

RELATED TRAVELERS



**ORIENTALISM
IN THE
AGE
OF
COLONIAL
DISSOLUTION**

Ali Behdad

Belated Travelers

Post-Contemporary Interventions

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Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution

Ali Behdad



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Contents



| | |
|---|-----|
| Preface | vii |
| Introduction: The Predicaments of Belatedness | i |
| 1. Orientalist Desire, Desire for the Orient: Ideological Splits in Nerval | 18 |
| 2. From Travelogue to Tourist Guide: The Orientalist as Sightseer | 35 |
| 3. Notes on Notes, or with Flaubert in Paris, Egypt | 53 |
| 4. Kipling's "Other" Narrator/Reader: Self-Exoticism and the Micropolitics of Colonial Ambivalence | 73 |
| 5. Colonial Ethnography and the Politics of Gender: The Everyday Life of an Orientalist Journey | 92 |
| 6. Allahou-Akbar! He Is a Woman: Colonialism, Transvestism, and the Orientalist Parasite | 113 |
| "Tristesse du Depart": An Open-ended Conclusion | 133 |
| Notes | 139 |
| Bibliography | 151 |
| Index | 159 |

Preface



Many times during my reflections on the beginnings of this intellectual journey, the study of the cultural and political implications of Western representations of “Orientals,” the violent memory of one cold autumn night in 1979 has returned to me. While working on a writing assignment in my dormitory room on the campus of a midwestern university in the United States late one night, I was startled by the belligerent voices of two fellow resident students, shouting anti-Iranian slogans at my door. Soon their violent words were accompanied by the sound of darts sinking into my door. Imprisoned and claustrophobic—thus reenacting feelings I had often felt during those 444 days of the hostage crisis—I silently waited, trapped inside my room, until the campus police arrived. During those harrowing minutes, well before I had learned much about Orientalism, I could not but feel scapegoated by the power of representation and stereotypes that had transformed me into a metonymy of what the Middle East signifies in the collective imaginary of the United States: incomprehensible terrorism and fanaticism. Although I finally managed to repress the terrifying memory of that experience—well after American students had forgotten the hostage crisis—I could not overlook the way my identity as an “Oriental” in the United States had been interpellated by the violence of popular representations of the Middle East and Islam. Thus, through my experience I came to realize early on how, to a large degree, the cultural confrontation between the West and the Middle East is of a discursive nature. It should not be surprising that I later became interested in the genealogy of those representations and tried to understand the history that had helped to construe me as a threatening, threatened Other.

This book emerges from that personal interrogation, and in some ways its writing “exorcises” the violent image-repertoire that has haunted me.

But I have also chosen to preface this volume with that memory to “make real” the crucial effects and consequences of representations of otherness in the West, and to suggest that writing a counterrepresentation, or a genealogical history of Orientalist representation, is not merely a theoretical exercise but a praxis, understood as a creative and self-creating practice through which we act on our histories, our everyday lives, our world, and ourselves. As I write these lines, belatedly, the media and memories of later personal encounters remind me of the continual reanimation of negative representations of the Middle East and Islam in the West today. Thus, this text can only be the beginning, for me, of a long journey. That Orientalism as a Western discourse on the Other continues to operate so powerfully only makes the need for counterrepresentational practices more urgent. The kind of practice this book offers belongs to an oppositional field of discourses that “intend—without necessarily succeeding in implementing—the end of dominating, coercive systems of knowledge,” as Edward Said defines them. In the pages that follow I try both to establish a historical knowledge of Orientalism’s complexity, by way of situating its cultural hegemony, and to further articulate more effective tactics to oppose its coercive authority. What allows Orientalism to remain such a productive force in (neo)colonial power relations, I argue in this book, is its ability as a dominant discourse to incorporate differing and heterogeneous ideological elements, thus making possible the production of a whole series of hegemonic discursive practices in various epistemological domains. New tactics of oppositionality can be effectively articulated only in a shifting and multiple series of local moves against such global discourses of power, moves that must be antitotalizing, tactical, and against the grain to be effective.

My practice works from a “decentered consciousness” critical of both methodological and discursive consistency. I have studied texts from different domains of representation in nineteenth-century France and Britain to account for the complexities of Orientalism, but without any intention of constructing a unified field of discursive practices or suggesting a topical uniformity among them. In a similar vein, I have used theoretical texts from various “fields” of knowledge—including anthropology, literary theory, history, philosophy, and psychoanalysis—considering them, as Gilles Deleuze has suggested, as “a box of tools” to be used only when they prove useful and only when they add something to other areas of in-

quiry. Needless to say, my attempt to cross cultural and discursive boundaries has entailed some “exclusions,” among which the absence of Islamic intellectual thought produced in the Middle East is perhaps the most obvious. For reasons I would like to explore elsewhere in greater depth, there exists only a small body of works on Orientalism produced in the Middle East itself. Interestingly, the “Middle Eastern” texts I do utilize are the work of diaspora intellectuals, written in French, among them Abdel Malek’s “Orientalism en crise,” Hichem Djait’s *L’Europe et l’Islam*, and Hassan El Nouty’s *Le Proche-Orient dans la littérature française de Nerval à Barrès*. Although important Middle Eastern intellectuals such as Ali Shariati, Jalal All-Ahmad, Abdelrahman el Munif, and Eqbal Ahmad critiqued (neo)-colonial relations of power early on, their privileging of the economic domination of the West over its cultural hegemony left unquestioned the powerful discursive field of European representations of the Orient that my project, produced as it is in the West, problematizes. I have tried to address other lacunae in the conclusion of this study by way of suggesting new directions in postcolonial historiography.

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Introduction:
The Predicaments of Belatedness



This is not a *récit de voyage* but a *discours de voyage*, a “metanarrative” about different kinds of traveling through literary texts, theoretical domains, images, photographs, signs, letters, and traces. Writing is here viewed as a mode of “traveling theory” that involves displacement in time and space: writing about colonialism in a postcolonial era, and writing it in the West.¹ Some postcolonial intellectuals have used the chronotope of travel to reconceptualize the very nature of intellectual practice. Following Edward Said’s discussion of writing and displacement, James Clifford, for example, has suggested the return of theory to its etymological root, *theorein*; that is, a “practice of travel and observation, a man sent by the polis to another city to witness a religious ceremony.”² (Dis)placed in a world of global contacts where communities, economies, and subjectivities constantly cross, theory, he argues, “is no longer naturally ‘at home’ in the West” (179); it has been destabilized by other locations, contested by other trajectories of subjectivity, and displaced by other forms of knowledge. As a postcolonial practice, this text is therefore conceived as a kind of itinerary mediated by a complex network of diasporic conjunctures, conflicted histories, hybrid identities, and conditions of displacement and transplantation.

This book began as a topical work on the notion of opposition in modern orientalist texts in England and France. As an “amateur traveler” (a tourist?), I began searching for something I unconsciously knew was absent: opposition and counterideologies in a hegemonic discourse. I discovered consciously the *presence* of their *absence*. I found counterdiscursive practices, but they were working within the system as effects of its power relations. Opposition, I began to realize, was not a negative force

outside the dominant, but a formative element that mediated the production and maintenance of orientalist power and knowledge. This realization shifted my focus from a topical work on Orientalism to a *belated* postcolonial study of the micropolitics of Europe's desire for the Other and its productive function in the discourse of colonial power.

The kind of cultural critique this text offers is belated in at least two ways. First, genealogically, it comes after the anticolonial responses of Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Albert Memmi, and other founders of postcolonial discursivity, and it attempts to rework through a kind of philosophical *décalage* our perceptions of the colonial encounter. Oppositional reading, as Louis Althusser has demonstrated, is inescapably late, lagging behind what it hopes to transform and write beyond. Second, historically, the critique of Orientalism this book offers also lags far behind the colonial encounter it addresses, and as such it belongs to an *anamnesiac* order of discourse. But this recognition complicates the status of this work's historicity and raises the question as to what the aims and implications of its writing practice are.

Postcolonial Belatedness

A postcolonial traveling theory such as this is inscribed within a whole field of political practices: the project of postcolonial discursivity as a *belated* philosophy of praxis. Let me elaborate on this critical inscription through a theoretical detour—or perhaps *re-tour*?—through Althusser's belated practice of Marxist philosophy, elaborated in his seminal essay "Lenin and Philosophy."³ Here, Althusser defines Marxism as a "philosophy of praxis," arguing that this new practice is a kind of "*pratique sauvage*," which, like Freud's wild analysis, "does not provide the theoretical credentials for its operations and which raises screams from the philosophy of the 'interpretation' of the world which might be called the philosophy of *denegation*. A wild practice, if you will, but what did not begin by being wild?" (65–66). This last rhetorical question provides a theoretical beginning for my reflections on the possibility of postcolonialism as a kind of *pratique sauvage*, a kind of praxis that is a new political theory, coming after the anticolonial responses of Fanon, Césaire, Memmi, and other founders of postcolonial discursivity. While these founders of postcolonial oppositional discourse provided what one may call the "science of anti-imperialism," postcolonial theory today is a new practice of philosophy that politicizes the academic debates about race and gender as it

reworks—or more accurately, transforms—the perception of the colonial encounter and opposition to it. But before situating my practice in this field of oppositional knowledge, I want to reflect briefly on Althusser's discussion of the new Marxist philosophy as a traveling theory.

Althusser distinguishes two phases of Marxism, scientific and philosophical, pointing out that Lenin, a figure often marginalized in philosophical discussions, produced a philosophy of Marxism that lagged behind Marx's science of history. Marxist philosophy necessarily lags behind the science of Marxism because Lenin read Marx belatedly to produce a crucial *décalage* (dislocation) in its history—and here Althusser, of course, belatedly reads Lenin's marginalized philosophy to politicize the debates in the Société Française de Philosophie by outlining an interventionist, political philosophy. Reading in each instant is necessarily late, lagging behind what it transforms or writes beyond.

Lenin's reading of the Marxist science of history is not merely an interpretation but a kind of epistemological dislocation that produces a new phase, a new consciousness, a new set of practices—and as such, Althusser claims, it is capable of transforming the material world. Practicing philosophy is, in short, the "consciousness of the ruthless" that divides in order to produce new political practices—and dividing here should be understood as a form of political contestation, and not as a kind of disciplinary separation by which the philosophy of interpretation operates. Althusser's emphasis on the necessary lag of Marxist philosophy, coming after the science, draws attention to the issue of the belatedness of political philosophy to which my traveling theory belongs; that is, historical hindsight becoming the enabling condition for oppositional theory.

Althusser also insists on the newness of this wild practice, "new in that it is no longer that rumination which is no more than the practice of denegation, where philosophy, constantly intervening 'politically' in the disputes in which the real destiny of the science is at stake, between the scientific that they install and the ideology that threatens them" (66). He uses the term *dénégation*, which is not only the psychological notion of denial but also the political attitudes and acts of repudiation, or the action of refutation. Althusser's point about the newness of Lenin's "practice of philosophy" underscores the political consciousness of such a belated—and new by virtue of its belatedness—reading. A belated reading is not an orthodox reiteration or a reapplication of a previous theory; rather, it is an interventionary articulation of a new problematic through the detour—or, perhaps more accurately, *retour*—of an earlier practice. The belated

practice of philosophy is therefore a mode of discursive contestation, and having renounced denegation, this wild practice is consciously political and “acts according to what it is” (66). The new practice of philosophy is a “certain investment of politics, a certain continuation of politics, a certain rumination of politics” (37), Althusser insists.

Such a philosophical practice recognizes the limits of its interventionist politics and can only assist in transforming the material world—it can only mediate the possibilities of change—because “it is not theoreticians, scientists or philosophers, nor is it ‘men,’ who make history—but the ‘masses’” (67). In short, new practices act as catalysts that mediate the political struggles of contingent communities—mediation is here the political component of belatedness, of reading behind.

Althusser’s reflections offer an interesting theoretical space in which to consider postcolonialism as a belated praxis in the academy, for they draw attention to three fundamental components of this new field of knowledge: the wildness of postcolonial consciousness, its belatedness, and the academic context of its formation. Postcolonialism, as a philosophy of praxis, comprises a field of wild practices, *wild* in that their counter-systemic and contestatory stance defies the boundaries of the disciplinary impulse that tries to name and compartmentalize them. Postcolonial counterdisciplinarity depends on a certain historical consciousness that constitutes it as necessarily beyond the boundaries of disciplinary formation; it renounces disciplinary denegation—the depoliticized, divided space of compartmentalized academy—by connecting the separate disciplinary boundaries in alternative ways through critical interventions. The counterdisciplinary position of postcolonialism can therefore be viewed as a practice in negotiation and exchange—both in the ways different modes of knowledge intersect and in the ways postcolonial critics negotiate with the academy to mediate new oppositional possibilities; for example, the inclusion of texts and voices previously excluded from various disciplines.

The problematics and politics of postcoloniality demand a counter-disciplinary mode of knowledge to rethink the relations and distinctions between ideology, history, culture, and theory. Because the science of imperialism, as a modern discourse of power, produces a plurality of subject and ideological positions, any critique of such a science can be accomplished only through interdisciplinary praxis. Edward Said, for example, has persistently renounced the disciplinary space of a compartmentalized academy, arguing against the dominant principle in American

universities that “knowledge ought to exist, be sought after and disseminated in a very divided form.”⁴ Following Antonio Gramsci and Michel Foucault, Said argues cogently that the dominant culture in the West achieves its hegemony by making invisible the “actual affiliations that exist between the world of ideas and scholarship, on the one hand, and the world of brute politics, corporate and state power, and military force, on the other” (136). While universities play a central role in producing the “experts” and the professional knowledge used by corporate and state powers, any political discussion of knowledge encounters disciplinary resistance on campus.⁵ Social and political processes and economic interests are always immanent in the pursuit of knowledge and the production of power, but the effects of differentiation, separation, and denial render them opaque. The counterdisciplinary practices of postcolonialism attempt, through their “decentered consciousness,” to expose the internal conditions of these strategies of differentiation. In the place of the dominant will to specialize, Said suggests, “there must be *interference*, crossing of borders and obstacles, a determined attempt to generalize exactly at those points where generalizations seem impossible to make.”⁶

Said’s own work provides a fascinating example of antidisciplinary practice. In *Orientalism*,⁷ for example, he demonstrates how Europe’s geopolitical awareness of its “exotic” Others was distributed into aesthetic representations as well as within economic, sociological, anthropological, historical, and philosophical texts, all of which provided a heterogeneous discourse of power through which the Orient was colonized. Said describes in great detail how culture becomes a productive site where a plurality of interests are articulated and brought into contact with the kinds of military, economic, and political strategies that produce a complex system of domination. Given the multifarious and composite network of power relations, a critique of Orientalism can be produced only in an interdisciplinary project addressed to a broad-spectrum audience. As a postcolonial critic, Said therefore situates his work within a plurality of interests and readers: he addresses his book not only to various university scholars who would benefit from his discussion of the interrelations between culture, history, and texts but also to policymakers and Orientalists, to present them with their “intellectual genealogy” and question their false assumptions about the Middle East, as well as to the general public in the United States and the “Third World,” to demonstrate the “strength of Western cultural discourse” (24). The aim of postcolonial antidisciplinarity is, in short, to expose how seemingly specialized discourses are in

fact linked in ways that allow for the complexities of Western cultural hegemony.

Such a postcolonial critique suggests also an oppositional consciousness to read against the grain. Said describes his goal as a critique of the intellectual genealogy of mainstream studies of the Middle East: his work remembers through archival work what has been historically forgotten. As Homi Bhabha remarks, "Said's work focused the need to quicken the half-light of western history with the disturbing memory of its colonial texts that bear witness to the trauma that accompanies the triumphal art of Empire."⁸ Postcolonial studies are on the side of memory, their oppositionality a function of *anamnesia*, as they expose the genealogy of oppression and the oppressed, the veiled political economy of colonial powers, the "imaginative geography" that separates the Orient from the Occident, the black from the white. Postcolonial critiques in this sense are the belated return of the repressed, disrupting that structure of colonial amnesia that denied the colonized his or her history. In "Orientalism Reconsidered," Said points out that "what for the most part got left out of Orientalism was precisely the history that resisted its ideological as well as political encroachments, and that repressed or resistant history has returned in various critiques and attacks upon Orientalism, which has uniformly and polemically been represented by these critiques as a science of imperialism."⁹ Postcolonial practices are the belated return of the repressed histories of resistance.¹⁰

Colonial Memory and Postcolonial Anamnesia

Crucial to the understanding of this belated return of the repressed is the notion of temporal difference in the discourses these practices critique. Johannes Fabian, in his powerful *Time and the Other*, describes how the concept of time is a crucial "carrier of significance," defining the unequal relation of self and Other—"primitive" being a temporal concept.¹¹ In a genealogical approach like Said's, Fabian argues, the epistemological conditions of ethnographic representations of the Other depend on a "persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse" (31). In other words, the anthropologist, in spite of sharing time with the Other in order to produce the empirical data for his or her research, writes an ethnography that denies the Other coevalness, placing the object in a time other than the Western present. This is accomplished

through a whole series of methods and techniques such as unilateral observation of the “natives”; classification of their habits and practices; taxonomic descriptions; uses of maps, charts, and tables to visualize the Other’s culture; and so on.

Responding to the denial of coevalness, postcolonial practices are exercises in remembering; they bring into consciousness the repressed time of the Other and work through a demand for coevalness in their belated readings of the science of imperialism. They question the hegemony of taxonomic and allochronic representational strategies of the discourse of power through recourse to the history they were denied. Whereas the discourses of power circumvent the question of history through the uses of cultural relativism or taxonomic approaches, the wild praxes of postcolonialism produce the conditions of coevalness and contemporaneity for dialectical confrontations of cultures through remembering; they demystify the allochronic discourse of power while reclaiming the unrepresented history. These practices recognize that the geopolitics of imperialism had and continues to have its ideological foundations in what Fabian calls “chronopolitics,” the politics of time. As the belated return of the repressed histories of resistance, they struggle for recognition of coevalness in their new histories of resistance.

Malek Alloula’s provocative rereading of colonial postcards in *The Colonial Harem* is an interesting example of anamnestic praxes of postcolonial historicity:

To map out, from under the plethora of images, the obsessive scheme that regulates the totality of the output of this enterprise [i.e., the production of colonial postcards] and endows it with meaning is to force the postcard to reveal what it holds back (the ideology of colonialism) and to expose what is repressed in it (the sexual phantasm).

Behind this image of Algerian women, probably reproduced in the millions, there is visible the broad outline of one of the figures of the colonial perception of the native. This figure can be essentially defined as the practice of a right of (over)sight that the colonizer arrogates to himself and that is the bearer of multiform violence. The postcard fully partakes in such violence; it extends its effects; it is its accomplished expression, no less efficient for being symbolic.

A reading of the sort that I propose to undertake would be entirely superfluous if there existed photographic traces of the gaze of the