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**REINTERPRETING EDWARD SAID:  
FEMINIST INTERVENTIONS IN CONTEMPORARY DISCOURSE**

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**ABSTRACT:**

This paper focuses on Orientalism through the lens of contemporary feminist interventions to examine how Orientalist discourse is not only racial and cultural but also deeply gendered. It also argues that women in the “Orient” are doubly “Othered”: first as colonial subjects and second as women within patriarchal and imperial frameworks. Drawing upon feminist postcolonial theorists and selected contemporary feminist literary texts, the study explores how female writers challenge Orientalist stereotypes of the submissive, eroticized, and silenced Eastern woman. A gendered re-reading of Orientalism not only expands Said’s critical framework but also reveals how feminist fiction functions as a powerful counter-discourse that resists both colonial domination and patriarchal control. Thus, the study proposes that Gendered Orientalism is a crucial lens for understanding contemporary post-colonial literature and the evolving politics of representation in a globalized world.

**KEYWORDS:**

Orientalism, Gender, Feminism, Postcolonial Literature,  
Representation, Contemporary Discourse, Hegemony.

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“Criticism must think of itself as life-enhancing and constitutively opposed to every form of tyranny, domination, and abuse; its social goals are non-coercive knowledge produced in the interest of human freedom”.

— Edward Said

Orientalism is not merely a body of knowledge but a discourse that enables political and cultural domination. The Orient is represented as irrational, backward, erotic, and passive, while the Occident positions itself as rational, progressive, and superior. Edward Said's Orientalism was published in 1978 and has influenced six fields of study: comparative religion, history, anthropology, sociology, literary studies, and regional studies. Said's analysis highlights how the West has constructed and propagated a biased understanding of the East, highlighting the power dynamics. The West establishes its own identity and self-image as rational, advanced, and powerful. Orientalism represents the East as inferior and exotic, whereas the West enforces superiority in the post-colonial context. Contemporary feminist fiction rejects the passive positioning of Eastern women and reverberates their voices, desires, and resistance. By narrating from the perspective of the “Other,” feminist writers destabilize the authority of Western discourse and reclaim narrative power.

This narration is a way of organizing knowledge and understanding the world from the contemporary scenario. Edward Said opines that this “Orientalist” view of the East is not based on objective reality but on stereotypes and power dynamics. It is not only a traditional dialogue but also a political, social, and economic discourse. Said states that the concept of the Orient is not an inherent reality but constructed by the Westerners with dominance and control. This “Othering” allows the West to see itself as superior and entitled to control and civilize the East, portraying it as volatile, irrational, and backward. According to Hegel's view of “master and slave,” Said also echoes the same concept: that the West represents

the master and the East embodies the slave. Also, Simone de Beauvoir in her *The Second Sex* mentions the male as the subject and the female as the Other. This binary division closely mirrors patriarchal gender relations, where the male is positioned as the master and the female as the subordinate Other.

According to Edward W. Said, Orientalism is a “created body of theory and practice.” His main theory of post-colonialism is based on the false image of the Orient. The term ‘Orient’ originated from the Latin word ‘Oriens,’ meaning ‘east.’ This word was used to describe countries East of Europe. As Europeans were pushed eastward, the idea of the Orient expanded too from initial use. As Said notes, “The Orient was almost a European invention,” shaped to serve Western ideological and political interests. The term is often used to describe objects and in a derogatory manner. “Orientalism” refers to Western theories and beliefs on the Orient, such as Western learning, Western awareness, Western empire, etc. And “Orient” is used by Edward Said to refer to a system of representation by political forces that introduced the East. It is a mirror image of the inferior, the “Other.” He was a literary critic who stated that Western authors depicted Asian countries as being less than themselves.

In Said’s work, the interdisciplinary approach to literary criticism denotes structuralism and existentialism. The relationship between the Orient and the Occident as one of binary opposition originated with Ferdinand de Saussure, a seminal figure in structuralist theory, who defined it as two ideas that depend on one another for definition but are theoretically opposed. This dependency and opposition articulate the historical and theoretical bind in the relationship between the Orient (the East) and the Occident (the West). Said applies the concept of hegemony to Orientalism; the cultural structure is tied to public policy with regard to the Orient. He also asserts that writing about the Orient is part of shaping the power between the East and the West. His ideas have had a significant impact on both cultural studies and literary theories. He

focuses on various connections of how language and writing, power and politics are defined.

Orientalism was an ideology prevalent among British rulers and academics who argued that India should be governed according to its own customs and laws, as opposed to the “Anglicanism” of those who claimed that it should be controlled according to British traditions and laws. The three different pursuits of Orientalism refer to an academic discipline, a style of thought, and a corporate institution for dealing with the Orient. Latent Orientalism is a set of ideas and unconscious assumptions about the Orient, while manifest refers to the real-world interactions with it. This examines the legacies of colonialism, imperialism, and the ongoing struggle for liberation and decolonization.

Historically contingent, British colonial power denies individual freedom with reference to White vs. Black, resonating with post-colonial critiques of colonialism’s legacy. The binary oppositions like Colonizer vs. Colonized, the Male educated and intellectual vs. the Female primitive and ignorant, etc. Consequently, women are treated as Other, objective, and inessential. As stated by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, women are socially constructed and oppressed by men. Colonizers justify women as inferior and, finally, women are treated as objects rather than autonomous beings. Inaction in the face of oppression is a form of complicity, and colonialism denies individual freedom in post-independence societies. According to Emmanuel Levinas’s view, the concept of the “Other” strongly supports an anti-hegemonic and feminist reading of literature; for example, “Face of the other,” “chosen or elected,” “orders or ordains,” “their Alterity and their expression,” is an excellent representation of metaphysical conceit. Men and women so do support and cling to each other and enhance life together, although different in nature but as one entity. Alterity is the quality of strangeness in the Other, and the fact that the Other is essentially strange showcases how each one is complementary to each other.

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**The lines from ‘The Ballad of East and West’ by Rudyard Kipling depict:**

Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,

Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God’s great judgement seat;

But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,

When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth!

In the context of the poem, it reflects the challenges, the complexities of identity, and tensions of colonial rule. The core idea is that East and West are so distinct in their ways of being that they will always remain separate entities, unable to fully comprehend or unite with each other. The phrase expresses a colonial perspective on the differences between the British Empire (West) and the indigenous populations of the East, highlighting perceived differences in values, traditions, social structures, and even fundamental ways of thinking between Eastern and Western cultures.

Kipling illustrates this fact by setting a Pathan bandit named Kamal and the unnamed son of a Colonel of British Guides against each other, but in the end, they become friends out of mutual respect for each other’s toughness and determination. This dichotomy sets the stage for a deeper understanding of these contrasting perspectives to coexist and enrich one another. Rabindranath Tagore condemned the British Raj and fought for independence from Britain. His essay “East and West” delves into the essence of these two worlds, highlighting their unique characteristics and the potential for mutual understanding and harmony. Although he acknowledges the distinct worldviews that define the East and West, he describes the East as a realm deeply rooted in spirituality, traditions, and a sense of unity with nature. In contrast, he portrays the West as a land of rationality, scientific advancement, and individualism.

The poet also emphasizes the importance of dialogue between the two cultures by arguing that the East can benefit from the West's advancements in science and technology, which can enhance the quality of life without compromising spiritual values. Whereas the West often lacks the spiritual depth and emotional richness found in Eastern philosophies, even though the West has made significant strides in material progress and intellectual achievements. He also addresses the dangers of cultural imperialism, warning against the tendency of one culture to dominate another. Therefore, he advocates for a respectful exchange of ideas and values, where both East and West can learn from each other.

Feminist writers like Simone de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* challenge and resist existential and social oppression. The views of women differ from each feminist writer. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in the feminist theoretical text "Can the Subaltern Speak?" critiques how colonial discourse constructs gendered subaltern identities. bell hooks in her discourse *Intersection of Race, Gender and Power* highlights how institutions construct gender through power, and knowledge is shaped by race, class, and gender hierarchies. Carol Gilligan, in *In a Different Voice*, critiques universal models of moral development based on male experience, and psychological knowledge is shaped by privileged male norms. In the case of Judith Butler's discourse *Gender Trouble*, she dismantles the idea of fixed gender identity, arguing that gender is performative, constructed through repeated acts, and therefore open to subversion. This means gender is something we do, not something we are. She rejects universal feminism that ignores race and class and also argues that gender is not natural or fixed but socially constructed and acted upon through repeated acts, gestures, language, and cultural norms. Whereas, with regard to Elaine Showalter's *Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness*, all of these texts represent powerful women's voice, agency, and resistance.

Despite differences in context and discipline, these thinkers are united by their critique of patriarchal power structures and their

effort to recover silenced voices, especially women's. Women's voices are systematically distorted in dominant knowledge systems. Toni Morrison reclaims silenced Black female histories; Tahareh Mafi transforms the "Oriental Woman" from object to speaking subject. The heroine's body is treated as a site of fear and control, echoing feminist critiques of patriarchy, with Mafi advocating defiance against authority structures. In the extract "We Should All Be Feminists" by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, she challenges the masculine biased attitude and especially criticizes the way society raises boys and girls, highlighting the damaging impact of gender stereotypes and expectations. She advocates for a shift in mindset, focusing on abilities and interests rather than gender, to create a more unbiased and better society. Therefore, contemporary feminist fiction does not merely respond to Edward Said's Orientalism; feminist fiction acts as a counter-hegemonic discourse and re-voices the silences within it. Re-reading Edward Said through contemporary fiction allows us to bridge postcolonial studies, and feminist criticism functions as a counter-discursive space, challenging colonial and patriarchal narratives.

### **Conclusion:**

Today, the blindness of contempt is more hopeless than the blindness of ignorance; for contempt kills the light which ignorance merely leaves unignited. The East is waiting to be understood by the Western races, in order to share the truth and be confident in her mission. Tagore states that what the confusion of thought was to the Western poet, dwelling upon the difference between East and West that "Never the twain shall meet". As Simone de Beauvoir states that historically gender is socially constructed, not a biological one. As a post-colonial feminist, she challenges both colonial rule and patriarchal structures. "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," emphasizing that femininity is not innate but a result of societal norms. However, the fact is that the West has not sent out its humanity to meet the man in the East, but only its machine. Man is man, machine is a machine, and never the two entities yoke

together as one. Thus, Tagore's earnest desire was to see the right hand which wields the sword has the need of the left hand, which holds the shield of safety. This mutual admiration, he believes, is essential for fostering global harmony and understanding of literature.

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