

Orientalism in the post-colonial context: A study in relation to Malay Muslim in Singapore

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Abstract

This article attempts to discuss the main thesis or theories and its traits of Orientalism. It also examines the applicability and its impacts of these main theories in relation to the issues concerning the Malay Muslim community in Singapore in the current post-colonial context. This is mainly a theoretical article based on the contemporary literature in relation to the topic. The article reveals a long tradition of romanticized images of Asia and the Middle Eastern Western culture had served as an implicit justification for European and American colonial and imperial ambitions. It is argued that a close reading of Singapore's state policies on multiracialism reflects the Orientalist mode of thinking as to how the Malay Muslim have continuously been subjected to bear the brunt of stereotype being relegated to the status of 'other' within the multiracial community in Singapore.

Introduction

“Orientalism is premised upon exteriority, that is, on the fact that the Orientalist, poet or scholar, makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient...He is never concerned with the Orient except as the first cause of what he say...The principal product of this exteriority is of course representation...The things to look at are style, figures of speech, setting, narrative devices, historical and social circumstances, not the correctness of the representation nor its great fidelity to some great original.” (Said 1979:20)

Edward Said, one of the most influential intellectuals and scholars in the post-colonial era, contributed his work on Orientalism, which is profoundly admired by many people in

the contemporary world. It is also one of the most sustained deconstructions and criticisms of Western imperialism, past and present. Said narrates that an imaginary geographical line was drawn between what was *ours* and what was *theirs* by Orientalists for what they say is to orientalise the orient. Said also believed that Orientalism functions to justify the continued presence of the imperialists and perpetuate the continued colonization of the Orient. Thus, this paper discusses the Orientalism by (1) understanding their mode of thinking and identifying its various traits, (2) exploring its continuation in today's postcolonial context; and (3) its impacts on the Malay Muslims in

Singapore. This is a theoretically based paper, tracing the available contemporary literature in relation to the main topic of the article.

Orientalism and its traits

Orientalism is all about a mode of thinking about the 'other' oriental culture (easterners) by the westerners. Said refers "Orientalism is a style of thought based on ontological and epistemological distinction between the 'Orient' and the 'occident'" (Said, 1979: 02). By creating a distinction between Orient (East) and the Occident (West), Orientalists attempt to define itself by creating further a set of assumption, mainly superiority of the West and inferiority of the Orient or Oriental world. This inferiority or weakness notion of Orient is sustained; and the Orient subsequently becomes an idea with a corresponding reality. Thus, Orientalism refers to the way in which non-Western culture are perceived in the West, by scholars, writers, thinkers, politicians and society at large. Sered defines in his article on orientalism as "it is a manner of regularized (or Orientalized) writing, vision, and study, dominated by imperatives, perspectives, and ideological biases ostensibly suited to the Orient." (Sered 1996:01). This is clearly evident in the narrative of Said. "My contention is that Orientalism is fundamentally a political doctrine willed over the orient because of the Orient was weaker than the West, which elided the Orient's difference with its weakness.... As a cultural apparatus Orientalism is all aggression, activity, judgment, will-to-truth, and knowledge." (Said 1979:204). Said emphasises that it is a "systematic discipline by European culture (is) able to manage –and even produce– the

Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively" (ibid:3). This inferiority or weakness notion of Orient is sustained; and the Orient subsequently becomes an idea with a corresponding reality. While cultural hegemony gives Orientalism its durability and influence to create positional superiority of West, which effectively perpetuates false consciousness about the 'Other'. In short, it constructs Orient as the 'other' of Europe or West, which in turn confirms Europe's or Western dominant position. More importantly, 'the Orient was Orientalized not because it was discovered to be "Oriental"... but because it could be – that is submitted to being– made Oriental (ibid:6). What is significant about Orientalism is not the correspondence between what it says of the so-called Orient but rather the manner in which it constructs an image of the Orient and the internal consistency of that image, despite the lack of correspondence with a real Orient (ibid: 5). According to the Orientalist construction of East (Oriental culture), the Orient is weak, backward, irrational, inferior, primitive, static, exotic, obsessed with the erotic and is waiting to be conquered. Westerners dominate and Orientals must be dominated which means having their lands occupied, their internal affairs rigidly controlled, their blood and treasure put at the disposal of one or another western power (ibid: 36). These ideas are the underlying assumptions of Orientalist approach

towards understanding 'other' or oriental culture and people.

As for the traits of Orientalism, Alwee(2005) listed the following.

1. Stereotyping/biasness – continuous stereotyping of the orient; they take on an essentialist and paternalistic approach.
2. Being ahistorical in perspective- assumes society is static and ignores socio-historical factors that continually shape the societies.
3. Textualist- assumes society can be studied through literature/language in the text per se and disregards reality
4. Reductionist in explanation- reduces totality to a specific, that is instead of looking at social, cultural or political institutions and conceptualize myths.
5. Totalizing tendency- attributes everything to one sole factor
6. Averse in applying insights or methodology of the social science into their study
7. Dichotomising of East and West- Compared East as non-equal and assume they only can copy Western rule of thumb. And finally
8. Its selective nature of subject matter, while others are marginalised or silenced.

Orientalism in relation to Malay Muslims in the Post-Colonial Singapore

Having understood the traits of Orientalism, it is now necessary to

explore how Orientalist discourses continue to affect the Malay Muslim in Singapore in Post-colonial era.

The regurgitation of exact biases and prejudices towards orient and stereotyping 'other' is one of the essential features of Orientalism. This has been a dominant feature in the discourses of Orientalists against Malay minority in Singapore, a country predominantly occupied by majority Chinese. One of the significant studies undertaken by Lily Zubaidah Rahim(1998) on the 'Singapore Dilemma' illustrates that the ideology of Malay Muslim inferiority conceptualized in 'cultural deficit thesis' contradicting the theory and practice of equal opportunity, meritocracy and multiracialism in Singapore. She narrates that cultural deficit thesis was attributed to the persisting socio-economic and educational marginality of Malay community in Singapore while them being projected as, lazy, dull and undeserving of assistance(Rahim 1998: 51,61). She argues that the persistent economic backwardness of the Malay is because as a community, they have been structurally disadvantaged. Instead, culturalist discourse which consists of a representation of societies in terms of essentialised cultural characteristics is favoured. Obviously, such a conceptualisation of culture is desocialised and dehistoricised. It should be emphasized that this contention of Rahim encapsulates the culturalist discourse towards Malay minority, portraying them to the state

of inferior and continually stereotyping them.

The notion of Malay laziness has explicitly been refuted by some Malay scholars, especially by Alatas. In the study undertaken by Alatas (1977) on the “Myth of the Lazy Natives” he narrates the image of Malay lazy native is a production of colonialists and in fact it has been reproduced in the post colonial period as well. Alatas further argues that inception of the plural society concept in colonial era is actually labour-driven, functioning in the larger British administration of its colonial societies; ‘from a labour point of view, there are practically three races, the Malays, the Chinese, and the Tamils. By nature, the Malay Muslim is an idler, the Chinaman is a thief, and the Kling is a drunkard, yet each, in his special class of work is both cheap and efficient, when properly supervised’ (1977:75). The Local population was not only compartmentalised into races, the subsequent races were allotted corresponding space and ‘culture’, depending on how they fitted the interest of the colonial capitalists. For instance, the Malay Muslim race was associated with a ‘culture of laziness’ because they refused to partake in the colonial capitalist system. The myth of laziness by a way of stereotyping, born in specific circumstances is created to justify colonial policies with regard to immigration, land ownership, education and more importantly, their exclusion from full participation in the market economy.

The other important fact is that that the Malay Muslims are portrayed as non-loyal as they are believed to have a regional loyalty or emotional links to their homeland simply due to the geographical situation of Singapore in the *Nusantara*. Malay Muslim loyalty is questioned and slammed to be non-integrative with other communities in Singapore.(Suriani 2004: 3,9). The point is the historical fact that Malays who have indigenous claims to this land has been questioned. This also shows the nature of stereotyping the Malay by the Orientalists’ discourse. This also underlines the ahistorical perspective of the Orientalists’ thinking as well.

Another disheartening feature of Orientalism is that the discourses nurtured by Orientalist are accepted by indigenous scholarship knowingly or unknowingly. Malay scholarship, especially Malay Muslim upper class is caught under this trap without understanding the reality. The acceptance of ‘Malay being lazy’ by Mahathir Bin Mohammed in his study on “Malay Dilemma (1982) underlines the fact that Orientalists’ discourses have entrenched among the Malay scholarship to some extent, which in turn replaces the existing indigenous theory and concepts of Malays.

Further, Surian Suratman’s (2005) analysis on “Problematic Singapore Malays” describes that the Malays are portrayed in 1960s as ‘slow to adapting to changes’, in 1970s as ‘old fashioned

and traditional', in 1980s as 'lagging behind and not integrating', in 1990s as 'Malays are progressing but cannot be satisfied' and in 2000s as 'Malays are progressing but distancing themselves'. These kind of stereotypes and prejudices of Orientalists' discourse are propagated against Malays to relegate them to the level of 'other' in the multiracial society in Singapore.

The recent book of Lee Kuan Yew (2011) on "Hard Truths to Keep Singapore Going" nullifies the image of Malays by asking them to be less strict in Islamic observances (Yew 2011: 229). In other words, he tries to show that Malays are not integrative with other communities in Singapore because of their religion. Thus, he tries to stereotype the religion of Malays thinking that it has become a stumbling block to the prosperity of the country and attempts to relegate them to the stage of 'others' in this multiracial country. Moreover, this is an attempt to show the supremacy and racism by the Orientalists' in their discourses as well. However, it should be noted here that the case is reverse in practice in the case of Malays in Singapore. In the sense, Malays are no longer living in 'enclaves' and of course being more integrative with other communities in Singapore.

Another important factor of Orientalism is totalizing tendency, which means attributing everything to one sole factor. In a new turn of event, action of Malay Muslim in Singapore is attributed to Islam, especially after the

post 9/11 attack on US world trade centre. In the recent book of Lee Kuan Yew on "Hard Truths to Keep Singapore Going", he asked the Muslims to be less strict in their religious observations (Yew 2011: 229). On top of that, the portrayal of The Malays as loyal to Islamic revivalist or fundamentalist movements is a way of attributing the actions of Malays to Islam, which is a part of Orientalists' agenda. On 24 April 1987, four Malays were detained without trial for manufacturing rumours about an imminent clash between Chinese and Malays in Singapore. During a televised confession, all four men confessed their involvement in violent and Islamic activist groups and pictures of confiscated weapons were published in local newspaper (Aljunied, 2010: 317).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the above discussion dealt with the conceptualization of Orientalism and its traits from the work of Said. Thereafter, it applied the theory of Orientalism concerning the Malay Muslims in the post-colonial context of Singapore. This paper reveals that the Orientalist thinking is stereotypical, totalizing in tendency, and ahistorical in relation to Malay Muslims in the Post-Colonial Singapore. More importantly, the Orientals are accorded as the "Others" with the discriminatory and prejudicial terminology like backward, irrational, exotic, lazy, alcoholic, uncultured,

illiterate and so on by the Occidents (West). This espouses superiority of the West and inferiority of East. The unhealthy events befalling upon the developing world in the contemporary era is a solid manifestation of the Orientalists' treatment towards others. Thus, stereotyping and prejudice of "others" need to be exposed and critiqued from all fronts..

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