

# **Orientalism**

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## **Bush and Orientalism**

Upon Bush's reelection as the president of the US, there seems to be much discussion going on, but hardly any discussion concerning the reinforcement of Orientalism due to his reelection. As for myself, I feel anxious that Bush and his Orientalist associates may reinforce Orientalism in America, and in the world.

Those who would translate the term, "Orientalism" literally into "Orient-ism" or "Orient-centrism" might argue that, if Bush takes this notion of "Orientalism," it is not a situation to worry about, but one to celebrate. Those, however, who are aware of how the term is truly used, will understand the actual meaning of the term is the opposite, i.e., "Orient-contempt-ism" or "Orient-discrimination-ism."

Arguing that this Orientalism has driven America to disdain and discriminate against the non-Occident (i.e., the Orient), and eventually to invade Afghanistan and Iraq as well as arousing certain public opinion against North Korea, may be criticized for its ignorance or exaggeration, especially when the world has observed the events of 9.11 and the North Korean nuclear weapon issue.

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Is it, however, really an exaggerated groundless apprehension to question whether Orientalism is embedded in the United States' view of Iraq and the Korean peninsula? There have been numerous cases of misrepresentation of Korea by the US: it described the 4.19 Student Uprising by saying, "a rose bloomed in a trash bin"; General John Wickham, the United States commander of the joint US-South Korea military command, called the Korean people "rats"; an American press recently reported that there are millions of prostitutes in South Korea. As for the representations of North Korea, Kim Jong-il of North Korea has been regarded as the equivalent of Saddam Hussein of Iraq, and the "North Korean nuclear weapon" as the equivalent of the unaccounted-for "Weapons of Mass Destruction" in Iraq. My suspicion of the American Orientalist view on Korea is based on these misrepresentations.

Wouldn't there be any relation between the United States' claims on the issues of the still unexplained North Korean nuclear weapon, on South Korea's uranium enrichment test, and on the unclear Iraqi WMD? How far is the lopsided relationship between South Korea and the US from the unequal treaty between Korea and Japan at the time of the "opening of the port", when the US announces unilaterally a reduction of US forces in South Korea and maintains the unequal SOFA (Status of Forces Agreement) which leaves military command in wartime to the United State?

Those who are keen on the international politics might argue that this unequal relationship is a matter-of-course for lesser nations, and, thus, they should become greater powers. Amongst the approximately 200 nations around the world, however, the chances for lesser nations to become as powerful as the US are almost nonexistent. Some patriots might get angry now if I say that South Korea cannot become a nation as mighty as the United States; however, we should acknowledge our reality.

What matters is not power in real politics. Orientalism is the term that signifies the existent contempt and discrimination at the bottom of the political, economic, social and cultural discourses that were created to justify the imperialist West's invasion of and domination over the non-West. In other words, Orientalism was

brought out as a matter of historical judgment.

In the case of Orientalism, “ism” does not mean a certain political, economic, social, or cultural system, but it carries a negative implication as in “alcoholism.” This is not to say that Orientalism means “addiction to the Orient,” but to say that it implies the negative attitude, i.e., discrimination and contempt, toward the Orient.

#### The Falsehood of the Essentialist Distinction

The distinction between the West (the Occident) and the East (the Orient) presumes certain essential differences between the two. We can easily differentiate them with simplistic features. This sort of distinction, however, is often based upon unreliable reasons.

What is important here is that this kind of distinction between the West and the East based on false reasons first started in the West, especially by Western imperialists. One of the most prevalent discourses of this distinction can be the comparison between the “civilized” West and the “barbaric” East. From the Western point of view, this comparison might have had certain reasons; however, the very reasons were fabricated in the West, and what is worse is that we, in the East, have also believed them to be true.

The same can be observed in historical views on Korean history and the theories of Korean nationality fabricated by imperialist Japan. The West had to justify their invasion of the East, and the imperialist Japan learned this strategy from the West, as has been proven by many studies on the colonial policies in the early Japanese colonial period.

The problem is that this Orientalism is still present, long after the imperialist invasions. Bush’s policies are the evidence for the existence of Orientalism. The Bush administration invaded Iraq claiming that Iraq had WMD and that Saddam Hussein was an unforgivable dictator. As the supposed WMD have not yet been found and as Hussein was the representative of Iraq, chosen by its people, it is natural that the Iraqi people pronounce an anathema against Bush.

Bush’s military force cannot occupy Iraq forever, I believe. Though the Bush

administration has announced that the US military force will be withdrawn upon the establishment of a democratic government in Iraq, the US will probably still try to dominate Iraq in one way or another as long as they have an oil interest in Iraq. Their dominance, however, will not last for long, and the US army cannot help but leave Iraq. This is just a matter of time.

I do not ignore the anger that Bush and the people in America, or people in the world, felt over 9.11. Nobody can deny that 9.11 was an atrocity that aroused anger around the world. The world, however, is aware that the broad antagonism of the Bush administration against the Arab world was one of the main causes of 9.11, and that the terrorist Bin Laden himself was, in the past, nurtured by the US to fight against the USSR. In other words, 9.11 was a trap set by the US themselves; then, as the US was attacked by the terrorists, it reared up for its own national interest.

This is, however, should not allow for such an act as 9.11. In the context of Orientalism, Bush and Bin Laden can be regarded as Orientalists of the same kind. Bush brought up Bin Laden as his perpetrator to dominate the Arab world, but Bin Laden became an Arab nationalist to resist against the US. Rising against the Orientalism of the Bush administration, Bin Laden has become a fundamentalist or essentialist who adheres to Arab-absolutism or Orient-centrism.

This kind of variety of Orientalism is often observed in fundamentalist nationalists during or after the period of liberation from the colonial powers or during independence struggles. There are also numerous varieties of Orientalism that are cultural and ideological. The East-West distinction theories in South Korea are also, at the end, essentialist categorizations.

## Orientalism

At the beginning, Orientalism meant the artistic and academic trend that can be translated as “an Orient-adoring inclination” in the West. This meaning has been

often adopted in the translation of the term and in certain West-related publications. The term, Orientalism, however, gained another meaning as Edward Said appropriated the term in *Orientalism* taking it for the Western way of perception of the East that is fabricated as a means of domination over the East. It was in 1991 that I translated Said's book into Korean, and since then it seems that the term has been understood with Said's meaning in South Korea. In this article, I also use the term, Orientalism, in Said's way.

In *Orientalism*, Said focused on Western Orientalism vis-a-vis the Middle East, but I am not here to introduce Said's observation on the topic. Middle East Studies are not fully developed in South Korea for various reasons. Nor has my translation of the book encouraged Middle East Studies in South Korea, unlike in certain countries where the publication opened active discussions concerning Said's book and the Middle East. As the Korean translator of *Orientalism*, I felt a certain responsibility to introduce these discussions, but no one seemed to be interested in them. This did not, however, discourage me as I translated the book because I wanted to introduce its paradigm which we can use to ponder our own problems, not because I was interested in Middle East Studies. Nonetheless, I have yet to see publications that deal with our own problems of Orientalism seriously, except for a very few works.

I expected foreign literary studies, including English literature, to open genuine discussions concerning Orientalism, such as so-called "postcolonial" discussions. I have read a couple of related articles, and observed that our foreign literary studies are still very submissive to the powerful. In English literature, the Saidian critical approach has been totally ignored or disregarded. The case of English literature is still better than the cases of French or German literary studies where there is no single publication that concerns the matter. Said criticized French literature because of its Orientalism, as much as he did with English literature. Camus' works, especially, have been translated into Korean many times and are now published in a complete edition.

The Orientalist elements can be observed not only in so-called "canonical" works, but also in our contemporary works. Orientalism is prevalent in most works of

English and French literature. At the moment, however, those literary works imbued with imperialism and colonialism are considered as the Canon and as masterpieces. This is quite a deplorable reality. The same criticism can be made not only of literary works, but also of scientific work in other areas of studies in the humanities and social sciences, from Marx to Weber and on to Huntington, to mention just a few; yet, no one has called them into question.

### Robinson Crusoe

Probably everybody has heard of Daniel Defoe's Robinson Crusoe. The scene I remember most is where the native islander, who was saved by Crusoe, knelt down in front of him and swore to serve him as a slave until his death. This native man was named after the day, Friday, that he was saved by Crusoe, learned English and Christian principles from his "master", Crusoe, and went back to England with him. Whether it was an island in Asia or in Africa, for the British, or for the Western, it would have been the same story. In other words, if Crusoe had drifted to Jeju-do Island or Dok-do Island, the written story might have been the same. If our ancestor had sworn to be a slave to Crusoe and changed his/her name to "Friday," would we have appreciated the book as much as we do now?

Is Robinson Crusoe the only case of Orientalism? How about Tarzan, who we have seen so many times in the form of novels, films and TV dramas? How about those films about American Indians? How about The Jungle Book? Who is 007 that fights the "Eastern" villains who want to destroy the world? What does the friendship between Livingstone and Stanley, introduced with the title, "The Explorer of the 'Dark' Continent," in a Korean middle school textbook, tell us about? Who is Schweitzer, "the Saint in the jungle," for us now? Many more examples can be taken.

Robinson Crusoe is read, in general, as an adventure novel, or so-called "survival

story”; however, the book is more than that. Crusoe was a slave-trafficking merchant, a sugar and tobacco plantation manager, and an adventurous trader who crosses the Eurasian continent. In a word, he was a typical imperialist who formed a domination network through production and trade based on the Western Europe and its colonies.

Crusoe came to the uninhabited island because of a shipwreck while sailing from northern Brazil to the northwestern coastline of Africa, called Guinea in those days, for slave trafficking. The island, however, was not an island in the distant sea, but one at the mouth of the second-largest river in South America, in sight of land. The sea connected to the river was the Caribbean Sea, and the native islanders were those whom we call the Carib nowadays. As the island was no great distance from the shore, the Carib could visit the island easily by canoe.

In the novel, the Carib are described as a cannibal race and the reason for their visit to the island is to have a cannibalistic party on it. Friday is often mistaken as a Negro, but he was in fact a member of the Carib. It was first claimed by Jesuits, who came to the area in the 17th century when Crusoe drifted to the island, that the Carib were a cannibal race; this theory, however, was discounted by the Jesuits of the 18th century.

This change was due to the history of colonization. In the 17th and the 18th centuries, most of the Caribbean area was colonized and the Carib were in danger of extinction. The number of native Carib decreased sharply from about 40,000 at the end of the 16th century to about 4,000 a century later. In other words, the cannibalism theory disappeared along with the native Carib.

The cannibal Friday learned to eat cooked goat meat and bread, to wear clothes and to speak English. He also learns how to use a gun, the symbol of European civilization, and to kill his own cannibal race with the gun. In less than three years, Friday became a “good” Christian, even better than Crusoe.

This was the basic Western perspective of the non-West, and has been the motive for the reproduction of “Robinson Crusoe literature” for the last two centuries. The remarkable vital force of this perspective came from its connection

to one of the fundamental fabrications that supported imperialism and colonialism: to switch the positions of the invaders and the native. This was the basic structure for the creation mythology of colonialism. In other words, the western invaders claimed to be the natives by building their artificial paradise and then excluding the original natives as invaders of that paradise.

### **Orientalism in Us**

I have, above, mentioned Robinson Crusoe as an example of Orientalism, and now will go back to discuss our own reality. South Korea was experiencing different submissive and colonial fevers of English education, overseas studies, overseas traveling, and preference to foreign goods under the name of “internationalization” and “globalization,” when the so-called “IMF crisis” struck the country. Under the surveillance of the IMF, South Korea had to open its market to foreign capital, which some regarded as “the second national humiliation,” a new “trusteeship” or a “viceroysip.” These humiliated emotions are now forgotten, and those fevers from the past are returning.

The 21st century began with a series of events that caused serious damage to humanity: the 9.11 terrorist attack caused more than 3,000 casualties in New York; the US military’s act of retaliation caused an even larger number of casualties. Under the name of anti-terrorism, the US is carrying out a large-scale military operation in Iraq. This series of tragic events implies not only a deprivation of human lives, but also of humanity.

No one can deny that the developed countries, such as the US, are taking military and economic actions based on calculations around issues of oil interest and the Israel-Palestine conflict. Since the Cold War came to an end near the end of the 20th century, the world has shifted its power structure from a US-USSR polar system to a singular US formation. As the risk of coming into conflict with the USSR has

disappeared, it has become much easier for the US to take military action. As its military expenses decreased, the US economy also prospered. Consequently, people started to believe that American ideology was the only justice in the world. “Globalization,” the IMF system, and the war in Iraq are the outcomes of this American ideology.

This American ideology is deeply rooted in Orientalism. According to Said, Orientalism is a system of cultural hegemony that expresses and represents the East (which constitutes substantial parts of Western civilization and culture) through cultural and ideological discourses as an entity that is sustained by certain systems, knowledge, figures, and beliefs, as well as the colonial bureaucracy and the colonial mode of life. In other words, Orientalism has been the means for the West to exploit and dominate the non-West and its culture.

According to Said, for the West, “the East” indicates the Other distinguished from the West itself. To justify the West’s invasion of and domination over the East, the West had to make an ontological and epistemological distinction between the East and the West, claiming that there were essential differences between the two. The East, thus, is fabricated by the West. Invasion and domination promote mystification, along with contempt. Likewise, the West endowed the East with political dictatorship, social authoritarianism, and cultural mysticism as its unique characteristics. This was the West’s scheme to further their domination over the East.

This Western view of the East has its origin in the Greek and Roman era when the West started to dominate the East, and is still prevalent. It is dominating us not only at the political, economical, social and cultural level, but also at the level of our own minds and bodies. Orientalism in Korea is based on the belief that culture is completed with the American capitalist system, the American presidential system, American individualism, and American Ph.Ds. Is there be any other country in the world that has been Americanized as much as South Korea? Despite this reality, the so-called “elite” intellectuals of the society insist on further Americanization under the name of “globalization”.

Said's Orientalism indicates first, the studies on the East; second, the paradigm based on the presumed ontological and epistemological distinction between the East and the West that can be found in literature or journalism about the East; third, the inter-related system or network of knowledge that produces the narrations about the East and endows them with authority, for the Western domination over the East.

The East represented through Orientalism does not necessarily correspond to the "real" East. The East here is a representation through the discourse of Orientalism, and this representation of the East appears to be the subject=subordination of the Western view. Furthermore, to position the East opposed to the West is also an Orientalist statement. Said, however, was not to claim that a Westerner can never know the "real" East or that only a citizen of the East can; instead, he showed that Western Orientalism produces a power relation of dominance and suppression through political and economic practices.

When they achieved independence from the West, the countries of the East sought out their subjectivities in the models of the Western nation-state (the formal universality), and, at the same time, emphasized their non-Western originality (the concrete peculiarity). The non-Western intellectuals found themselves faced with the duty to establish an identity for their nations based on putative differences from the West, and to make their own history through the mechanism of imitation of and resistance against the West. It was in this context that the rehabilitation of Confucian culture was suggested in countries such as Japan, Korea, China and Singapore. In the case of Japan and China, the rehabilitation of Confucian culture receded after a while, unlike in Korea where it still remains as one of the country's major cultural currents. This Eastern Confucian culture, however, can be seen as a kind of Orientalism sharing Sinocentrism based on nationalism. The starting point of Sinocentrism is courtesy, i.e., the decorums of the ceremonies of coming of age, marriages, and funerals as well as ancestor worship. In the Joseon Dynasty, courtesy was forced to an extreme degree in order to get closer to China, the utopia where courtesy was worshipped. It is necessary for us to discuss how to overcome Orientalism, while taking precautions against dangerous traps such as Sinocentrism.

In *Orientalism*, Said analyzed how Western supremacy had been fabricated in the names of literature, scholarly works, art and religion, and how Western supremacy, in league with the imperialist domination, had exploited the colonized people and imposed upon them various forms of self-abasement. *Orientalism* was a book of anger toward the falsehood and hypocrisy of the Western mind, through which Said pursued his investigations as a genuine “intellectual activist.” Though *Orientalism* dealt with the invasion of Western imperialism in the Middle East, its argument can be applied to analyze the situation in Korea, both during the Japanese colonial period and today, where modernization, westernization, Americanization, internationalization, and globalization have come to mean the same thing. Imperialist Japan merely imitated the West and exploited Korea. Though it has been more than half a century since its liberation from Japan, Korea is still haunted by the Western ghost, which is now even more blatant, and at the same time subtler, than before.

Since the publication of *Orientalism*, Said’s criticism of Western science and art, especially of Oriental Studies, literature, fine art, architecture, and music, numerous controversies have been raised. Said already analyzed the linkage between Western music and imperialist power in his “Musical Elaborations,” and his perspective was further developed by Linda Nochlin through her criticisms of Western fine art. Said’s argument has provided a new critical perspective on the invasive and mystifying Oriental Studies in the West, and have, most importantly, been developed by Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha into discussions of people in the Third World, of the fabrication of “peoplehood” under colonial domination, and the contradictions and ambiguities of colonial policies. Said’s argument in *Orientalism* has become the guidepost that continuously promotes discourses which attempt to establish a new cultural system for the world based on the diversity of the non-West, anti-authoritative democracy, and the anti-logocentric mind.