A Critique Of Edward Said's Orientalism (al-Azm, Bernard Lewis, Robert Irwin)

The definition of the term Orientalism has been devised by Palestinian and intellectual critic, Edward Said in 1978. Said composed a deep criticism on Western Oriental studies and how the concept of ‘Orientalism’ and the image of the ‘Oriental Other’ was scheme of imaginative fictions; created by the European-West to justify colonial dominance and imperial oppression over the East. He illuminates how the essence of ‘Orientalism’ thrived on the racial preconceptions and derogatory stereotypes of the ‘Orient’ and asserts that these prejudicial undertones were the fundamental reason for the ‘ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority’. Since the publication of Said’s Orientalism, the accentuated differences between the ‘rational’ Occident and the ‘primitive’ Orient became prevalent in historical discussion amongst cultural critics such as Syrian philosopher Al-‘Azm, Bernard Lewis and Robert Irwin. Said elucidates how Western depictions of Oriental natives blurred the line between fantasy and reality of Eastern lands and ultimately enabled Western sovereignty over non-white subjects. Said asserts that superficial depictions of the Orient in historical portraits and narratives were rooted in Western unconsciousness, blinded by the desire to possess the enchanting myth of Eastern lands. This chapter will provide an analysis of Said’s explanation within Orientalism and will decipher the critical examination of Al-‘Azm, whilst incorporating multiple points from Irwin and Lewis who address the effective analysis of Said’s Orientalism. Said provides valuable insight into the bias and inaccuracy of Europe’s ‘Orientalised’ vision and how it was effective in enveloping the Oriental world – he expresses that such widespread artificial illusions, paved the road to the subordination and colonisation of the East. In contrast, Al-Azm’s Reverse Orientalism, exposes how Said fundamentally reinforced ‘essentialism’ in his work, as it further amplified the deep dissimilarity of both the East and the West. This chapter will strengthen Said’s framework of analysis whilst examining multiple historical thoughts and criticism from cultural critics. It will showcase how the perception of ‘Orientalism’ has shifted with time and how the West became conscious of the imperialist projects implemented in the Oriental world. Furthermore, it will identify the issues of Said’s arguments but also vindicate how it was significant in unveiling the bias of Europe’s ‘Oriental’ gaze in ideological narratives.

Al-‘Azm’s Reverse Orientalism, critically examines the methodology and inconsistency of Said’s arguments within his work, Orientalism. Al-‘Azm critiques how Said does not give an accurate definition of the ‘West’. Although, the reader may ascribe certain characteristics to the European-West such as being more ‘secular, evolved and liberated’ , Said’s oversight and absence of giving a definite meaning to the ‘West’, essentially leaves the reader to rely on their own natural connotations. This dismissive aspect of his argument exposes the issues and invalidity of his methodology as it leaves the perception of the West to the subjective imagination of the reader. This problematic feature showcases how inconsistent and flawed Said’s methodology truly is within Orientalism - Al- ‘Azm illuminates the major issue with Said’s arguments and denotes that this lack of consistency, ultimately diverted Said from attaining an objective, conclusive definition, leaving a sense of ambiguity with reader to utilise their own associations with the word.

Al-‘Azm’s criticism exposes several methodological, factual and theoretical errors within Said’s

arguments. He showcases how although Said admits that ‘cultures have always been inclined to impose transformation on other cultures’ and perceived other cultures ‘not as they are’ , he inadvertently disagrees with his own argument. Throughout Orientalism, Said denounces the Western world for objectifying the East and mispresenting the Orient, however Al-‘Azm credibly points out that Said himself, unconsciously implies that such fabricated illusions of another culture and its ‘distortions [are] inevitable’ . Al-‘Azm signifies the critical inaccuracies within Orientalism and exposes how such contradictions have fragmented the reliability of Said’s arguments and has provoked additional criticism of his historical approach and bias. Al-‘Azm unveils a new angle of interpretation through Said’s lack of consistency and connotes that if every culture – whether it be ‘Eastern or Western or South American’ – are unable to comprehend the reality of the ‘alien-Orient’ culture; then Europe’s ‘categorisation, classification and reduction’ is essentially preordained and unescapable. Said’s central insight in Orientalism, denounces the artificial depictions of the exotic and peculiar ‘Other’. However, in his analysis, he claims that ‘the nature of the human mind’ cannot avoid the essentialism that categorises the Orient. Here, Said further contradicts his own argument and ultimately conveys that it is not possible for the ‘human mind to’ grasp the lived reality and objective truth of the Orient people. Al-‘Azm proves the issues within Orientalism, and states that although Said rejects misrepresentation and reduction of the East, he also argues that such perceptions are ‘perfectly natural for the human mind’ to falsify and distort. He determines that Said is responsible for making significant intellectual errors as he consistently formed ostentatious, futile and self-contradictory speech.

Al-‘Azm conveys that Said’s classification of the ‘Orient’ and ‘Occident’ identities cemented the fabricated, inequality between the East and the West which Said essentially aimed to dismantle. He reveals how Said’s ascription to the Oriental Other as a place of ‘romance, exotic beings, haunting landscapes and remarkable experiences’ further defined the West as its contrasting image. Therefore, Al-‘Azm conveys that Said’s stereotypical and essentialist concepts are ultimately equivalent to the notion of European Orientalists. He states that the superiority and dominance of ‘Western societies, cultures, languages and mentalities’ has moulded the East to be inherently inferior to their Western ‘opponent’. In correspondence to this view, Robert Irwin illustrates how Eastern societies spent centuries in a system that buried their riches, cultures and beliefs to undermine them and their prosperity. He critiques Said’s stance of ‘essentialist, patronising and ideologically motivated’ construction of the Orient-Occident categories as it mirrors the similar ‘construct of Orientalists… which has no objective reality’ . Al-‘Azm states that the lack of consistency within Said’s Orientalism has fragmented the objectivity of his critical analysis which greatly refuted the validity of his arguments. Al-‘Azm argues that these irreversible, lasting features associated with the East and the West have been anchored by Said’s Orientalism, where he reinforces essentialistic categorisation of the ‘Orient’ and the ‘Occident’. He argues how ascribing essentialistic features to the Occident-West further stimulates inaccurate judgements and misleading constructions knowledge. Al-‘Azm concludes that Said fell ‘in the same trap of essentialist thinking’ which he intended to render.

Al-‘Azm critically analyses Said’s stance against Academic Oriental Studies which were, supposedly, based on ‘a European invention’ centred around the ‘virtues of geographical exploration and colonial adventure’ . He expands on how Western scholarship and studies ‘tended to essentialise and exoticize non-Western culture’ which emerged from the underlying, racial tones of Orientalism. Al-‘Azm asserts that Said was essentially ‘anti-Western’ as he portrayed the West as ‘evil and unfit’ to understand ‘human societies, cultures and languages’

. Here, Al-‘Azm inflicts a new angle of interpretation and showcases how Said’s ‘inveighing’ attitude against Western Academic Orientalism and his criticism of Western scholarship ‘codifying, reducing and dissecting the Orient’ , implicitly reflects the inherent, condescending biases of his work. Al-‘Azm also signifies that, although Said denounces Western academe, he refutes his own argument by claiming that the human mind is innately predisposed to ‘misrepresent the realities of other cultures’ – this showcases how Said’s objection of Western scholarship is also justified by his own arguments and exposes the inconsistency of his narrative. However, although Said illuminated the errors within Western scholarship, he also exposed the great need to dethrone Westo-centric perspectives that place Europe at the focal point of history.

A wave of historians and intellectual critics such as Robert Irwin have challenged the unclear problems that have persisted through Said’s arguments within Orientalism. They have argued that Said’s approach is reductionist as he majorly reduces and ‘confines the Orient to the Middle East’ when most Orientalist victims ‘are found outside that region’. Irwin connotes that such decisions undertaken by Said showcases how his theories within Orientalism is clouded with pure, subjective knowledge. He illuminates that although Said discusses about the ‘The East’, he entirely overlooks significant ‘Oriental’ colonies such as India, China and Africa who were also victims of Orientalist, colonial projects. In addition, Historian Bernard Lewis connotes that the fact that ‘Mr Said’s Orient was reduced to the Middle East’ and disregards the other third-world nations, simply captures the tainted knowledge within his arguments and methodology. This showcases how over time; critics have become aware of the major issues within Said’s methodology and subjectivity which provoked further debate in the scholarship of Orientalism. It has led intellectuals to question the authenticity of Said’s interpretation and the synthesis of his narrative as he does not consistently follow his own arguments.

Cultural critic, Ziauddin Sardar also addresses the issue of Said’s ‘objectiveness’ within his work. He discusses that Orientalism is an intricate web of utopic delusions, that has been deformed through centuries of prejudiced images of the Oriental Other. Such distortions and entanglements have shrouded Orientalism with the inability to attain ‘clear thinking and objective standards’ . He states that the term ‘Orientalism’, is an ‘artificial construct’ and cannot be detached from subjective ideologies as it is an integral part in the bridge that divides the East and the West. Likewise, Said argues that ‘there [cannot] be a true representation of anything’ because Oriental representations are always ‘intertwined, embedded, interwoven with many other things, besides the “truth”’ . It can be inferred Sardar proposes a new angle of interpretation as he showcases that Said’s lack of objectivity has occurred because the term ‘Orientalism’ itself, is one that is tangible and has altered through societal, economic and political climates with time. Sardar’s interpretation correlates with the central notion of Orientalism – both intellectuals argue that the true Orient is hidden and tainted by the veils of Orientalist ideology. They emphasise how false representations of the Orient’s reality, has prohibited historians from achieving pure objective knowledge of the ‘Orient’.

However, this research study is greatly in agreement with majority of Said’s significant intellectual arguments and will focus on the positive contributions Said’s orientalist works have made in historical analysis and critical methodology. It can be inferred that Al-‘Azm supports the central notion of Orientalism and elaborates how Orientalism ‘perpetuated European superiority… an essence that is natural to the West’ . Said also stresses this and demonstrates the ‘varying degrees of…inferiority and strength’ between the Orient and the Occident and crafted an ‘imaginative division’ between the Western and Eastern world. Moreover, Al-‘Azm

expands on how the Orientalist outlook was inherently organised for European domination and acknowledges that the ‘world is made up of two unequal halves.’ He connotes that Orientalism inspired political and economic interest in the Orient, but ‘also helped to maintain them.’ Although Al-‘Azm denotes the problems of Said’s methodology and narrative synthesis within Orientalism, he acknowledges the great contribution and valid interpretations it has made to scholarly debates. He discusses how Said’s dissection of the dehumanising ideology showcased how Europeans rationalised and justified the belief that the East were in need of their ‘civilising rays’ . The conception that the natives were in the ‘depths’ of ignorance and brutality has provoked Western Cultural-Academics to expose the falsified depiction of the ‘Dark Other’ and the dangers that come with such elaborated escapist fantasies.

Many historians such as Bernard Lewis place their arguments in harmony and agreement with Said’s belief that European powers justified their colonial project through Orientalist ‘fiction writers, artists… and European travellers’ . They believe that Said deserves credibility for exposing the cultural implications, imperialist imposition had on the Orient and how Europe’s justification was derived on biases and plain prejudice. Lewis addresses how Said’s definition of the ‘Occident’ revealed how the world revolved around the West and how it became the global ‘centre’ and the ruler for measuring ‘what was the norm’. He argues that the non-European Other being portrayed as ‘barbarous, despotic’ , abnormal and foreign began a journey ‘to a new myth’ , where the Orient was an embodiment of cruelty, enslavement and fatalism. Lewis aligns his arguments with Said’s interpretations and asserts that the ‘sexuality of the mythical Orient’ is simply a distortion of reality and is motivated by fascination. Said, states that these degrading connotations associated with the Eastern Other established the West to be defined as the stark contrast – one which is superior to the ‘Orient’. The West was essentially the contrast of the East – where civilisations were progressive, liberated and enlightened. Lewis’ comprehensive analysis illustrates the significant role Said’s book played in understanding ‘Orientalism’ and has become a fundamental basis of Orientalist history. Said’s significant influence in understanding Euro-centricity cannot be overlooked as he illuminates how European stereotypes and fantasies derive from symbolisms of the Orient. The pillars of Lewis’ argument illustrate that he largely agrees with Said’s belief that the mental image of the Orient is a scheme to redefine Oriental natives for economic exploitation and political oppression.

Overall, this essay describes the criticism of Said’s Orientalist work but also acknowledges the credible aspects of Orientalism as it has gifted intellectuals and critics about the historical value of the relationship between Europe and ‘Oriental’ lands. Said’s central notion illuminates how Orientalists falsified artificial narratives and artworks to both undermine and exoticize Oriental subjects. He showcases the prejudicial undertones within Orientalism and criticises Western academic for focusing on Eurocentric history – one which is essentialist and reductionist. Furthermore, critics such as Al-‘Azm, Irwin and Sardar critically examine the methodology and comprehensiveness of Said’s arguments. Each author points out credible issues within Orientalism and showcase how Said’s inconsistency within his arguments produce self-contradictory elements within his study. Al-Azm exposes the imbedded bias in Said’s analysis of Orientalists and how it refuted him to reaching a sufficient conclusion for the issues he elucidated in his discussion. Al-Azm’s fruitful criticism demonstrated how Said’s subjective knowledge and lack of objectivity essentially minimised the validity and factual accuracy of his narrative. He exposes how Said’s critique of Western academia lies within his inherent bias against the ‘Occident’ and how such dividing categories constructed by Said, ultimately conflicted with what he was denouncing. It can be concluded that through time, debates of

Said’s Orientalism began to shift as historians and intellectual critics began to focus on the major issues in the methodology of Orientalism and how Said’s subjectivity restricted him from having an objective theoretical analysis. However, the great influence of Said’s works cannot be discounted as it provoked enduring discussions in historical debates. The central pillars of Said’s arguments elucidated the impact of superficial Orientalist thinking and how its influence enabled historians to offer new angles of interpretation and critically assess existing interpretations.