

# Reviewing Theories of Orientalism In Search of the Orient Identity

In every issue of this journal a special article will be allocated to reviewing famous theories due to the pivotal role of “concept of the orient” in the journal’s researches. In this issue Ms. Padideh Adelvand and Ms. Maryam Ghandeharioon were the cooperators

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**Abstract:** The orient has been the cradle to great religions and civilizations; it is a noted belief in numerous historical, archaeological and cultural sources. The geographical territory of the orient includes North Africa to Indus and Central Asia to the Indian Ocean, however the concept of orient does not have a single interpretation and the common issues between the inhabitants of these territories are not quite clear. In addition, the existence of a bipolar system and encountering the East and West and division of civilizations of the world into two groups, East and West does not have a vivid answer. Despite ethnic, religious, ritual and language diversities and independence of divisions, the orient has a unit concept emanating from a common origin of these communities. Discovering the identity elements of the orient and recognizing their relations requires a “holistic” review which explores beyond geographical boundaries. It seems that in oriental territories the Gods are elements of nature and existing religious beliefs demonstrate the metamorphosis of natural and divine beliefs. Therefore, the common roots of the people of orient may be the religious philosophy and their holy worldviews.

**Keywords:** Orient, Identity of the Orient, Cultural Orient, Orientalism.

## Introduction

Iran, Middle Orient, China, India, Egypt, the Anatolian peninsula and North Africa are among distinguished oriental territories.

Land and civilization division into two categories of Orient and west has attracted the attention of scholars for a long time.

A brief look to the small oriental civilizations clarifies there is nothing common in the ethnic or racial characteristics, nor in language and religion.

Therefore the main question is what has divided the Orient from west?

To answer this question and to identify the concept of orient, the factors that can integrate sub-civilizations and its related cultures should be followed. Aside from geography, the orient has often been different or at odds with the West in the fields of politics, philosophy, culture, religion, mysticism and history.

The following questions and interrelated issues that they raise, form the basis of an investigation through publication of the journal:

1-On what basis has this concept of "Orient" been constructed and what factors actually serve to unite the area?

2-Where is the "Orient"? When is "Orient" used in opposition to "orient"? What are the past and present expressions of this concept of "east"?

3-Is "Orient" related to the Sun and a belief system that worships the Sun? Does it relate to the position of the Sun and the geographical location of the area?

4-Could the rise of religious philosophies, transcendent worldviews, most prophets and the many social reformers in the east be the cause of the priority and primacy of eastern culture and civilization that has been established in opposition to "orient"?

5-Could a common celestial view be considered as the factor that binds eastern nations?

6-How come different nations in Asia, Africa and some parts of Europe are called eastern nations and are considered to have an Oriental culture and civilization?

7-The geographic east in the world has been identified as the cradle of civilization and major reli-

gions, so does the term "west" refer to some nations and territories that constitute a more recent development?

8-Is it that humanist thought has replaced spiritual revelation in the life of western nations and thus contributes to this concept of "west"?

## Terminology of the Orient

The term Orientalism can be interpreted as eastern studies, oriental and orientalist. The two terms "Orient" and "East" have the same meaning; but "orient" has a Proto-Germanic root derived from the word Eostre, the name of the Germanic goddess of the morning meaning sunrise, often used to mean everything to do with the East and sometimes it may be used to mean the Orient.

The word "orient" has often been used to describe lands located east of the Mediterranean and Europe. So, the terms Orientalism and Orientalist are derived from the word "orient" and those words have become increasingly popular. Of course, there is a little negligence in this interpretation of Orientalism because the suffix "al" implies the recognition of objects "belonging to the east" rather than recognition of "the land of the east itself" unless it is with reference to a concept of "orient" that means the land and all its belongings (Zamani quoting Al-Mord, Maniz Al-Balbaki; Hym Dictionary; Arianpoor Dictionary).

The term Orientalism first appeared in the Oxford English Dictionary and in then in 1838 it was included in the French Scientific Dictionary. In the Oxford English Dictionary, the word Orientalism, which was not used until 1812, was included under the meaning of orient, in the context of the Study of Eastern Countries. This helped researchers to study the culture and land of Eastern Asia.

The term "Orient" is derived from the Latin word "Oriens" which means "what goes up" or "what comes up" (<http://www.lexilogos.com>). The term Oriens has two meanings: the first one is "the sun's" and second one refers to "the east and eastern coasts of the Mediterranean". The term "Ori-

ent” with a small “o” is one of the four cardinal directions that is the opposite of “west”. Also, the word “orient” is used to describe a point in the sky and the area on the horizon where the sun rises each morning (<http://atilf.atilf.fr>).

In addition, the term “orient” refers to a “glittering pearl”, which is reminiscent of the sunlight at sunrise (<http://ia700307.us.archive.org>).

The term “Orient” with a capital letter refers to some countries in Eastern Europe or South Central Europe and some Mediterranean countries.

Against the term “Orient”, there is the term “Occident” which has its root in the Latin term “Occidence” meaning “fall and down”. This term was used only once in the West and then its use was abolished in England (<http://crosscrafter.com>).

Generally, the term “orient” means “the rising sun” in many languages and is used to describe the place where the sun rises each morning. For example, in France: Levant; in Russia: Vostok; in Greek: Anatolia; in Hebrew: Mizrahi and Zriha; in China: Pinyin; In Japan: Japan (Land of Sun); (<http://www.orient.askdefine.com>).

It is interesting that in English, the term “orientation” is used directly and correctly to mean “to perch” or a “directed path”, which needs to be taken in its linguistic context and within a conceptual structure.

### **Historiography of Orientalism**

The term Orientalism in relation to eastern countries can be traced back to antiquity, to early east-bound expeditions. Some of these early accounts of Orientalism are as follows:

1 -The Trojan War: some Orientalists have expressed that the earliest references to Orientalism are evident in accounts of the Trojan War (about a thousand years before Christ) narrated by “Homer” and “Herodotus”. The Trojan War was a symbolic battle between two different worlds; those of Orient and West (Islami Nadoshan, 1372: 73).

2 -Alexander’s invasion of Iran: “Edward Saeed”1 ascribes this historical event in the fourth century BC as an allusion to Orientalism, Alexander is re-

ported to have invaded Iran and lands of the “Orient” (Zamani, n.d.).

3 -Napoleon Bonaparte’s expedition to Egypt: this represents the first attempt to identify a country in the east. The survey of Napoleon’s delegation includes a description of Egypt published in 23 volumes, in 1809-1829 (Mousavi, 1998: 409).

4 -Expeditions of the Ottoman Turks: these expeditions attracted the attention of European researchers of the Renaissance Period. There was subsequent fluctuation in interest in the East until the Ottoman Turks attempted to conquer Vienna three times, and then attention to the East was rekindled (Doublik, 2006: 253).

Historical accounts relating to Orientalism, from their beginnings until now, are usually divided into 4 periods and each period is studied individually. These events are summarized in table1.

### **The Opinions of Orientalists**

Many Islamic and Christian philosophers, historians, sociologists, politicians, critics and materialists have commented on the Orient, The majority of opinions on the division of Orient and west pay attention to geographical regions. Americans, Europeans and Oriental social society, all try to analyze this matter, each from its own perspective. But so far, only a few scholars have regarded the Orient from a cultural stand point and those that have tend to juxtapose an oriental culture against a western one. Sometimes the Orient has been praised for its schools of thought and spiritual beliefs that have transformed faiths and contributed to momentous and meaningful events over time. But the responsibility of human agency and humanitarianism on religion and thought has been over looked. Furthermore, there are many different viewpoints on the Orient because there are several “Orients” such as an Iranian Orient, an Islamic Orient, a Buddhist Orient and a Hindu Orient; orientalist have not accurately expressed these subtle differences.

So, this article aims to address this subject and answer questions with a new insight and to analyze

and to define a cultural Orient.

• The Orient: the otherness of the west “Edward Saeed”, based on the theories of “Nietzsche” and “Adorno” which have been interpreted by “Foucault”, says that: “Orientalism is a kind of western style to dominate the East”. He has analyzed the historical process of this type of domination and the formation of an authoritative view in the west towards Islam (Saeed, 1978: Introduction).

He does not believe in a constant difference between West and Orient, and considers that the “human” factor should be the most important factor used to determine West and Orient and insists that Orientalism should relate to human beings. “Abol Kalam Azad” says about the concept of humans in West and Orient: Man in the Oriental conception is the symbol or manifestation of God. Man shares traits and virtues of God, which are endless and he can be dominant over the entire universe. In western thought, man, is doubtlessly an animal but if he wants to progress in material issues, there is no limitation. Mankind’s scientific advantages have caused him to gain supremacy over all other creatures and he has become dominant over the heavens and earth. Then, it can be said that, in practice, western thought has realized oriental theories on man’s capabilities. However, since the western concept has no emphasis over mankind’s spiritual characteristics, his scientific successes and joyful achievements become a source of danger for the existence of life on earth. Thus, if we can incorporate western science, oriental spirit and man’s relationship with God then science becomes less devastating and could serve to bring peace, welfare and progress for mankind (Azad, 2012 : 34).

He maintains the following opinion in his evaluation about Orientalists:

European Orientalists’ viewpoints have some characteristics as a closed system and self-reliant force combined with magic and myth. In such system, all determinants are issues that should be, whether at present or any other time and with every ontological reason. In such system, no empirical data or issue can

move or change their positions (Saeed, 1998: 132). Orient helps West to define his figure, characteristic and form opposite of the Orient. However, there is no imaginary part for Orient. The Orient is part of European civilization and material culture. Orientalism is the commentator and indicator of this definition culturally and ideologically (Ibid: 14).

“Mojtaba Sadri” believes that western culture, with its bias, has depicted oriental culture according to its own values. “Max Weber”, is another pioneer in this field. According to Benjamin Nelson (1976), he was the first scholar to investigate particular aspects of Orientalism as a central aspect of western Europe and showed some surveys on the Orient. Weber, in a collection of articles entitled “Sociology of Religion” and “Economy and Society”, has claimed that the West should be recognized in comparison with its oriental neighbors (zeimaran, 2002 : 12).

#### • Cultural Orient

-Among Iranian theorists, “Shapour Ravasani” has identified a “cultural east” and has demonstrated new definitions of the East and has reviewed Orientalists’ opinions.

- Ravasani’s opinions are based on the following points:

- Orientalists have looked at the East as a part of a whole and despite the diversity of cultural and political practices within the area; it remains as one conceptual unit for analysis. According to archaeological evidence, the Big East (or big society of the east) has a common culture and its differences and contradictions are the internal affairs of a wider community. In many works of historians, Orientalists and archaeologists in European and American countries that are working for a local community or the residents of a country- the Big East- needs to discover, deliver and propagandize an independent cultural and historical identity that may include hostility to other groups and residents of the region. Meanwhile, separate and individual analyses on oriental families cannot provide credible means for evaluation.

- The geographical area of the east has some incompatibility with its cultural territory. The geographical

Table1. Orientalism Chronology; reference: authors based on Sharifi, 2002; Alziadi, 2004: 133; Desoughi, 1997 & Zamani, (n.d.).

Period	Stage	Main events	Minor events
First	From the conquest of Andalusia and the Mediterranean islands to the crusades	The West (Christian) familiarizes itself with Islam and Moslems	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The establishment of Islamic schools in European and the utilization of Islamic and educational scholars and masters in Islamic countries</li> <li>• The transfer of Islamic and scientific heritage to West and translation to Latin</li> <li>• The foundation of a scientific basis for cultural movements and new civilizations</li> </ul>
Second	From the end of the crusades until mid 18th C.	The beginning of new thoughts on Orientalism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• More attention to Arabic language and Islamic Civilizations</li> <li>• An increase in scientific centers and universities that study Islamic civilizations</li> <li>• Competition between centers to transfer Islamic heritage to Europe extensive</li> <li>• Conflict with Islam</li> </ul>
Third	Mid 18th C.until the end of World War II	The most established stage in Orientalism thoughts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The emergence of Orientalism</li> <li>• The organization of meetings and conferences on Orientalism</li> <li>• Publications on Orientalism</li> <li>• The emergence of world states towards Orientalism</li> <li>• The emergence of Orientalism in military and diplomatic arenas in oriental countries like Richard Burton as portrayed in the Indian Army</li> <li>• The establishment of Orientalist centers and institutions and increasing the transfer of Islamic heritage to Europe</li> <li>• The education of Islamic students by Orientalists and attention to the study of Islamic heritage</li> </ul>
fourth	After World War II until now	The modification and moderation of Orientalism theories with regard to Islamic issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Addressing Orientalist discourse on the Orient</li> <li>• Expansion of research in fields of Orientalism</li> </ul>

territory of the Orient extends from North Africa to send and from the Middle East to the Indian Ocean. It is a widely held opinion that the political and colonially imposed boundaries among countries in this vast region do not necessarily align with the ethical and cultural boundaries. The culture of the East should be investigated across its present political boundaries and regarded in terms of its social history.

- The great territory and society of the East is the origin of religions as well as philosophical and social theories.

- The civilization of the East does not begin with migration. This opinion is against that of Orientalists regarding the civilization of the East, which is based on theories. The relative path of nations in eastern lands have not developed linearly because natural obstacles prevent direct movement between places and migrant nations in different lands are often temporary residents or have permanently shifted their civilizations to inhabit another nation. The civilization of the East has formed and expanded



with the participation and corporation of all inhabitant nations in this large area of land.

- Europeans have developed western parts of the East and paid no attention to eastern parts. The relations between north, south, west and east of eastern civilization have been neglected by researchers. Also, Ravasani has said that attention to these above theories present some questions in our mind that have not been addressed by Europeans:

- Where is the civilization origin of migrant nations?
- How can their history be traced before the migration?
- How can the situation of inhabitant nations be defined within a new civilization?

The viewpoint is based on the idea that an investigation of the East is deviated by the West because of a non-scientific framework and founded on a fabrication made for political purposes. Despite the attempts of colonialists from the 19th century until now to accommodate the rich culture of the East in the light of western political democracy, as well as investigation of civilization and the supreme art of the East in the present world and many nations within eastern nations are revitalizing their ancient civilizations and cultures. If this pride in the rich heritage of eastern nations continues to grow, the strong roots of eastern culture will become more widespread around the world. The light of the east will be shed on the darkness of the west once again. As the saying goes; the sun does not always hide under a cloud. The dark cloud of colonization will eventually be driven away and the light of eastern knowledge allowed to flourish (from Ravasani, 2007).

### **Western and Eastern gods**

In search of the root of western religions and the opinions of ancient Greece, which looked to the sky, significant differences between these and those of the eastern world can be identified. The ancient Greek gods lived on Mount Olympus and had a relationship with the sky. But the Greek and

Roman gods had human characteristics and personality and they lived as people. But most eastern gods and mythical figures were elements of nature and in Iran, God or Ezadan had positive myths and supportive characters and were considered an intermediary between humans and nature. Before the advent of Buddha, Chinese and Japanese ancient religions believed in a heaven and terrestrial myths and gods. Also, Hindus believed in three gods; terrestrial, heavenly and gods between earth and the heavens. Among Indo-Iranian Aryans, the great covenant god, god of light and the sun and patron of fighters -MITRA or MEHR- fighting against darkness, bringing light, fighting with lies and cunning and expanding truth and integrity in the world. Goddess "Anahita" was a symbol of fertility in humans, plants and animals. People made sacrifices to these gods in order to gain a life filled with joy, happiness, blessing and abundance. Over time, when Zarathusht was a prophet, the power and domination of MITRA was reduced so she was one of the followers of the God (Mazda) and was aligned with other gods. MITRA, as the patron god for fighters, went to Europe and governed for centuries throughout the Roman Empire. Then, the nature of god was related to the east, nature and heaven because they were with people. These gods or myths were replaced with new beliefs. Existing rituals all over the eastern world have shown a kind of change in naturalistic and heavenly beliefs with which human beings have lived. These shared beliefs and deities, or sometimes from different or similar beliefs, are seen in various cultures and this is a factor that forges bonds between nations. Thus, in various civilizations, the same beliefs and customs are evident, such as in the culture of the east. In spite of battles and fights between these two ancient great civilizations- Iran and Rome- there have been eastern origins and much cultural and artistic exchange has taken place. In some chronicles it has been mentioned that Atrosks left their birth place in Lydia (Lidie) located in Asia Minor and settled in Etruria, an area between Rome and Florence called

Tuska or Atroska (land of alders).

They (Atro-Riaee) had close relations with nations of ancient Asia Minor and the Near East on art and culture. Based on the hypothesis of civilization the sudden appearance of Atrosks from 700 BC, the formation of this culture was the result of a link with sailors that attacked Lodie in the 8th century. This hypothesis is consistent with the myth of the birth of Rome. The Romans believed Rome was built in 735 BC by concealed posterity from Teriva located

in Asian Minor. It is likely that this story originated from Atro-Riaee and was later adopted by the Romans to serve their own purpose (R. k. to: Johnson, 1359:124). Therefore, the origin of the largest western civilization (Ancient Rome) belonged to the East. The Mehr religion, which is the ancient Aryan-Persian religion was predominant during the time of the Roman Empire for approximately 4 centuries, as the official religion of the Romans.

## Conclusion

The East has long been a key subject in policies of dominance. It has been supported in associated research and thus the concept gradually became an accepted norm that was implemented in colonial activities. So, policies and practices were based on a false notion of the East, denying the true identity of the region. This approach has ripped apart the East and does not hold against fundamental questions regarding the western construct of an 'East'. In contrast, there is a new approach that goes beyond colonial policies and defines the east as a cultural totality that transcends political boundaries and presents an identity based on relations between its components. It seems that in spite of differences in language, ethnicity, geography, religion and various other beliefs, more than half of the world's people have an eastern identity and a deep religious and philosophical outlook and their worldview is one that stretches beyond terrestrial boundaries. Societies of the east, with naturalistic beliefs and religions, emotional beliefs and intuitive-mystic beliefs, transcendental and symbolic beliefs are contrary to societies in the west (after the Renaissance) with mythical worldviews, terrestrial values and rationalist views of nature, human beings and society. A cultural approach to establish a definition of the 'East' with a cultural approach shows the range of Orientalist knowledge which included religions, beliefs, faiths, customs of people in the east, schools of thought, various branches of knowledge, cultural aspects of ethnicity, language, history, art, literature, anthropology, government and the mood of people in the east; and each of these of these aspects requires further investigation.

## Endnote

1. Edward Saeed; Palestinian Orientalist; grew up in France and England; and was resident in America.

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