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Universidad del Zulia
Facultad Experimental de Ciencias
Departamento de Ciencias Humanas
Maracaibo - Venezuela

American Orientalism: A Historical Background

Prof. Dr. Abdul Sattar Awad Ibrahim

Department of English Al-Turath University College

Abstract

This research paper is intended to present a historical background about American orientalism. It concentrates on those aspects which have obliged the Occident to explore the Orient, shedding light on political, social, economic, and cultural factors to be examined in this regard. It also sheds light on the American tendency to monopolize studies on orientalism in an attempt to be independent of European studies in this respect. Besides, the research paper unfolds the American interest in the Orient in general and in the Arabic and Islamic world in particular and the reasons that have made America examine them thoroughly on many and various levels. Furthermore, there will be a clear account about those bright and glorious aspects of which the Arab and Islamic world has been proud of and by which the Occident has been fascinated and influenced. This research paper quotes those signs of the Holy Quran which show the Occident's hatred and envy towards the Arab Muslims and which show how its civilization will one day collapse and be transferred to other nations and countries.

Orientalismo Americano: Un Trasfondo Histórico

Resumen

El objetivo de este trabajo de investigación es presentar un trasfondo histórico sobre el orientalismo estadounidense. Se concentra en aquellos aspectos que han obligado a Occidente a explorar Oriente, arrojando luz sobre los factores políticos, sociales, económicos y culturales que se examinarán a este respecto. También arroja luz sobre la tendencia estadounidense a monopolizar los estudios sobre el orientalismo en un intento de ser independiente de los estudios europeos a este respecto. Además, el trabajo de investigación revela el interés estadounidense en Oriente en general y en el mundo árabe e islámico en particular y las razones que han hecho que Estados Unidos los examine a fondo en muchos y diversos niveles. Además, habrá un relato claro sobre aquellos aspectos brillantes y gloriosos de los que el mundo árabe e islámico se ha sentido orgulloso y por los cuales Occidente se ha sentido fascinado e influenciado. Este trabajo de investigación cita los signos del Sagrado Corán que muestran el odio y la envidia de Occidente hacia los musulmanes árabes y que muestran cómo su civilización algún día colapsará y será transferida a otras naciones y países.

This research paper is mainly concerned with some significant aspects of American orientalism, especially the Arab and Islamic world. Orientalism, generally speaking, is a very important activity for both the United States and the Arab and the Islamic World. The function of orientalism for the Arab and Islamic world is to introduce the Arab and the Muslims to their position as seen in the eye of America and also to those aspects, familiar and unfamiliar, as to the political, economic, cultural, social, religious, and even tribal and spatial categories which can be of high significance to the United States of America when trying to occupy or control any part of our homeland, because the former let the latter undergo those gaps, shortcomings, and points of weaknesses which enable the former to do whatsoever it wants to do in accordance with both its national security and the international heritage. The United States of America feels the necessity and responsibility for making special studies in the field of orientalism as it is also aspiring for global control of the world. Thus, orientalism is more significant to the United States of America than to the Arab and Islamic world, for the latter's potentialities are limited in this field of study. Thus,

one can say that the Occident knows more than what the Orient knows about itself.

It is worth noting that orientalism may be defined as the interest in and the depiction and description of the cultural and literary aspects of the Orient which may be made by writers, designers and artists of the Occidental countries. Orientalism thus depicts the cultures of the middle Eastern and Asian countries, and it is mainly related to the Orient or the East as opposed to the Occident or the West respectively.

According to Faisal Abdul Wahab, American orientalism can be identified with three different aspects. First, the kind of orientalism that has often been associated with the name of Edward Said which represents an outstanding point of view concerning America's hegemony and the control of the Orient; the second aspect concentrates on orientalism as a constant effort and an urgent activity to serve oriental sciences in general and Islamic sciences in particular; the third aspect as pointed out by Abdul Jabbar Naji is regarded as a genuine reflection of the relationship between the Orient and the Occident as a result of the geographic discoveries and the economic aspects conducive to its evolution. In the beginning, America depends on European orientalism as a source for information to help it know everything about the Orient. Yet there are many reasons for the appearance of American orientalism as an independent activity; America starts to abandon the dependence on European heritage as to orientalism which was once imported to America; America is motivated, throughout its artists, to learn and be introduced to the civilizations of other nations. The Romantic period plays a greater part in this respect, for writers during this period began to learn about the oriental heritage of which *The Arabian Nights* was an important literary work and which was a great motive for the many Occidental voyagers to come to the East in order to know its cultures, languages, and religions: a good example of those American orientalist is Herman Melville. 1

In his *American Literature and Orientalism* Marwan Obeidat projects the Middle East and the Muslim world as being represented or misrepresented in American literary texts written during the period between "the mid-nineteenth century to the present day." 2 He points out that the overall view of the Americans concerning the Muslims of the East is regarded as being "fueled by prejudice," and he, at the same time, has censured Washington Irving (1783-1859) for his views concerning Islam which he considers as being "shallow and distorted" 3 Besides, criticism against Ralph Waldo Emerson has not been overlooked who apparently "preferred

to remain Occidental,” 4 but he also points out that Emerson has not been “motivated by any kind of bias against the Orient...who has read a great deal of Oriental literature, including Persian and mystic poetry...[having] profound interest and fascination for the mystic ideals” 5 to the extent that his writings consist of “certain simplifications of Islam and the Prophet [Muhammad Peace Be Upon Him].” 6

It should be noted that among those who have been greatly influenced by the Oriental culture is Irving who has presented many writings about the Arab and Islamic civilization of the Eden Lost which are crowned by his unique book *The Life of Muhammad*. It may be suggested that the religious factor can be considered another motive for American orientalism, for America shows its tendency to spread Christianity in the Arab world. Besides, the economic factor for American orientalism should not be overlooked, which motivates America to find new markets for selling its economic products. 7 Most important for the colonizing countries is orientalism which is made for the sake of political aspects in so far as it helps them discover the sound means of how to run and exploit the riches of the colonized countries. Because of its tremendous military and economic development, the United States of America becomes the most powerful country in the world that even trespasses the European countries on all levels and, at the same time, it aspires to occupy and control the entire world, so orientalism to it must be of paramount significance.

According to Abdul Wahab, American Orientalism takes two phases: the first phase shows its dependence on European Orientalism which ends after the beginning of the post-independence period which lasts from 1783 (the year that points to the independence of America) to the end of World War II; the second phase is known as the modern contemporary orientalism characterized by the great emphasis on political orientalism due to the political and economic changes witnessed by America after the two World Wars and after the waning of the role of Britain and France due to the appearance of America as a substitute for them on many and various levels. 8

American orientalism has not only dealt with the traditional aspects known for their study of Islam and its sectors and divisions, but it has also employed them in such a way as to serve the American political orientalism and interests. The American orientalist's writings are characterized by the fictional style which is to endow them with fame and direct effect on the American society.

It is worth noting that American orientalism allots great importance to the American identity, which leads to the appearance of thoughtful and

philosophical schools that are to concentrate on the principle of criticism and analysis as to their researches and opinions which have been rejected from the ecclesiastical point of view, for history becomes subject to criticism and analysis. Furthermore, the pioneers of American orientalism are romantic like Irving and Emerson who believe that the past represents human efforts which are invaluable and which are regarded as a constant factor among the so many and various ones. To Abdul Wahab, Irving's interest in orientalism has started when he began to work in the American Council in Spain in 1826 and thus the Arab and Islamic heritage of the Eden Lost became in his own hand; Irving so admires this heritage that he has composed many books in the field of orientalism like *The Invasion of Granada* and *The Eden Lost Conquest*; they are the two books which have inspired him to compose his great book entitled *The Life of Muhammad*.

On the other hand, it should be unfolded that the Arab and Islamic world should shed light on and study those points of view which contribute to its importance and greatness as far as its scientific, cultural, military, social, and humane aspects are concerned. Irving, for instance, presents his testimony that the behaviour of the Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him), after the Mecca conquest, shows that he is really the messenger of God and not a mere just and successful yet victorious leader, for he shows his mercy and compassion for his citizens despite the fact that his position becomes most powerful, and thus he has crowned his victory with mercy and forgiveness. Moreover, Irving said that the Old Testament had been one day the guide of man and the basis of his own behaviour until Jesus Christ (Peace Be Upon Him) appeared and thus all Christians followed his instructions as shown in the New Testament—the Bible. He adds that the Holy Quran has replaced both of these books for it is more comprehensive and more detailed than they really are and, at the same time, it has corrected all the confusions and wrong changes and notions inserted in them, and the Holy Quran consists of everything and all laws as it is the concluding holy heavenly book. Furthermore, Irving confesses that Muhammad is the concluding Prophet and the greatest messenger sent by the Almighty Allah to all mankind.

It must be noted that orientalism represents a trend of thought in various studies about the Orient, which is looking for its sciences, doctrines, and literatures, not to mention its civilization, religions, languages, and cultures. Orientalism contributes to the formation of the Occidental point of view about the Arab and Islamic world and is expressive and illustrative of the background of the civilizational conflict, old and new, between the

Occident and the Orient, as pointed out by Munthir Maaliqi in his book *Orientalism in the Scales*.⁹ This phenomenon of orientalism has occupied an important space in the human history on the one hand and in the Arab and Islamic world on the other, and formed across different historical epochs a significant symbol in the field of thought, culture, and literature. Maaliqi also points out that orientalism has sprung from the study of Arab archaeology and managed to transfer the sciences of the Orient to the Occident which have been the bases of the Occidental Renaissance which has reached its highest point of progress and prosperity and which then has influenced the Arab contemporary and modern Renaissance and coloured it with many and various positive and negative phenomena with its broad subject matters—literary, political, religious, and historical. 10

Most importantly, the study of orientalism with its actions, plans, and dimensions contributes to the revival of our homeland and rid it of the iniquitous fall which has been caused by the orientalist and their students who, because of their aggressive tendency towards the Arab and Islam, have delayed the course of their progress and distanced them from contributing significant achievements to world civilization, especially when they have obliterated the Arab and Islamic civilization which has reached its highest point, and whose knowledge and experience have greatly progressed. Thus, the Occident has shown its aggressive nature towards the Arab and Islam and created their conflict with their civilization for the sake of getting sovereignty; hence, the Occident has competed with them for the great position they have acquired across history when man has got his freedom which he struggles to obtain for a long period of time and feels the injustice of his oppressors. The Occident, thus, feels that the danger is coming to them from the Orient which they think threatens their origins of thought and cultural horizons. Therefore, the Occident has prepared and fortified itself in order to launch a thoughtful and informational attack when it sets free its inimical pens to make their raids against the Arab and Islamic civilization by deforming the Arab civilization and Islam and the Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him), employing writers and literary men from various nationalities and making use of the state of weakness the Arab and Islam have been suffering from, not to mention the Occident's invasion of the Arab world. Thus, the Occident has started to conspire against the Arab and Islamic civilization in order to deform its glowing aspects—religious, social, economic, and political—in an attempt to denigrate its ancient and modern history, forgetting and obliterating the fact that that the Arab civilization has immortalized itself during the most difficult

times and more specifically during what is called to be the dark ages lived and witnessed by the Occident in medieval times. It should be made clear that the Arab and Islamic scientific and literary heritage, and the artful and architectural creative achievements, not to mention the exploits on various levels, have surprised the world in general and European thinkers living during the European Renaissance in particular. Maaliqi points out that the European thinkers even employed the Arabic language which they considered the language of human thought and communication and regarded the Arab and Islamic civilization as the glittering minaret of the modern Latin world which was definitely the basis of the European Renaissance. 11 Not only has imperialism been aggressive towards the Arab and Islamic world but it also has been aggressive and malignant against human life in all the foreign countries of the modern world. For imperialism has possessed all the powerful ingredients to pollute, by means of a number of orientalists, the sacredness of the genuine pen, denigrate the history of the Arab, and spoil the reputation of Islam. For the triumph of Islam in the widespread countries has surprised and frightened the Occident which is therefore motivated to know the reasons behind this triumph; hence, the fever of orientalism with its phenomenon has stimulated Europe, America, and Russia, that have depended on voyagers, scientists, historians, and researchers, to study and translate whatsoever useful for understanding the ingredients of the powerful Arab and Islamic civilizations, which will make them able to devise the means necessary for destroying them, and therefore, they will be able to destroy the Arab potentials and delay their revival and renovation and, at the same time, steal their precious resources whatsoever.

The Occident's attitude towards the Arab and Islam is clearly shown in the various writings—aggressive and purposeful—made by many orientalists and the Zionists invaders to enter, according to Maaliqi, into the Arab Homeland, rule its nations, and forge all facts related to its brilliant civilizations, with the exception of some orientalists who have proved themselves to be just and whose writings have been objective and scientific, for they have mentioned the Arab and Islamic contribution to Europe in the fields of medicine, astronomy, and mathematics, etc. They have also mentioned the role of the Arab and Islam in preserving the Aristotelian heritage and Greek and African civilizations; hence, those just orientalists have attempted to show the truth and be fair yet true to historical facts. 12

However, the Occident has tried to obliterate the entity and identity of the Arab and Islamic world due to the former's aggressive attitudes based on the culture of hatred 13 and its wish to prevail in the world.

Moreover, the Occident always denies the vantage of the Arab and Islamic civilizations which have greatly contributed to its modern and contemporary progress and prosperity. Not only is it because of hatred but it is also because of envy that the Occident has behaved in this way towards the Arab and Islam; this is a fact that is well expressed in the word of the Almighty Allah which is mentioned in the Holy Quran and which shows that if all the Muslims in the world unify themselves under one banner, they will surely rule the world and humiliate all those who have misbehaved towards them. Thus, the Almighty Allah says, addressing the Jews and the Christians, “Say: O People of the Scripture why drive ye back believers from the way of Allah, seeking to make it crooked, when ye are witnesses (to Allah’s guidance)? Allah is not unaware of what ye do.”¹⁴ Concerning the hatred of the Occident towards the Arab Muslims, the Almighty Allah says: “Hatred is revealed (by the utterance of) their mouths, but that which their breasts hide is greater. We have made plain for you the revelations if ye will understand.”¹⁵ Furthermore, in another sign of the Holy Quran the Almighty Allah says: “Never will the Jews nor the Christians be pleased with you (O Muhammad Peace Be Upon Him) till you follow their religion.”¹⁶ As to the transference of power and wealth from one place to another or from one nation to another the Almighty Allah says: “These are (only) the vicissitudes which cause to follow one another for mankind...”¹⁷

It is therefore significant to notice that the Occident should be advised that power, or civilization, or wealth, or prosperity will be transferred from one nation to another; a fact that is well expressed and witnessed across history and in the Holy Quran as well: “And every nation has its appointed term; when their term is reached, neither can they delay it nor can they advance it an hour (or a minute).”¹⁸ Therefore, the Occident should quit its arrogance, avarice, hostility and authoritarianism towards the Arab and Islam for the latter may one day assume power and prevail over the entire world according to the word of the Almighty Allah. To substantiate the idea that civilization would be restored to its original place, Edger Allen Poe declares in his Review of Stephens’ Arabia Petraea and the Holy Land that according to the Biblical history that when the word of the Almighty Allah is fulfilled, civilization will be brought back again to its first and original place:

From all sources we derive evidence of the conformity, almost of the identity, of the modern with the ancient usages of the East. This steadfast resistance to innovation is a trait remarkably confined to the regions of biblical history, and (it should not be doubted) will remain in force until it should have fulfilled all the important purposes of biblical elucidation. Hereafter, when the ends of Providence shall be thoroughly answered, it will not fail to give way before the influence of that very Word it has been instrumental in establishing; and the tide of civilization, which has hitherto flowed continuously, from the rising to the setting sun, will be driven back, a partial ebb, into its original channels. 19

Notes

1. Faisal Abdulwahab, American Orientalism. www.ahewwar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid...

2. Marwan Obeidat, American Literature and Orientalism (1999) www.Academia.edu/.../American_Literature...

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Faisal Abdulwahab, American Orientalism. www.ahewwar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid...

8. Ibid.

9. Munthir Maaliqi, Orientalism in the Scales, 1st ed. (Beirut: The Islamic Office, 1997), p. 5.

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid. p. 7.

12. Ibid. p. 8-9.

13. <http://www-iid-alraid.com/>

14. This is a literary translation of the meaning of Chapter 3 (Al-Imran), verse 99 quoted in The Holy Quran. <https://tryhome.wrodpress.com/.../al-imra...>

15. Ibid. Chapter 3, verse 118.

16. As quoted in The Holy Quran, Chapter Al-Baqara (2), Verse no. 120. University of Leeds-www.comp.leeds.ac.uk/nora/.../2-120.ht... In the same reference it is important to quote the following words of Allah concerning the envy of those People of The Book towards the Arab Muslims: "Quite a number of the People of the Book wish they could turn you (people) back to infidelity after ye have believed, from selfish envy, after the truth hath become manifest unto them: But forgive and overlook, till Allah accomplish His purpose; for Allah hath power over all things." As quoted in The Holy Quran, chapter Al-Baqara (2), verse 109.

17. The Holy Quran, Chapter 3, verse 140. As quoted in <http://tryhome.wordpree.com/.../al-imra..>

18. The Holy Quran, Chapter 7 (Al-Araf), Verse, 34. As quoted in www.Comp.leeds.ac.uk/nora/.../17:34.Html.verse.no.34.

19. Edgar Allen Poe, Review of Stephens' Arabia Petraea.
www.amazon.com/...Arabia-Petraea/.../04...

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