



Revisiting Orientalism. Responses to the Saidian Thesis in the Indian Academy

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Résumé | Abstract

FR Cet article est une tentative de cartographier globalement les réponses à la thèse saïdienne dans le monde universitaire indien, non seulement dans les termes d’un engagement substantiel avec *Orientalism*, mais en s’interrogeant aussi sur ce que ce travail a signifié dans un terrain non-occidental. Célébré, d’une part, comme un «événement canonique» qui a, d’un coup, libéré notre pédagogie, cet ouvrage a d’autre part été soumis à une critique rigoureuse, incisive, et parfois rancunière de la part des académiciens indiens. Par conséquent, le plus grand impact d’*Orientalism* demeure dans sa contribution à lancer des questions souvent au-delà de son champ d’application (l’orientalisme tout court) et ouvrant aux problèmes plus vastes de la représentation, de la subalternité, de l’instabilité radicale du discours, de l’aporie des résistances, et de la nature de notre postcolonialité et de sa relation ambivalente à l’Ouest.

Mots-clés Saïd, Spivak, études postcoloniales, Inde, orientalisme.

EN This paper is an attempt to broadly map responses to the Saidian thesis in the Indian academy. As such it is not so much a substantive engagement with *Orientalism* as with what it has come to mean on a specific non-Western academic terrain. Celebrated, on the one hand, as a ‘canonical event’ that liberated our pedagogy in one stroke, it has, on the other, been subjected to rigorous, incisive, and sometimes rancorous critique by Indian scholars. *Orientalism*’s greatest impact has really been that it has, for us here, meant more than itself. By becoming the occasion for intense debate it helped initiate questions often beyond its own scope – in short it opened the door to an entire terrain upon which we have worked through ideas not just of Orientalism, but also related/tangential questions of representation, subalternity, the radical instability of discourses, the aporia of resistances, and the fraught nature of our postcoloniality and its ambivalent relationship to the West.

Keywords Said, Spivak, postcolonial studies, India, Orientalism.

SHOBA VENKATESH GHOSH

Revisiting *Orientalism*
Responses to the Saidian Thesis in the Indian Academy¹

...Orientalism functioned for us as a theory of reading which transformed our classroom practice by alerting us to the workings of the colonized consciousness and to our interpellation as the colonized reader.

Zakia Pathak²

I will long remember the day I read Orientalism...For me, the child of a successful anti-colonial struggle, Orientalism was a book that talked of things I felt I had known all along but had never found the language to formulate with clarity...

Partha Chatterjee³

Said quite justifiably accuses the « Orientalist » of essentializing the Orient, but his own essentializing of 'the West' is equally remarkable. In the process, Said of course gives us that same « Europe » – unified, self-identical, transhistorical, textual – which is always rehearsed for us in the sort of literary criticism which traces its own pedigree from Aristotle to T. S. Eliot...

Aijaz Ahmad⁴

If Orientalism is a limited text, then it is so primarily because it fails to accommodate the possibility of difference within Oriental discourse. Sometimes in his obdurate determination that Orientalism silenced opposition, Said, ironically, silences opposition...

Leela Gandhi⁵

In many ways, one fears, Said's rhetoric and sweep itself has brought into discredit the rigour and precision of older scholarship and so opened the doors to new forms of neo-colonial influences. Such scholars might indeed put themselves forward as critics of « Eurocentrism », of « Orientalist appropriations », and of 'colonial discourse', but this rhetoric is often found to be of little relevance when the actual substance of their work is considered.

Irfan Habib⁶

¹ A version of this paper was first presented at a seminar on *European Visions of the Orient* at the University of Bologna, May 2012.

² Z. Pathak, S. Sengupta et S. Puryakayastha, « The prisonhouse of Orientalism », dans *Textual Practice* Vol 5, n° 2, Summer 1991, p. 198.

³ Chatterjee, P., « Their Own Words? An Essay for Edward Said », dans Michael Sprinkler (éd) *Edward Said: A Critical Reader*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1992, p. 194.

⁴ A. Ahmad, « Orientalism and After: Ambivalence and Cosmopolitan Location in the Work of Edward Said », dans *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 27, n° 30, July 1992. Reproduced in A. Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*, Verso, 1992, pp. 104-105.

⁵ L. Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, New Delhi, Oxford India paperbacks, 1999, p. 79.

⁶ I. Habib, « Critical Notes on Edward Saïd », dans *International Socialism: A quarterly journal of revolutionary Socialism*, n° 108, October 2005. <http://www.isj.org.uk/?id=141>.

THIS PAPER BY AN INDIAN ACADEMIC for the special issue of a European journal on *Visions de L'Orient* is written with a sharp awareness that it might be one of the few papers – or even the only paper – emanating from the other side of the Occident/Orient divide, not just in terms of intellectual orientation but also with regards to actual location. During a brief tenure at the University of Bologna in 2012 when I participated in a series of seminars on the theme, a particularly telling insight into the aforementioned divide came to me. Whereas in Europe it is still possible to use the term « Orientalist » in a reflective sense as referring to, in Said's words, « Anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient », the appellation is far more normative, fraught and, yes, pejorative in its deployment back home in the Indian academy. The Indian historian Irfan Habib may be slightly overstating the case when (rehearsing Albert Hourani's observation) he claims that « after Said's *Orientalism*, the very word Orientalism has »become a term of abuse »⁷ ». In sum, however, he rightly recognises the decisive re-articulation the term has undergone in the academic landscape of a postcolonial nation whose very self-identity is built on an ambivalent relationship with its recent colonial past.

Indeed, the influence in the Indian academy of Edward Said's monumental *Orientalism* has been immeasurable. The book is near-mandatory reading in English departments, as well as in departments of other disciplines, and the term « Orientalism » has become part and parcel of our postcolonial arsenal. Though published in 1978, the real influence within the academy was felt in the mid- to late-1980s. For many of my generation of academics, the arrival of the book marked nothing less than a schism between our careers as students and as teachers.

Typically our training in English Studies would have been within a liberal-humanist « Great Works » tradition concentrated primarily on British literature supplemented by some European and American writings. The experience was not without its discomforts given that we studied a literature that was not simply « not one's own » but one that was of our erstwhile colonisers. Fluctuating in an aporetic sense between awe of the « universal » validity of the Great Tradition and the inchoate sense of violence we were likely to experience as the magisterial tradition interpellated us as complicit readers, we lacked the cognitive

⁷ I. Habib, « Critical Notes on Edward Saïd », *op. cit.*

paradigm or the vocabulary to give a name to our conflicted responses. Then when we entered the teaching profession in the 1980s, it was « the long awaited and messianic arrival of *Orientalism* in the alienated and alienating English Studies classroom⁸ » that equipped us to mobilise canonical British texts out of conventional critical frameworks so as to make our experience in the classroom connect in crucial ways to our lives and realities outside it. It furnished us with the critical tools to engage not only our colonial past but the more immediate and urgent questions of nationalism, tradition and modernity which have beset our postcoloniality from the start. It might be no exaggeration to say that it was with Said that our study of literature became decisively and irrevocably politicised. Zakia Pathak *et al* speak of this transformatory « epistemological intervention » in the following terms:

To deconstruct the text, to examine the process of its production, to identify the myths of imperialism structuring it, to show how the oppositions on which it rests are generated by political needs at a given moment in history, quickened the text to a life in our world⁹.

This enthusiastic, even fervent, embracing of the Saidian thesis has not been without its blind-spots. For instance, it is easy to forget that *Orientalism* is only the first in a trilogy of books, and that in much of his subsequent work Said has inflected his earlier positions. That said, it is incontrovertible that Said's thesis of *Orientalism* offered us a broad and flexible enough theoretical paradigm – and the analytical apparatus to go with it – to engage with the imbalances of representational power and its imbrications with material power structures that obtained under colonialism. And, Said became our pathway to thinkers such as Foucault and Gramsci who were perhaps already integral to other disciplines but whom we, in the English Studies classroom, might not have encountered in any depth if not for *Orientalism*. Most importantly, Said's study opened up a way for us to interrogate the terms under which the very discipline of English Studies came into being in India as well as the historicity of our insertion into it – that is, as Said puts it in another context, « to see things not simply as they are, but as they have come to be that way¹⁰ ». ¹¹ Gramsci's famed comment about the need to

⁸ L. Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, New Delhi, Oxford India paperbacks, 1998, p. 65.

⁹ Z. Pathak, S. Sengupta et S. Puryakayastha, « The prisonhouse of Orientalism », *op. cit.*, p. 195

¹⁰ E. Said, « Intellectual Exile: Expatriates and Marginals », dans *Grand Street*, n° 47, Autumn 1993, p. 122.

¹¹ Gauri Viswanathan's *Masks of Conquest* is directly influenced by Said and « sets out to demonstrate in part that the discipline in English came into its own in age of colonialism, as well

inventory historical traces, and Said's deployment of it to launch his path-breaking study bear repetition here:

In the *Prison Notebooks* Gramsci says: « The starting point in critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is...as a product of the historical process to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory ». The only available English translation inexplicably leaves Gramsci's comment at that, whereas Gramsci's Italian text concludes by adding that « therefore, it is imperative at the outset to compile such an inventory ». In many ways my study of Orientalism has been an attempt to inventory the traces upon me, the Oriental subject, of the culture whose domination has been so powerful a factor in the life of all Orientals¹².

It is perhaps evident by now that this paper is not so much a substantive engagement with *Orientalism* as with what it has come to mean on a specific non-Western academic terrain. And indeed, it has, with Protean shape-shiftingness, come to mean many things in the three decades and a half since its publication. Celebrated, on the one hand, as a « canonical event » that liberated our pedagogy in one stroke, it has, on the other, been subjected to rigorous, incisive, and sometimes rancorous critique by Indian scholars¹³. The critiques have been

as to argue that no serious account of its growth and development can afford to ignore the imperial mission of educating and civilizing colonial subjects in the literature and thought of England, a mission that in the long run served to strengthen Western cultural hegemony in enormously complex ways », dans G. Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest. Literary Study and British Rule in India*, Columbia University Press, 1989, p. 2. – Said's book has also been the starting point of critical reflection on disciplines other than English Studies. In his essay « Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World : Perspectives on Indian Historiography », Gyan Prakash argues that to set out to map how the third world writes its post-Orientalist histories is to « acknowledge that the knowledge of the third world is historical ». Viewed in this manner, Orientalist, nationalist, Marxist and other historiographies reveal themselves as discursive attempts to constitute their objects of knowledge, that is, the third world. To map post-Orientalist historiography in the Indian context, then, one must begin with Said and his definition of Orientalism (Cf. G. Prakash, « Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Perspectives from Indian Historiography », dans *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 32, n° 2, April 1990, pp. 383-388). Preym K. Po'dar and Tanka B. Subba draw upon the Saidian thesis to visibilize how Indian anthropologists are « home-grown Orientalists » in that they are caught up in the tyranny of the colonial academic tradition and re-enact Orientalist violence in their own ethnographies of indigenous marginal groups – « They are Orientals in that they have been “othered” in the discourse of the West about India; they are Orientalists in that they study and “other” their objects of study – the subordinate (in this case, Himalayan) Orientals », dans P. K. Po'dar et T. B. Subba, « Demystifying Some Ethnographic Texts on the Himalayas », dans *Social Scientist*, Vol. 19, n° 8/9, Aug.-Sep. 1991, pp. 78-79.

¹² E. Said, *Orientalism: Western Representations of the Orient*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978, p. 25.

¹³ The patchwork of quotations that prefixes my paper may give some indication of the variety of responses.

mounted from varied positions and have taken issue with the book's substantive limitations, theoretical naiveté, exclusionary engagement, flawed methodology, epistemological fuzziness, and lack of real rigour, among other things. *Orientalism's* greatest impact has really been that it has, for us here, meant more than itself. By becoming the occasion for intense debate it helped initiate questions often beyond its own scope – in short it opened the door to an entire terrain upon which we have worked through ideas not just of Orientalism, but also related/tangential questions of representation, subalternity, the radical instability of discourses, the aporia of resistances, and the fraught nature of our postcoloniality and its ambivalent relationship to the West. This paper, then, is an attempt to broadly map responses to the Saidian thesis in the Indian academy.

Published at a historical moment when decolonizing movements had almost completely dismantled the machinery of the European imperium, and when American hegemony seemed to have taken its place, *Orientalism* struck a chord with its passion, wide-ranging engagement, and controversial, even polemical, argument. Though routinely written about as the progenitor of postcolonial studies, it was not the first work to systematically subject colonialism to critical scrutiny. M. K. Gandhi, Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire (among others) had already contributed significantly to a vibrant tradition of postcolonial critique. In fact, critiques specifically about the work of the Orientalists were already underway in the non-western world¹⁴ as well as in the West¹⁵. What *Orientalism* did, rather, was to give a name to a political and intellectual orientation and help us retrospectively trace a tradition that began much before Said; indeed, a tradition that is, as Aijaz Ahmad notes, «as old virtually as colonialism itself¹⁶». *Orientalism* helped us identify a particular constellation of works, and texts like Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* and Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* entered our English Studies classrooms too.

To Said, Orientalism is «a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in the European western

¹⁴ Cf. A. Abdel-Malek, «Orientalism in Crisis», dans *Diogenes*, Vol. 11, n° 44, 1963 et A. L. Tibawi, «English-Speaking Orientalists», dans *Islamic Quarterly*, Vol. 8.1-4, 1964.

¹⁵ Cf. R. Schwab, *La Renaissance orientale*, Paris, Payot, 1950 et Kiernan, V. G. *The Lords of the Human kind: Black Man, Yellow Man, White Man in the Age of Empire* [1969], London, Penguin, 1972. – Said himself acknowledges in a later essay, «*Orientalism Reconsidered*» (1985), that what he had said in his book had already been said by Tiwabi, Abdalla Laroui, Abdel-Malek, Fanon, Romila Thapar and others.

¹⁶ A. Ahmad, «Orientalism and After: Ambivalence and Cosmopolitan Location in the Work of Edward Said», *op. cit.*, p. 102.

experience¹⁷ ». Defined variously as an « academic field », a peculiarly Occidental « style of thought », and as a « corporate institution », Orientalism is, for Said, an entire discursive terrain upon which the Orient has been « produced » in the interests of Western domination. In arguing for the fundamental textuality of empire, Said rehearses the Foucauldian thesis of the Power/Knowledge nexus and sets out to unmask the contiguity between Western knowledge and Western power. To this end he critically reads academic writing as well as writings of (primarily British and French) travellers, colonial administrators, missionaries, soldiers, poets, philosophers, economists as a body of « statements » that stabilized a particular « truth » of the Orient. However, in a departure from Foucault who subsumes the individual writer within the larger discursive formation, Said's analysis returns valence to the individual writers he selects for scrutiny. In his earlier book *Beginnings: Intention and Method* he clearly states that he finds « the determining imprint of individual authors » upon the discursive formation called Orientalism. Their personal signatures, styles, patterns and tropes contribute in specific ways to the discourse of Orientalism, and in turn acquire « mass, density, and referential power » from those who came before or after them¹⁸.

From Gramsci, of course, Said draws the idea of « hegemony » and identifies in the Orientalist exercise the hegemony-producing accompaniment to power. More crucially, the discourse of Orientalism must be seen not just as the handmaiden to Western domination but, in a symbiotic manner, an *inducement* to it, producing that which demands mastery. Orientalism, then, expresses for Said no less than a pathological drive to power that is as ancient as Ancient Greece and as contemporary as the present. The Orient is the Occident's « other ». It has been – variously and yet systematically, in a « regular constellation of ideas » – produced as timeless, outside of evolutionary history, passive, degraded, feminized, essentialized... The arguments of the book have been too thoroughly discussed to require detailed iteration here. And given the focus of my paper, I am interested in what we made of the book in our context.

While being drawn in by the argument made in the early part of the book – particularly in the chapter entitled « The Scope of Orientalism » that erects the conceptual scaffolding – we were unlikely when we first encountered the book to have a close familiarity with many of the specific authors discussed in later chapters. At a pinch, we might have

¹⁷ E. Said, *Orientalism: Western Representations of the Orient*, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

¹⁸ E. Said, « *Orientalism Reconsidered* », dans *Cultural Critique*, n° 1, Autumn 1985, p. 23.

known our Flaubert and Nerval, but de Chateaubriand and Lamartine were almost inarguably beyond the expertise of a typical Eng. Lit. scholar in India. As school children we would have been introduced to T. E. Lawrence and would have revelled in the thrilling exploits of « Lawrence of Arabia »; but the philologist Ernest Renan or the modern Orientalist Sylvestre de Sacy were certainly beyond our ken. Said's reading of these writers we could only take at face value, and that we did enthusiastically and perhaps, it must be admitted, uncritically. In the flush of political solidarity, we saw in the denouncements of the book by Western critics¹⁹ a reprise of colonialist Orientalism, and therefore a validation of Said. It would need a beat before our responses could settle to a more reasoned pitch, and then Said's text could become the site for productive and informed debate.

In the first flush of our encounter with *Orientalism*, its exciting promise seemed to be that it opened up a space within the Indian classroom to read English Literature against the grain and with more autonomy/authority than had been accorded to us before. It was not long before we began to run up against the limits of this oppositional reading project. This narrative is captured with prescience in an essay entitled « The Prisonhouse of Orientalism » (1991) and authored by Zakia Pathak, Saswati Sengupta and Sharmila Puryakayastha whose experiences as young Delhi University teachers in the undergraduate English Studies programme resonate sharply with my own in the late-1980s and early 1990s. The authors speak of how *Orientalism* released in the classroom a « taxonomical impulse » that set out to identify « white texts » that could be fit into a strategic formation testifying to the pathologically orientalisng tendencies of British texts and the entire discursive field from which they emanated. However, it was not long before « this project came to be riddled with reservations²⁰ ». It would seem that we had escaped out of one enclosure only to find ourselves in another, « the prisonhouse of Orientalism »:

Every text becomes a white text. In every text from a Donne poem to *Wuthering Heights* are clues that that yield a narrative which might become narcissistic or paranoid. In such re-readings of the English literary text which privilege Orientalist discourse as an interpretative grid, the whole of English Literature may be reduced to a ground on

¹⁹ Cf. L. Weiseltier, Review of *Orientalism*, dans *The New Republic*, Vol. 180, n° 14, April 1979 ; B. Lewis, « The Question of Orientalism », dans *New York Review of Books*, 24 June 1982.

²⁰ Z. Pathak, S. Sengupta et S. Puryakayastha, « The prisonhouse of Orientalism », *op. cit.*, p. 195-196.

which racial identities are contested. We remain trapped in the prisonhouse²¹.

And that first promise of connecting our investigations within the classroom to the world we inhabited also took on a chimerical quality. Our critiques of Orientalism and by extension of historical colonialism were likely to be, as Pathak *et al* note, at odds with what the West actually meant (and continues to mean) to us and our students in our present. The epicentre of our desires may have shifted across the Atlantic to North America, but our dreams and aspirations are in a very real sense mediated by the West. In something like a schizoid break we might resist the Occident (of the past) in our pedagogical endeavours, even while readying our college applications and immigration visas to the (present-day) West. In the final analysis, for the authors, to build our pedagogy along the binaries of Occident and Orient, and to occlude other axes of difference such as gender and sexuality (as Said does for the most part in *Orientalism*) is counter-productive – the urgent need in our reading of texts is « to refuse the monologic history that Orientalism recovers and recuperate the multiple narratives that interrupt it²² ».

The monological and magisterial narrative of Orientalism that Said constructs – by « assembling varied strands into a single narrative line²³ » is how Aijaz Ahmad puts it – has been the particular focus of attack not only for its exclusions and conflation but for its putative internal contradictions. It has been argued that Said's thesis is ruptured by sudden moments of incoherence when he fluctuates between what might be called poststructuralist and « realist » positions. He claims for the most part that he is not arguing for a « real » Orient which Orientalism misrepresents, given that all discourses are truth-effects rather than more or less true. At other times he seems to castigate Orientalism for its representational distortions, suggesting the more referential paradigm of realism that goes by the measure of authenticity in representation. To Aijaz Ahmad, perhaps the most strident critic of Said in the Indian academy, this is a fundamental methodological confusion in a deeply flawed book. Further, to trace Orientalism as a

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 195-196.

²² E. Said, *Orientalism: Western Representations of the Orient*, *op. cit.*, p. 198. Said's occlusion of gender and sexuality has been the special focus of feminist critique. Also, the Orientalist exercises in India would have been significantly impacted by indigenous caste structures. It is a documented fact, for instance, that the very access that Western Orientalists had to indigenous texts would have been mediated by the native intermediary of the priestly Brahmin caste.

²³ A. Ahmad, « Orientalism and After: Ambivalence and Cosmopolitan Location in the Work of Edward Said », *op. cit.*, p. 177.

seamless narrative that is at least as old as Aeschylus and continues to the present, and then to call it a coherent discourse would be, in Foucault's own terms, anachronistic at the very least. The argument is best made in Ahmad's own words:

The Foucault of *Discipline and Punish*....never spoke of a full-fledged discourse before the sixteenth-century because what he then called « discourse » presumes, as co-extensive corollary, a rationalism of the post-medieval kind, alongside the increasing elaborations of modern state forms, modern institutional grids, objectified economic productions, modern forms of rationalized planning. Said's idea that the ideology of the modern imperialist Eurocentrism is already inscribed in the ritual theatre of Greek tragedy.... is not only ahistorical in the ordinary sense but also specifically anti-Foucauldian in a methodological sense²⁴.

The Said-Ahmad face-off has become something like a staple in our postcolonial studies courses. To Ahmad, *Orientalism* is a work in which « polemics sometimes overwhelms scholarship » as a function of Said's deep personal investment in the project. And Ahmad begins his painstaking critique by acknowledging his own dilemma, which is of being torn between political solidarity and intellectual disagreement with Said. As a Marxist with little patience with postmodernism/poststructuralism, Ahmad is troubled by the excessively culturalist orientation of the book that does not adequately address the material, non-discursive practices of colonial domination. Further, to read Western textualities about the non-West in isolation from « how those textualities might have been received, accepted, modified, challenged, overthrown » by the non-West is to re-enact the very erasure/silencing that Said sees as fundamental to the project of *Orientalism*²⁵. In a different context, the literary critic Kumkum Sangari calls for a comparativist method as the only one adequate to the task of engaging with the mixed field of cultural production in the colonial period. The model of *transaction* or intersection between two well-developed patriarchal class-societies at the point of the colonial encounter, and the contradictions that arose therein, is more useful than the model of imposition²⁶. Nor are the histories and discursivities of the colony and the metropolis to be charted in distinct and synchronic terms, but rather as relational and interpenetrative.

²⁴ A. Ahmad, « Orientalism and After: Ambivalence and Cosmopolitan Location in the Work of Edward Said », *op. cit.*, p. 100.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

²⁶ K. Sangari, *Politics of the Possible: Essays on Gender, History, Narratives, Colonial English*, New Delhi, Tulika, 1999.

The grounds for Ahmad's disagreements are too many to rehearse here in any detail. But notable among them are what he sees as Said's unwitting complicities with the very object of his attack – his reverse stereotyping of the West; his dependence on the very tradition he critiques and which is evident in his refusal to venture outside the canon; his tacit acceptance of Europe as a civilisational entity that goes back to Greek antiquity, even though «the civilisational map and geographical imagination of antiquity were fundamentally different from those that came to be fabricated in post-Renaissance Europe²⁷ ». Said's epistemological fuzziness, contends Ahmad, reveals itself in the inconsistencies of his periodization and definitions of Orientalism. At times he seems to suggest that it was already in place at the time of Homer. At others, Orientalism seems the «ideological corollary of modern colonialism²⁸ ». And yet again, there is the suggestion that Orientalism «delivered » the Orient to colonialism, thus making colonialism the function of Orientalism. But perhaps the most exciting observation of Ahmad, and which he substantiates with impressive erudition, is that in his determination to cast Orientalism as a monolithically authoritative discourse Said does not address the contradictions and internal ruptures within it that a more vigilant reading may uncover. For instance, taking issue with Said's monochromatic reading of Dante's treatment of Prophet Mohammed, Ahmad identifies in the writer crucial ambivalences that must be read in terms of the contradictions in Dante's own ideology, poised as he was at the cusp between the medieval and modern epistemes.

Ahmad's critique became the occasion for other voices to enter the debate in the pages of influential Indian journal *Economic and Political Weekly* where most of us first encountered Ahmad's piece. The political scientist Nivedita Menon's riposte to Ahmad, published within a couple of months of the latter's essay, counters his somewhat cavalier Marxist dismissal of post-modernism and his foreclosing of any possibility of it as emancipatory critique. At the very least it leads him to understand 'discourse' in a severely reductive way, which then becomes grist to the

²⁷ A. Ahmad, « Orientalism and After: Ambivalence and Cosmopolitan Location in the Work of Edward Said », *op. cit.*, p. 183. In the vein of Martin Bernal (1987), Ahmad contends that « the fabrication of Ancient Greece as an originary and autonomous cultural formation, its sundering from the composite Mediterranean culture in which it had been placed overlappingly with Egyptian and Levantine antiquities, and its relocation as the fount of a West European history rather than at the Afro-Asiatic-European confluence – i.e. the mapping of an Athens-to-Albion cultural grid which demarcates Europe from Asia – is really a product of the late eighteenth century onwards, after the main European interests (in both senses of the word) shift from Egypt to India, and when the Indo-Aryan linguistic model gets going as the basic explanatory model for cultural unities and mobilities », *Ibidem*, p. 116.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 182.

mill of his criticism of Said's focus on discursivities in *Orientalism*. Nor, argues Menon, are Said's three definitions of Orientalism mutually incompatible unless plucked out of the flow of the argument and sundered from their context. Menon's essay is exciting in that in contesting Ahmad it takes within its ambit urgent issues that exercised late twentieth century India, and which continue to be flashpoints today – issues of gender and women's rights and their imbrications with community and religion; the aporias of identitarian politics in an increasingly communalised field; the torsion in caste issues in a shifting economic landscape. It is in this sense that Said's book has often been the starting point of discussion on many wide-ranging issues that are, strictly speaking, beyond the scope of *Orientalism* itself.

Robert Young has famously and irreverently declared Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi Bhabha as constituting the « Holy Trinity » of postcolonial critics²⁹. Bart Moore-Gilbert, in fact, refers to Said as the « mentor » whose ideas Spivak and Bhabha « both challenge and revise, as well as extend³⁰ ». Certainly, in our postcolonial studies courses in English departments in India, the three are obligatory and overwhelming presences. Spivak and Bhabha are not, properly speaking, voices that emerge from within the Indian academy, writing as they do from locations in the West. However, their works are centrally concerned with postcolonial issues in the Indian context and are, therefore, key nodal points in our mapping of theoretical issues. And in my experience in the classroom, Said is the shadow presence in any of our discussions of Spivak and Bhabha, both as a point of reference and of difference.

Like Said, Spivak subjects colonial discursivities to interrogation – in particular, the colonial archive³¹. However, her point of departure is that, in reading the archive against the grain, she attempts to recuperate the voice of the colonized and raises important questions of subaltern agency. Crucially, she genders the enterprise and brings to crisis the figure of the female historical subaltern – the « silent interlocutor » of the dominant order – who, caught between indigenous and colonial patriarchies, seems doomed to a « violent shuttling » between tradition and modernity and denial of a space from which she

²⁹ R. Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*, London & New York, Routledge, 1990.

³⁰ B. Moore-Gilbert, « Spivak and Bhabha », dans H. Shwartz and S. Ray (éds) *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2000, p. 451.

³¹ G. C. Spivak, « The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives », dans *History and Theory*, Vol. 24, n° 3, October 1985 et « Can the Subaltern Speak? », dans C. Nelson et L. Grossberg (éds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, London, Macmillan, 1988.

can « speak ». In doing so, Spivak questions not only colonial epistemologies but also the limitations of contemporary western theory and feminist frameworks in their production of the « third-world woman ».

While Spivak shares some common ground with Said even when radically differing from him in certain ways, Bhabha's work is more directly in contest with the orientation and assumptions of *Orientalism*. In pieces such as « Signs Taken for Wonders » he does invoke Said when speaking of the near mystical cultural authority embodied in the book as the talisman of European power³². However, he develops his ideas in a different direction so as to stress difference and ambivalence. To Bhabha, Fanon rather than Said is the more valuable thinker when it comes to theorising issues of agency and resistance. Decisively infusing psychoanalytic theory into the field, Bhabha contends that colonial discourse is impelled by its own nature to be ambivalent and unstable. The relationship of the coloniser-colonised too is other than unidirectional in terms of power. In the mutual dependence and mixed economy of this relationship, the affective « in-between » of dominant and subordinate cultures becomes the site of radical possibilities for the circumventing of colonial power. Colonial narcissism-paranoia is persistently troubled by the returning gaze of the colonised and insidiously destabilised by mimicry – these are only some of the faultlines and fissures that mark the authority of the dominant. Colonial authority by its very nature and dynamics incites refusal and resistance. The narrative that Said had set in motion in *Orientalism* has, with Bhabha, moved far afield from its originary ground.

In 2005, a year after Said's death, Irfan Habib wrote a piece that I referred to in the opening paragraph of this paper and in which he regretfully noted that one of the severest casualties of Said's book has been that the word « Orientalism » has now become a term of vilification. To Habib, Said's category of the Orientalist is an exercise in selectiveness, misreading, and even outright distortion (the last, evident in his reading of Marx). Where in Said's « nasty basket of Orientalists », asks Habib, are figures such as I. Goldhizer or Joseph Needham whose respect for Islam and for the achievements of the Chinese/Indian/Arab-Islamic cultures, fly in the face of the central thesis of *Orientalism*? Or, as Leela Gandhi asks in a similar vein, how should we respond to the

³² H. K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London, Routledge, 1994.

« Orientalist *par excellence* » William Jones who « [speaks] vitriolically about the uncivilised cultural insularity of Europe³³ »?

Habib's further contention is that Said's book cannot accommodate or even acknowledge the work of non-Western Orientalists such as the D. D. Kosambi who « drawing quite firmly on the Orientalist tradition of scholarship, aimed at reconstructing ancient Indian history through the application of Marxist concepts³⁴ ». This line of inquiry picks up on earlier critiques by Indian scholars, such as Partha Chatterjee, who question that the effects of Orientalism on the colonized were necessarily deleterious. During the Indian anti-colonial struggle, for instance, Orientalist stereotypes and tropes were often creatively appropriated and mobilised by nationalists as strategy of resistance. Gyan Prakash has written of the postcolonial imperative to « fully recognise another history of agency and knowledge alive in the dead weight of the colonial past³⁵ ».

The purpose of ending this paper with a reference to Irfan Habib's fairly recent intervention is to underline the fact that even some decades after its appearance, Said's book retains its valence in the Indian context. Spivak has called it the « source book of postcolonial studies, and every so often when faced with new intellectual aporias we seem impelled to revisit the primal scene. Even the limitations and gaps of *Orientalism* have been productive in that they continue to generate responses pertaining not only to our colonial interregnum, but to the ambivalent conditions of the colonial aftermath as well as our most urgent contemporary concerns.

³³ L. Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, op. cit., p. 79.

³⁴ The most vociferous criticism of Said in India has come from intellectuals of the left such as Aijaz Ahmad and Irfan Habib, and their opprobrium is centrally concerned with two features of Said's book – what they consider to be his uninformed and selective reading of Marx, and his poststructuralist, anti-humanist theoretical positioning.

³⁵ G. Prakash, *After Colonialism: Imperial Histories and Postcolonial Displacements*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton university Press, 1995, p. 5.

SHOBA VENKATESH GHOSH

Revisiting *Orientalism*
Responses to the Saidian Thesis in the Indian Academy¹

...Orientalism functioned for us as a theory of reading which transformed our classroom practice by alerting us to the workings of the colonized consciousness and to our interpellation as the colonized reader.

Zakia Pathak²

I will long remember the day I read Orientalism...For me, the child of a successful anti-colonial struggle, Orientalism was a book that talked of things I felt I had known all along but had never found the language to formulate with clarity...

Partha Chatterjee³

Said quite justifiably accuses the « Orientalist » of essentializing the Orient, but his own essentializing of 'the West' is equally remarkable. In the process, Said of course gives us that same « Europe » – unified, self-identical, transhistorical, textual – which is always rehearsed for us in the sort of literary criticism which traces its own pedigree from Aristotle to T. S. Eliot...

Aijaz Ahmad⁴

If Orientalism is a limited text, then it is so primarily because it fails to accommodate the possibility of difference within Oriental discourse. Sometimes in his obdurate determination that Orientalism silenced opposition, Said, ironically, silences opposition...

Leela Gandhi⁵

In many ways, one fears, Said's rhetoric and sweep itself has brought into discredit the rigour and precision of older scholarship and so opened the doors to new forms of neo-colonial influences. Such scholars might indeed put themselves forward as critics of « Eurocentrism », of « Orientalist appropriations », and of 'colonial discourse', but this rhetoric is often found to be of little relevance when the actual substance of their work is considered.

Irfan Habib⁶

¹ A version of this paper was first presented at a seminar on *European Visions of the Orient* at the University of Bologna, May 2012.

² Z. Pathak, S. Sengupta et S. Puryakayastha, « The prisonhouse of Orientalism », dans *Textual Practice* Vol 5, n° 2, Summer 1991, p. 198.

³ Chatterjee, P., « Their Own Words? An Essay for Edward Said », dans Michael Sprinkler (éd) *Edward Said: A Critical Reader*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1992, p. 194.

⁴ A. Ahmad, « Orientalism and After: Ambivalence and Cosmopolitan Location in the Work of Edward Said », dans *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 27, n° 30, July 1992. Reproduced in A. Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*, Verso, 1992, pp. 104-105.

⁵ L. Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, New Delhi, Oxford India paperbacks, 1999, p. 79.

⁶ I. Habib, « Critical Notes on Edward Saïd », dans *International Socialism: A quarterly journal of revolutionary Socialism*, n° 108, October 2005. <http://www.isj.org.uk/?id=141>.

THIS PAPER BY AN INDIAN ACADEMIC for the special issue of a European journal on *Visions de L'Orient* is written with a sharp awareness that it might be one of the few papers – or even the only paper – emanating from the other side of the Occident/Orient divide, not just in terms of intellectual orientation but also with regards to actual location. During a brief tenure at the University of Bologna in 2012 when I participated in a series of seminars on the theme, a particularly telling insight into the aforementioned divide came to me. Whereas in Europe it is still possible to use the term « Orientalist » in a reflective sense as referring to, in Said's words, « Anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient », the appellation is far more normative, fraught and, yes, pejorative in its deployment back home in the Indian academy. The Indian historian Irfan Habib may be slightly overstating the case when (rehearsing Albert Hourani's observation) he claims that « after Said's *Orientalism*, the very word Orientalism has »become a term of abuse »⁷ ». In sum, however, he rightly recognises the decisive re-articulation the term has undergone in the academic landscape of a postcolonial nation whose very self-identity is built on an ambivalent relationship with its recent colonial past.

Indeed, the influence in the Indian academy of Edward Said's monumental *Orientalism* has been immeasurable. The book is near-mandatory reading in English departments, as well as in departments of other disciplines, and the term « Orientalism » has become part and parcel of our postcolonial arsenal. Though published in 1978, the real influence within the academy was felt in the mid- to late-1980s. For many of my generation of academics, the arrival of the book marked nothing less than a schism between our careers as students and as teachers.

Typically our training in English Studies would have been within a liberal-humanist « Great Works » tradition concentrated primarily on British literature supplemented by some European and American writings. The experience was not without its discomforts given that we studied a literature that was not simply « not one's own » but one that was of our erstwhile colonisers. Fluctuating in an aporetic sense between awe of the « universal » validity of the Great Tradition and the inchoate sense of violence we were likely to experience as the magisterial tradition interpellated us as complicit readers, we lacked the cognitive

⁷ I. Habib, « Critical Notes on Edward Saïd », *op. cit.*

paradigm or the vocabulary to give a name to our conflicted responses. Then when we entered the teaching profession in the 1980s, it was « the long awaited and messianic arrival of *Orientalism* in the alienated and alienating English Studies classroom⁸ » that equipped us to mobilise canonical British texts out of conventional critical frameworks so as to make our experience in the classroom connect in crucial ways to our lives and realities outside it. It furnished us with the critical tools to engage not only our colonial past but the more immediate and urgent questions of nationalism, tradition and modernity which have beset our postcoloniality from the start. It might be no exaggeration to say that it was with Said that our study of literature became decisively and irrevocably politicised. Zakia Pathak *et al* speak of this transformatory « epistemological intervention » in the following terms:

To deconstruct the text, to examine the process of its production, to identify the myths of imperialism structuring it, to show how the oppositions on which it rests are generated by political needs at a given moment in history, quickened the text to a life in our world⁹.

This enthusiastic, even fervent, embracing of the Saidian thesis has not been without its blind-spots. For instance, it is easy to forget that *Orientalism* is only the first in a trilogy of books, and that in much of his subsequent work Said has inflected his earlier positions. That said, it is incontrovertible that Said's thesis of *Orientalism* offered us a broad and flexible enough theoretical paradigm – and the analytical apparatus to go with it – to engage with the imbalances of representational power and its imbrications with material power structures that obtained under colonialism. And, Said became our pathway to thinkers such as Foucault and Gramsci who were perhaps already integral to other disciplines but whom we, in the English Studies classroom, might not have encountered in any depth if not for *Orientalism*. Most importantly, Said's study opened up a way for us to interrogate the terms under which the very discipline of English Studies came into being in India as well as the historicity of our insertion into it – that is, as Said puts it in another context, « to see things not simply as they are, but as they have come to be that way¹⁰ ». ¹¹ Gramsci's famed comment about the need to

⁸ L. Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, New Delhi, Oxford India paperbacks, 1998, p. 65.

⁹ Z. Pathak, S. Sengupta et S. Puryakayastha, « The prisonhouse of Orientalism », *op. cit.*, p. 195

¹⁰ E. Said, « Intellectual Exile: Expatriates and Marginals », dans *Grand Street*, n° 47, Autumn 1993, p. 122.

¹¹ Gauri Viswanathan's *Masks of Conquest* is directly influenced by Said and « sets out to demonstrate in part that the discipline in English came into its own in age of colonialism, as well

inventory historical traces, and Said's deployment of it to launch his path-breaking study bear repetition here:

In the *Prison Notebooks* Gramsci says: « The starting point in critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is...as a product of the historical process to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory ». The only available English translation inexplicably leaves Gramsci's comment at that, whereas Gramsci's Italian text concludes by adding that « therefore, it is imperative at the outset to compile such an inventory ». In many ways my study of Orientalism has been an attempt to inventory the traces upon me, the Oriental subject, of the culture whose domination has been so powerful a factor in the life of all Orientals¹².

It is perhaps evident by now that this paper is not so much a substantive engagement with *Orientalism* as with what it has come to mean on a specific non-Western academic terrain. And indeed, it has, with Protean shape-shiftingness, come to mean many things in the three decades and a half since its publication. Celebrated, on the one hand, as a « canonical event » that liberated our pedagogy in one stroke, it has, on the other, been subjected to rigorous, incisive, and sometimes rancorous critique by Indian scholars¹³. The critiques have been

as to argue that no serious account of its growth and development can afford to ignore the imperial mission of educating and civilizing colonial subjects in the literature and thought of England, a mission that in the long run served to strengthen Western cultural hegemony in enormously complex ways », dans G. Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest. Literary Study and British Rule in India*, Columbia University Press, 1989, p. 2. – Said's book has also been the starting point of critical reflection on disciplines other than English Studies. In his essay « Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World : Perspectives on Indian Historiography », Gyan Prakash argues that to set out to map how the third world writes its post-Orientalist histories is to « acknowledge that the knowledge of the third world is historical ». Viewed in this manner, Orientalist, nationalist, Marxist and other historiographies reveal themselves as discursive attempts to constitute their objects of knowledge, that is, the third world. To map post-Orientalist historiography in the Indian context, then, one must begin with Said and his definition of Orientalism (Cf. G. Prakash, « Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Perspectives from Indian Historiography », dans *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 32, n° 2, April 1990, pp. 383-388). Preym K. Po'dar and Tanka B. Subba draw upon the Saidian thesis to visibilize how Indian anthropologists are « home-grown Orientalists » in that they are caught up in the tyranny of the colonial academic tradition and re-enact Orientalist violence in their own ethnographies of indigenous marginal groups – « They are Orientals in that they have been “othered” in the discourse of the West about India; they are Orientalists in that they study and “other” their objects of study – the subordinate (in this case, Himalayan) Orientals », dans P. K. Po'dar et T. B. Subba, « Demystifying Some Ethnographic Texts on the Himalayas », dans *Social Scientist*, Vol. 19, n° 8/9, Aug.-Sep. 1991, pp. 78-79.

¹² E. Said, *Orientalism: Western Representations of the Orient*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978, p. 25.

¹³ The patchwork of quotations that prefixes my paper may give some indication of the variety of responses.

mounted from varied positions and have taken issue with the book's substantive limitations, theoretical naiveté, exclusionary engagement, flawed methodology, epistemological fuzziness, and lack of real rigour, among other things. *Orientalism's* greatest impact has really been that it has, for us here, meant more than itself. By becoming the occasion for intense debate it helped initiate questions often beyond its own scope – in short it opened the door to an entire terrain upon which we have worked through ideas not just of Orientalism, but also related/tangential questions of representation, subalternity, the radical instability of discourses, the aporia of resistances, and the fraught nature of our postcoloniality and its ambivalent relationship to the West. This paper, then, is an attempt to broadly map responses to the Saidian thesis in the Indian academy.

Published at a historical moment when decolonizing movements had almost completely dismantled the machinery of the European imperium, and when American hegemony seemed to have taken its place, *Orientalism* struck a chord with its passion, wide-ranging engagement, and controversial, even polemical, argument. Though routinely written about as the progenitor of postcolonial studies, it was not the first work to systematically subject colonialism to critical scrutiny. M. K. Gandhi, Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire (among others) had already contributed significantly to a vibrant tradition of postcolonial critique. In fact, critiques specifically about the work of the Orientalists were already underway in the non-western world¹⁴ as well as in the West¹⁵. What *Orientalism* did, rather, was to give a name to a political and intellectual orientation and help us retrospectively trace a tradition that began much before Said; indeed, a tradition that is, as Aijaz Ahmad notes, «as old virtually as colonialism itself¹⁶». *Orientalism* helped us identify a particular constellation of works, and texts like Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* and Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* entered our English Studies classrooms too.

To Said, Orientalism is «a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in the European western

¹⁴ Cf. A. Abdel-Malek, «Orientalism in Crisis», dans *Diogenes*, Vol. 11, n° 44, 1963 et A. L. Tibawi, «English-Speaking Orientalists», dans *Islamic Quarterly*, Vol. 8.1-4, 1964.

¹⁵ Cf. R. Schwab, *La Renaissance orientale*, Paris, Payot, 1950 et Kiernan, V. G. *The Lords of the Human kind: Black Man, Yellow Man, White Man in the Age of Empire* [1969], London, Penguin, 1972. – Said himself acknowledges in a later essay, «*Orientalism Reconsidered*» (1985), that what he had said in his book had already been said by Tiwabi, Abdalla Laroui, Abdel-Malek, Fanon, Romila Thapar and others.

¹⁶ A. Ahmad, «Orientalism and After: Ambivalence and Cosmopolitan Location in the Work of Edward Said», *op. cit.*, p. 102.

experience¹⁷ ». Defined variously as an « academic field », a peculiarly Occidental « style of thought », and as a « corporate institution », Orientalism is, for Said, an entire discursive terrain upon which the Orient has been « produced » in the interests of Western domination. In arguing for the fundamental textuality of empire, Said rehearses the Foucauldian thesis of the Power/Knowledge nexus and sets out to unmask the contiguity between Western knowledge and Western power. To this end he critically reads academic writing as well as writings of (primarily British and French) travellers, colonial administrators, missionaries, soldiers, poets, philosophers, economists as a body of « statements » that stabilized a particular « truth » of the Orient. However, in a departure from Foucault who subsumes the individual writer within the larger discursive formation, Said's analysis returns valence to the individual writers he selects for scrutiny. In his earlier book *Beginnings: Intention and Method* he clearly states that he finds « the determining imprint of individual authors » upon the discursive formation called Orientalism. Their personal signatures, styles, patterns and tropes contribute in specific ways to the discourse of Orientalism, and in turn acquire « mass, density, and referential power » from those who came before or after them¹⁸.

From Gramsci, of course, Said draws the idea of « hegemony » and identifies in the Orientalist exercise the hegemony-producing accompaniment to power. More crucially, the discourse of Orientalism must be seen not just as the handmaiden to Western domination but, in a symbiotic manner, an *inducement* to it, producing that which demands mastery. Orientalism, then, expresses for Said no less than a pathological drive to power that is as ancient as Ancient Greece and as contemporary as the present. The Orient is the Occident's « other ». It has been – variously and yet systematically, in a « regular constellation of ideas » – produced as timeless, outside of evolutionary history, passive, degraded, feminized, essentialized... The arguments of the book have been too thoroughly discussed to require detailed iteration here. And given the focus of my paper, I am interested in what we made of the book in our context.

While being drawn in by the argument made in the early part of the book – particularly in the chapter entitled « The Scope of Orientalism » that erects the conceptual scaffolding – we were unlikely when we first encountered the book to have a close familiarity with many of the specific authors discussed in later chapters. At a pinch, we might have

¹⁷ E. Said, *Orientalism: Western Representations of the Orient*, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

¹⁸ E. Said, « *Orientalism Reconsidered* », dans *Cultural Critique*, n° 1, Autumn 1985, p. 23.

known our Flaubert and Nerval, but de Chateaubriand and Lamartine were almost inarguably beyond the expertise of a typical Eng. Lit. scholar in India. As school children we would have been introduced to T. E. Lawrence and would have revelled in the thrilling exploits of « Lawrence of Arabia »; but the philologist Ernest Renan or the modern Orientalist Sylvestre de Sacy were certainly beyond our ken. Said's reading of these writers we could only take at face value, and that we did enthusiastically and perhaps, it must be admitted, uncritically. In the flush of political solidarity, we saw in the denouncements of the book by Western critics¹⁹ a reprise of colonialist Orientalism, and therefore a validation of Said. It would need a beat before our responses could settle to a more reasoned pitch, and then Said's text could become the site for productive and informed debate.

In the first flush of our encounter with *Orientalism*, its exciting promise seemed to be that it opened up a space within the Indian classroom to read English Literature against the grain and with more autonomy/authority than had been accorded to us before. It was not long before we began to run up against the limits of this oppositional reading project. This narrative is captured with prescience in an essay entitled « The Prisonhouse of Orientalism » (1991) and authored by Zakia Pathak, Saswati Sengupta and Sharmila Puryakayastha whose experiences as young Delhi University teachers in the undergraduate English Studies programme resonate sharply with my own in the late-1980s and early 1990s. The authors speak of how *Orientalism* released in the classroom a « taxonomical impulse » that set out to identify « white texts » that could be fit into a strategic formation testifying to the pathologically orientalisng tendencies of British texts and the entire discursive field from which they emanated. However, it was not long before « this project came to be riddled with reservations²⁰ ». It would seem that we had escaped out of one enclosure only to find ourselves in another, « the prisonhouse of Orientalism »:

Every text becomes a white text. In every text from a Donne poem to *Wuthering Heights* are clues that that yield a narrative which might become narcissistic or paranoid. In such re-readings of the English literary text which privilege Orientalist discourse as an interpretative grid, the whole of English Literature may be reduced to a ground on

¹⁹ Cf. L. Weiseltier, Review of *Orientalism*, dans *The New Republic*, Vol. 180, n° 14, April 1979 ; B. Lewis, « The Question of Orientalism », dans *New York Review of Books*, 24 June 1982.

²⁰ Z. Pathak, S. Sengupta et S. Puryakayastha, « The prisonhouse of Orientalism », *op. cit.*, p. 195-196.

which racial identities are contested. We remain trapped in the prisonhouse²¹.

And that first promise of connecting our investigations within the classroom to the world we inhabited also took on a chimerical quality. Our critiques of Orientalism and by extension of historical colonialism were likely to be, as Pathak *et al* note, at odds with what the West actually meant (and continues to mean) to us and our students in our present. The epicentre of our desires may have shifted across the Atlantic to North America, but our dreams and aspirations are in a very real sense mediated by the West. In something like a schizoid break we might resist the Occident (of the past) in our pedagogical endeavours, even while readying our college applications and immigration visas to the (present-day) West. In the final analysis, for the authors, to build our pedagogy along the binaries of Occident and Orient, and to occlude other axes of difference such as gender and sexuality (as Said does for the most part in *Orientalism*) is counter-productive – the urgent need in our reading of texts is « to refuse the monologic history that Orientalism recovers and recuperate the multiple narratives that interrupt it²² ».

The monological and magisterial narrative of Orientalism that Said constructs – by « assembling varied strands into a single narrative line²³ » is how Aijaz Ahmad puts it – has been the particular focus of attack not only for its exclusions and conflation but for its putative internal contradictions. It has been argued that Said's thesis is ruptured by sudden moments of incoherence when he fluctuates between what might be called poststructuralist and « realist » positions. He claims for the most part that he is not arguing for a « real » Orient which Orientalism misrepresents, given that all discourses are truth-effects rather than more or less true. At other times he seems to castigate Orientalism for its representational distortions, suggesting the more referential paradigm of realism that goes by the measure of authenticity in representation. To Aijaz Ahmad, perhaps the most strident critic of Said in the Indian academy, this is a fundamental methodological confusion in a deeply flawed book. Further, to trace Orientalism as a

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 195-196.

²² E. Said, *Orientalism: Western Representations of the Orient*, *op. cit.*, p. 198. Said's occlusion of gender and sexuality has been the special focus of feminist critique. Also, the Orientalist exercises in India would have been significantly impacted by indigenous caste structures. It is a documented fact, for instance, that the very access that Western Orientalists had to indigenous texts would have been mediated by the native intermediary of the priestly Brahmin caste.

²³ A. Ahmad, « Orientalism and After: Ambivalence and Cosmopolitan Location in the Work of Edward Said », *op. cit.*, p. 177.

seamless narrative that is at least as old as Aeschylus and continues to the present, and then to call it a coherent discourse would be, in Foucault's own terms, anachronistic at the very least. The argument is best made in Ahmad's own words:

The Foucault of *Discipline and Punish*....never spoke of a full-fledged discourse before the sixteenth-century because what he then called « discourse » presumes, as co-extensive corollary, a rationalism of the post-medieval kind, alongside the increasing elaborations of modern state forms, modern institutional grids, objectified economic productions, modern forms of rationalized planning. Said's idea that the ideology of the modern imperialist Eurocentrism is already inscribed in the ritual theatre of Greek tragedy.... is not only ahistorical in the ordinary sense but also specifically anti-Foucauldian in a methodological sense²⁴.

The Said-Ahmad face-off has become something like a staple in our postcolonial studies courses. To Ahmad, *Orientalism* is a work in which « polemics sometimes overwhelms scholarship » as a function of Said's deep personal investment in the project. And Ahmad begins his painstaking critique by acknowledging his own dilemma, which is of being torn between political solidarity and intellectual disagreement with Said. As a Marxist with little patience with postmodernism/poststructuralism, Ahmad is troubled by the excessively culturalist orientation of the book that does not adequately address the material, non-discursive practices of colonial domination. Further, to read Western textualities about the non-West in isolation from « how those textualities might have been received, accepted, modified, challenged, overthrown » by the non-West is to re-enact the very erasure/silencing that Said sees as fundamental to the project of *Orientalism*²⁵. In a different context, the literary critic Kumkum Sangari calls for a comparativist method as the only one adequate to the task of engaging with the mixed field of cultural production in the colonial period. The model of *transaction* or intersection between two well-developed patriarchal class-societies at the point of the colonial encounter, and the contradictions that arose therein, is more useful than the model of imposition²⁶. Nor are the histories and discursivities of the colony and the metropolis to be charted in distinct and synchronic terms, but rather as relational and interpenetrative.

²⁴ A. Ahmad, « Orientalism and After: Ambivalence and Cosmopolitan Location in the Work of Edward Said », *op. cit.*, p. 100.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

²⁶ K. Sangari, *Politics of the Possible: Essays on Gender, History, Narratives, Colonial English*, New Delhi, Tulika, 1999.

The grounds for Ahmad's disagreements are too many to rehearse here in any detail. But notable among them are what he sees as Said's unwitting complicities with the very object of his attack – his reverse stereotyping of the West; his dependence on the very tradition he critiques and which is evident in his refusal to venture outside the canon; his tacit acceptance of Europe as a civilisational entity that goes back to Greek antiquity, even though «the civilisational map and geographical imagination of antiquity were fundamentally different from those that came to be fabricated in post-Renaissance Europe²⁷ ». Said's epistemological fuzziness, contends Ahmad, reveals itself in the inconsistencies of his periodization and definitions of Orientalism. At times he seems to suggest that it was already in place at the time of Homer. At others, Orientalism seems the «ideological corollary of modern colonialism²⁸ ». And yet again, there is the suggestion that Orientalism «delivered » the Orient to colonialism, thus making colonialism the function of Orientalism. But perhaps the most exciting observation of Ahmad, and which he substantiates with impressive erudition, is that in his determination to cast Orientalism as a monolithically authoritative discourse Said does not address the contradictions and internal ruptures within it that a more vigilant reading may uncover. For instance, taking issue with Said's monochromatic reading of Dante's treatment of Prophet Mohammed, Ahmad identifies in the writer crucial ambivalences that must be read in terms of the contradictions in Dante's own ideology, poised as he was at the cusp between the medieval and modern epistemes.

Ahmad's critique became the occasion for other voices to enter the debate in the pages of influential Indian journal *Economic and Political Weekly* where most of us first encountered Ahmad's piece. The political scientist Nivedita Menon's riposte to Ahmad, published within a couple of months of the latter's essay, counters his somewhat cavalier Marxist dismissal of post-modernism and his foreclosing of any possibility of it as emancipatory critique. At the very least it leads him to understand 'discourse' in a severely reductive way, which then becomes grist to the

²⁷ A. Ahmad, « Orientalism and After: Ambivalence and Cosmopolitan Location in the Work of Edward Said », *op. cit.*, p. 183. In the vein of Martin Bernal (1987), Ahmad contends that « the fabrication of Ancient Greece as an originary and autonomous cultural formation, its sundering from the composite Mediterranean culture in which it had been placed overlappingly with Egyptian and Levantine antiquities, and its relocation as the fount of a West European history rather than at the Afro-Asiatic-European confluence – i.e. the mapping of an Athens-to-Albion cultural grid which demarcates Europe from Asia – is really a product of the late eighteenth century onwards, after the main European interests (in both senses of the word) shift from Egypt to India, and when the Indo-Aryan linguistic model gets going as the basic explanatory model for cultural unities and mobilities », *Ibidem*, p. 116.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 182.

mill of his criticism of Said's focus on discursivities in *Orientalism*. Nor, argues Menon, are Said's three definitions of Orientalism mutually incompatible unless plucked out of the flow of the argument and sundered from their context. Menon's essay is exciting in that in contesting Ahmad it takes within its ambit urgent issues that exercised late twentieth century India, and which continue to be flashpoints today – issues of gender and women's rights and their imbrications with community and religion; the aporias of identitarian politics in an increasingly communalised field; the torsion in caste issues in a shifting economic landscape. It is in this sense that Said's book has often been the starting point of discussion on many wide-ranging issues that are, strictly speaking, beyond the scope of *Orientalism* itself.

Robert Young has famously and irreverently declared Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi Bhabha as constituting the « Holy Trinity » of postcolonial critics²⁹. Bart Moore-Gilbert, in fact, refers to Said as the « mentor » whose ideas Spivak and Bhabha « both challenge and revise, as well as extend³⁰ ». Certainly, in our postcolonial studies courses in English departments in India, the three are obligatory and overwhelming presences. Spivak and Bhabha are not, properly speaking, voices that emerge from within the Indian academy, writing as they do from locations in the West. However, their works are centrally concerned with postcolonial issues in the Indian context and are, therefore, key nodal points in our mapping of theoretical issues. And in my experience in the classroom, Said is the shadow presence in any of our discussions of Spivak and Bhabha, both as a point of reference and of difference.

Like Said, Spivak subjects colonial discursivities to interrogation – in particular, the colonial archive³¹. However, her point of departure is that, in reading the archive against the grain, she attempts to recuperate the voice of the colonized and raises important questions of subaltern agency. Crucially, she genders the enterprise and brings to crisis the figure of the female historical subaltern – the « silent interlocutor » of the dominant order – who, caught between indigenous and colonial patriarchies, seems doomed to a « violent shuttling » between tradition and modernity and denial of a space from which she

²⁹ R. Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*, London & New York, Routledge, 1990.

³⁰ B. Moore-Gilbert, « Spivak and Bhabha », dans H. Shwartz and S. Ray (éds) *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2000, p. 451.

³¹ G. C. Spivak, « The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives », dans *History and Theory*, Vol. 24, n° 3, October 1985 et « Can the Subaltern Speak? », dans C. Nelson et L. Grossberg (éds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, London, Macmillan, 1988.

can « speak ». In doing so, Spivak questions not only colonial epistemologies but also the limitations of contemporary western theory and feminist frameworks in their production of the « third-world woman ».

While Spivak shares some common ground with Said even when radically differing from him in certain ways, Bhabha's work is more directly in contest with the orientation and assumptions of *Orientalism*. In pieces such as « Signs Taken for Wonders » he does invoke Said when speaking of the near mystical cultural authority embodied in the book as the talisman of European power³². However, he develops his ideas in a different direction so as to stress difference and ambivalence. To Bhabha, Fanon rather than Said is the more valuable thinker when it comes to theorising issues of agency and resistance. Decisively infusing psychoanalytic theory into the field, Bhabha contends that colonial discourse is impelled by its own nature to be ambivalent and unstable. The relationship of the coloniser-colonised too is other than unidirectional in terms of power. In the mutual dependence and mixed economy of this relationship, the affective « in-between » of dominant and subordinate cultures becomes the site of radical possibilities for the circumventing of colonial power. Colonial narcissism-paranoia is persistently troubled by the returning gaze of the colonised and insidiously destabilised by mimicry – these are only some of the faultlines and fissures that mark the authority of the dominant. Colonial authority by its very nature and dynamics incites refusal and resistance. The narrative that Said had set in motion in *Orientalism* has, with Bhabha, moved far afield from its originary ground.

In 2005, a year after Said's death, Irfan Habib wrote a piece that I referred to in the opening paragraph of this paper and in which he regretfully noted that one of the severest casualties of Said's book has been that the word « Orientalism » has now become a term of vilification. To Habib, Said's category of the Orientalist is an exercise in selectiveness, misreading, and even outright distortion (the last, evident in his reading of Marx). Where in Said's « nasty basket of Orientalists », asks Habib, are figures such as I. Goldhizer or Joseph Needham whose respect for Islam and for the achievements of the Chinese/Indian/Arab-Islamic cultures, fly in the face of the central thesis of *Orientalism*? Or, as Leela Gandhi asks in a similar vein, how should we respond to the

³² H. K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London, Routledge, 1994.

« Orientalist *par excellence* » William Jones who « [speaks] vitriolically about the uncivilised cultural insularity of Europe³³ »?

Habib's further contention is that Said's book cannot accommodate or even acknowledge the work of non-Western Orientalists such as the D. D. Kosambi who « drawing quite firmly on the Orientalist tradition of scholarship, aimed at reconstructing ancient Indian history through the application of Marxist concepts³⁴ ». This line of inquiry picks up on earlier critiques by Indian scholars, such as Partha Chatterjee, who question that the effects of Orientalism on the colonized were necessarily deleterious. During the Indian anti-colonial struggle, for instance, Orientalist stereotypes and tropes were often creatively appropriated and mobilised by nationalists as strategy of resistance. Gyan Prakash has written of the postcolonial imperative to « fully recognise another history of agency and knowledge alive in the dead weight of the colonial past³⁵ ».

The purpose of ending this paper with a reference to Irfan Habib's fairly recent intervention is to underline the fact that even some decades after its appearance, Said's book retains its valence in the Indian context. Spivak has called it the « source book of postcolonial studies, and every so often when faced with new intellectual aporias we seem impelled to revisit the primal scene. Even the limitations and gaps of *Orientalism* have been productive in that they continue to generate responses pertaining not only to our colonial interregnum, but to the ambivalent conditions of the colonial aftermath as well as our most urgent contemporary concerns.

³³ L. Gandhi, *Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction*, op. cit., p. 79.

³⁴ The most vociferous criticism of Said in India has come from intellectuals of the left such as Aijaz Ahmad and Irfan Habib, and their opprobrium is centrally concerned with two features of Said's book – what they consider to be his uninformed and selective reading of Marx, and his poststructuralist, anti-humanist theoretical positioning.

³⁵ G. Prakash, *After Colonialism: Imperial Histories and Postcolonial Displacements*, Princeton, NJ, Princeton university Press, 1995, p. 5.