,

Islam and Muslims began to be frequently portrayed in Western media in connection with the concepts of “terrorism”, “radicalism”, and “danger” . As a result, a reductionist and generalized image such as “Muslim = terrorist” was implanted into the public consciousness. This stereotype appears not only in news coverage but also frequently in feature films, television series, and documentary productions.

“In tourism advertisements, cinema, and products of pop culture, the East is often presented as a ‘mysterious,’ ‘exotic,’ or ‘fantastical’ space. Such an approach obscures the real socio-political problems of Eastern societies and reduces them to a decorative image” . For instance, motifs from *One Thousand and One Nights* or depictions of ‘Oriental bazaars’ are still widely employed in advertising and media products.”

In the coverage of Middle Eastern conflicts (such as the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, or the Palestinian–Israeli conflict), Western mass media often frame the discussion in terms of ‘authoritarian regimes’ and ‘fundamentalism,’ while the perspectives, historical experiences, and social demands of Eastern peoples are relegated to the background. In particular, within this framework, it is frequently observed that Western media representations of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict tend to prioritize the Israeli position.

Within media discourse, gender issues frequently become a central theme when discussing the problems of the East. Women of the East are often portrayed across various sectors of mass media as victims of “Oriental despotism”, typically depicted as being “oppressed”, “deprived of freedom”, or as members of “closed societies” . “While such stereotypes may draw upon certain realities, they largely fail to capture the active social roles of women in Eastern societies, including their participation in education and political life” . Consequently, Eastern societies as a whole tend to be represented as spaces of ‘patriarchal oppression.

The rise of digital platforms and social media has not eradicated Orientalist representations; rather, it has amplified them. Online news outlets, blogs, and viral videos often rely on sensationalist depictions of “Islamic extremism” or “Middle Eastern backwardness” to attract audiences.⁷ Moreover, algorithm-driven platforms tend to privilege content that reinforces pre-existing biases, thereby circulating Orientalist tropes more widely.

On platforms such as “Twitter (X), Instagram, and YouTube, memes, cartoons, and short videos that spread rapidly often depict the East either as a “source of danger” or as an “exotic space” . At the same time, however, new media also provides Eastern societies with the opportunity to articulate their own positions.

For instance, channels such as Al Jazeera and TRT World, as well as Muslim journalists and bloggers, offer alternative narratives that challenge the stereotypes promoted by Western mass media.

Nevertheless, traditional orientalist thought continues to persist within media discourse in modernized forms. On the one hand, it portrays the East as a source of danger and threat, while on the other, it represents it through exotic and spectacular images. In this process, social media has become a vehicle for the rapid dissemination of orientalist stereotypes, yet at the same time it provides Eastern societies with an opportunity to make their voices heard. Thus, it may be concluded that in the media sphere of the twenty-first century, orientalist thought does not appear in a one-dimensional form, but rather emerges at the intersection of competing and contradictory discourses.

Despite the dominance of Orientalist discourse, there have been growing counter-narratives that challenge these stereotypes. Independent media outlets, scholarly critiques, and creative works from within the Global South have increasingly emphasized diversity, complexity, and hybridity in portraying Eastern societies. “Stuart Hall’s theory of representation highlights how meaning is socially constructed and therefore open to contestation” . “Critical discourse analysis, as developed by Norman Fairclough, provides a methodological framework for unpacking the ideological underpinnings of media texts”. Films, literature, and online campaigns from Muslim creators that emphasize alternative identities play a crucial role in destabilizing Orientalist representations.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the persistence of orientalist thought in contemporary media discourse demonstrates that the legacies of colonial power relations continue to shape global narratives. While the forms of representation have shifted with the rise of digital platforms and new modes of communication, the underlying stereotypes — depicting the East as exotic, backward, or threatening — remain remarkably resilient. Such portrayals not only distort cultural realities but also reinforce asymmetrical relations between the West and the East, sustaining a symbolic hierarchy rooted in imperial history. Recognizing and critically engaging with these patterns is therefore essential for fostering a more equitable media landscape, one that values plurality, diversity, and genuine intercultural dialogue.

Contemporary media discourse demonstrates that Orientalism has not disappeared but rather transformed into subtler, more insidious forms. Whether in news reporting, Hollywood productions, or

digital platforms, Orientalist narratives continue to depict the East as dangerous, irrational, or exotic. These representations sustain geopolitical hierarchies by legitimizing Western dominance and shaping public perceptions of the Muslim world. At the same time, emergent counter-narratives remind us that media discourse is not monolithic; it is a contested space where alternative representations can resist and reframe the logic of Orientalism.

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