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CHECK YOUR ORIENTALISM AT THE DOOR

Edward Said, Sanjay Seth, and the Adequacy of Western Pedagogy

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ABSTRACT

Western pedagogy and its preconceived notions of the non-Western world can limit scholars from developing accurate understandings of culturally different societies. Western academics teaching at foreign and Western institutions abroad must be mindful of how ingrained and subconscious Orientalist thinking can distort and hinder their interactions with local students.

Keywords: Western pedagogy, modernity, Orientalism, colonial education, Westernization

In *Subject Lessons: The Western Education of Colonial India*, scholar Sanjay Seth explores how Western education was disseminated to and "consumed by" Indian subjects under British rule. He discusses British belief in the superiority of their Western knowledge to indigenous knowledge, their initial certainty that Western education would "remake" the Indian middle class into modernized and enlightened subjects of the empire, and their frustration when this transformation never occurred (at least not in the way the British had desired). Likewise, Seth addresses Western education from the Indians' point of view: its limitations and how Indians "bent" Western knowledge and "compartmentalized" it from indigenous ones so as to better fit their traditional worldviews.

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Seth's observations provide a useful examination of the limitations of Western pedagogy in its ability to describe and analyze properly non-Western civilizations. Seth warns against trying to compare Western with indigenous knowledge as examples of superior and inferior pedagogy. In reality, he says, it is unfair and ignorant of modern-day scholars to project their categorical conceptions and frameworks back onto societies and eras in which these formulations never existed. Seth explains how indigenous education was not just a content alternative to Western knowledge but actually "corresponded to different ways of constituting the relation between knower and known, different ways of being and not just learning," which he says explains why it continued to be admired among different segments of Indian society throughout the nineteenth century (2007, Kindle locations 535–36). In other words, one cannot simply dismiss non-Western pedagogy as erroneous or invalid.

Above all, Seth makes a strong case that Western knowledge and pedagogy should be scrutinized. He explains that Western education has been equated with modernity. It is considered "the privileged means by which to know the modern, which is itself the privileged vantage point from which all of human history finally becomes explicable" (Seth, 2007, Kindle locations 2521–22). He argues that this thinking is inherently flawed. Scholars should not accept uncritically that the presuppositions Western knowledge makes are "axiomatic and universal." Western modes of learning are not intrinsically the best ways to objectively understand the pasts of a non-Western society or to predict how it will transform in the future. To do so would be to privilege "the European experience, . . . which [is] treat[ed] . . . as what all societies must undergo if they are to be classed as modern" (Seth, 2007, Kindle locations 2591–92). Rather, Seth advocates for greater recognition that Western or so-called modern pedagogy may be utterly "inadequate" to the non-Western object or subjects that it is trying to study and interpret.

While reading Seth's book, it is difficult not to compare his findings and research with the insights Edward Said offered in his seminal work, *Orientalism*. The latter's influence on the former is evident, and in his exploration of colonial pedagogy in India, Seth reaches similar conclusions as Said did when critiquing Orientalist scholarship on the Middle East and Arab world.

Published originally in 1978, *Orientalism* still holds immense sway in academia today. I believe that few scholars would disagree with Said that nineteenth- and twentieth-century Orientalist scholarship seriously fell short in its ability to objectively and accurately interpret Middle Eastern history, culture, and religion. As Said explains in his book, Orientalist scholarship rested on several false preconceptions: that the Middle East was inherently weaker and inferior to far more rational and civilized Europe and Britain; that the Orient was a "static" region forever stuck in the past of "tribe and tent," primitive,

and incapable of enacting change on its own, gaining wisdom, or even being influenced by worldly events; that only Western scholarship had the intellectual prowess to "know" the Orient and that the Oriental could never really "know" him- or herself or even adequately speak for him- or herself; and likewise, that only Western rule in the Orient could bring about any sort of "corrective study" or reform to the region.

Reading Seth's and Said's works side by side, it is clear that the British took similar approaches to India and the Middle East: they projected Western notions onto two culturally different geographic locations in order to justify the United Kingdom's rule over them. As both authors make clear, Western scholarship, at least from before and during the nineteenth to twentieth century, operated from a point of ignorance, bereft of any sort of true understanding of the peoples and cultures it was trying to study.

Yet, as both also concede, despite Western pedagogy's clear shortcomings in its historicizing of India and the Middle East, Western knowledge has come to be accepted as the ultimate mode of knowledge, even among the formerly colonized. As Seth explains, by the mid–twentieth century, Indian nationalists no longer viewed indigenous modes of learning as worthy rivals of Western education. Though they criticized Western education in India as "rooted in an alien culture, under the control of a foreign ruler, not having been adapted to the character of those subject to it," Indian nationalists were loath to discard it (Seth, 2007, Kindle locations 2206–8). They had come to internalize the concept that Western knowledge was inextricably linked to modernity while indigenous knowledge was not. Instead, they hoped to instill local Western education with more of an Indian feel by having it taught in the vernacular languages along with nationalist content. What has occurred now, Seth explains, is that "western knowledge is no longer seen as only one mode of knowing but as knowledge itself" and that, even today, "almost all serious, 'respectable,' and officially disseminated knowledge about the non-western world shares the presumptions and guiding categories of modern western knowledge. This is so whether the sites for the production of knowledge are located in the western world, or in the non-western world" (2007, Kindle locations 72–75).

The point I hope to make, beginning above with my brief summaries of two groundbreaking works on the misapplication of Western pedagogy in India and the Middle East, is that contemporary academics still have a lot to learn from the fallacies of the past. This is all the more true for academics working at international institutions outside the United States and Europe. We must be careful not to impose the same cultural ignorance, misperceptions, and false sense of superiority when teaching students of non-Western backgrounds. We may be teaching abroad in settings where Western pedagogy is embraced and possibly viewed as the be-all and end-all. Still, we must be vigilant not to take a

narrow-minded and culturally arrogant approach in conveying our knowledge. Otherwise, we risk repeating the same mistakes of Western scholars in the past and alienating a new generation of international students.

My own experience lecturing at Northwestern University in Qatar at Education City in Doha is a prime example. The peninsula of Qatar functioned as a British protectorate from 1916 until 1971, when it gained its independence. In recent decades the country has sought educational assistance and inspiration from American institutions.

The current education situation in Qatar is different from that of colonial India and the Middle East. American education is not forcibly being imposed on Qataris as Western education was in India and Egypt in the 1800s and 1900s. Rather, Northwestern is one of six American universities at the Education City campus that were explicitly sought out and invited by Qatari rulers to operate in the country. This pattern is being repeated throughout Asia and the Middle East, as the recent establishments of New York University campuses in Shanghai and Abu Dhabi show.

However, though Western education is no longer being imposed on non-Western populations through colonial rule, that does not mean that Arab countries' current education systems were not impacted by Western imperialism. As Said writes, "Consider first of all that universities in the Arab world are generally run according to some pattern inherited from, or once directly imposed by, a former colonial power" (1994, p. 322). The fact that Qatari leaders view American universities as the educational zenith is, probably at the very least, a by-product of that former British influence. The result is that "the Arab world today is an intellectual, political, and cultural satellite of the United States" (Said, 1994, p. 322).

Likewise, the recent boom in Western educational institutions sprouting up around the Middle East seems to support Seth's assertion that Western knowledge has come to be seen as the dominant form of knowledge in the contemporary era. As he writes, "A knowledge born in the modern West has thus become global. It is global precisely because, notwithstanding its European origins, it is seen as universal rather than parochial" (2007, Kindle locations 2506–7).

Whether Western pedagogy truly deserves the label that has been attached to it is in many ways irrelevant. The fact is that this is what many non-Western nations, including Qatar, seemingly believe and embrace. However, though Arab governments may happily spend large sums to sponsor Western education institutions in their countries, Western academics employed in these institutions should not take this as evidence of the Middle East's tacit acceptance of and surrender to the West's so-called pedagogical preeminence and its reductive beliefs and hypotheses about the region. Academics teaching at American institutions abroad still have an ethical obligation to approach their lectures, research, and

students without preconceived notions about the region or its peoples, histories, and cultures. As Seth advises, we must push ourselves to keep an open mind throughout our time in these countries, to constantly question our own presumptions, to second-guess whether the "guiding categories" of Western pedagogy can even be applied to studies of the non-Western world's past, and to endeavor to gain at least a mite of appreciation for or understanding of "different ways of looking at the world."

Unfortunately, I believe that many Western academics working in foreign or Western institutions abroad have a difficult time doing this. Several experiences I have had at Education City support my stance.

When I first arrived in Qatar I was introduced to faculty members at various Education City universities who would go on to escort me around Doha while informing me about the country's history and culture. Some had insightful information to share, but others only spat negative stereotypes that I quickly came to learn were not based in reality or any sort of actual understanding of the country and its society. One such statement was that there was absolutely nothing in Qatar before the discovery of oil in the late 1930s and that the historical sites and artifacts the country was now trying to promote as part of its legacy are modern-day fabrications or self-delusions afforded to the Qataris by their newfound wealth. As one colleague put it, "Qatar really had no history of its own," and by extension, Western academics really had nothing to learn from Qatar.

This assumption that they verbalized as fact is an incorrect one. Qatar does indeed have an interesting and rich history, and any absence of clear historical sites or objects would not negate this (although these artifacts and sites do exist). My Western compatriots' flimsy belief is one based on a misunderstanding of the nature of Bedouin nomadic society, the Gulf region in general, and, as I believe Seth would postulate, what counts as history or historical evidence to non-Western societies. It is also an assumption that would be deeply insulting to the Qatari people. Simple research would have shown these academics—some who had only been living in Doha for about a year and some who, surprisingly, had been around for many more—otherwise. But their lack of interest in pursuing this research reveals perhaps their unintentional Orientalist mentality and approach to life abroad outside of the West. As Said explains, Orientalists project their preconceived notions onto the Orient without bothering to question or check the veracity of them first. They also only look for evidence that will support their wrong conclusions: "For what the Orientalist does is to *confirm* the Orient in his readers' eyes; he neither tries nor wants to unsettle already firm convictions" (Said, 1994, p. 65). And this process within Western academia "also forces the uninitiated Western reader to accept Orientalist codifications" (Said, 1994, p. 67). My Orientalist academic guides were not propagating these

falsehoods in print to wider audiences. But it was obvious that they had heard these lies and clichés when they first arrived in Qatar, too, and had accepted them as truth without questioning the source of that information. And they were in turn disseminating it to naive tourists and new hires.

The erroneous assumptions they had come to believe as truth solidified another Orientalist notion in their minds: since Qatar had "no history," it and, most significantly, its people must be inferior to the West. In *Orientalism*, Said explains that Arabs have been portrayed in Western scholarship as well as pop culture as lacking in moral fortitude—as being somehow ignorant, incompetent, lazy, greedy, and untrustworthy, among other insulting portrayals. This stereotype has influenced the attitudes of Westerners in the Gulf, too. I have met many American and British academics, as well as other professionals here, who claim that all Qataris are rich and lazy, immature and money-hungry, and lack the work ethic and discipline of their diligent Western counterparts (as if indolent and incompetent Westerners do not exist as well). When pressed, they will admit that they know individual Qataris who do not fit this stereotype. They may even say that they have several wonderful Qatari students they are proud of. But apparently these Qataris are only exceptions to the rule. How many Qataris they actually have had a chance to meet and interact with, I find suspect. In Qatar it is very easy for an American to live in a Western bubble, interacting with Qataris only on rare occasions. A great many Westerners in Qatar reside and work in compounds, apartment blocks, and buildings that are filled primarily with other Western expatriates. So how do these Western residents really know if the vast majority of Qataris fit these clichés? This is yet another example of the Orientalism that too many Westerners, including academics, bring to foreign countries: that an Oriental is "*first* an Oriental, *second* a human being, and *last* again an Oriental" (Said, 1994, p. 102).

Another hallmark of Orientalism, which Said addresses, is that no matter how much the Orient tries to reform itself or how much development it undergoes, it will never reach the transcendence of the West: "The Orientalist now tries to see the Orient as an imitation West which, according to Bernard Lewis, can only improve itself when its nationalism 'is prepared to come to terms with the West'" (1994, p. 321). And likewise, whether "the Oriental" wants to emulate the Westerner, or how much an Arab country has already Westernized, is irrelevant. One of the most bizarre experiences I had in the Gulf was when a colleague, a lawyer working for a U.S. political action committee, asked me to meet her in the United Arab Emirates for a brief jaunt to Dubai. Dubai is frequently extolled by Westerners as resembling and even rivaling a European city. Since my colleague is conservative in political leaning and had never before traveled to the Middle East, I had hoped that the city would be a somewhat easy experience

and introduction to the region for her. We toured Dubai's many glamorous malls and skyscrapers. We ate at high-end restaurants that were clearly imported from America and Britain, and we spent one afternoon at a popular water park where men and women of all ethnicities (including those of Arab background) swam together in swimming trunks and bikinis. At one point I worried that Dubai would be far too Westernized for her tastes—that she would fly home complaining that she barely felt as though she had stepped foot in the Middle East. We had not even bothered to eat at an Arab restaurant, and the most interaction she had with an Emirati was watching the men dressed in white *thobes* and women in black abayas shop for clothing at the American retail stores in the Dubai Mall.

Yet, on the last day of our week together, she declared, without a trace of irony, that for the UAE and Middle East to ever be taken seriously, its people would have to wake up to "modernity" and accept Western culture as the ideal. Relisting everything we had done and seen, I asked her just how much *more* she wanted the UAE to Westernize itself. She stared at me blankly. I pointed out that local societies in the Gulf had been rapidly transforming for decades now, that even in the societal spheres in which Western commentators have traditionally lambasted and stereotyped Middle Easterners for being "behind the times," such as gender equality, much progress had been achieved by the locals' own resolve. Yet again, a look of disbelief emerged on her face. Though she had taken advantage of the city's high-end entertainment, affluence, and Westernized offerings, she left Dubai believing that the Middle East was a mere forgery of modernity and still decades behind that of the Western world.

Even faculty with the best intentions and who perhaps naively view themselves as enlightened can fall into the Orientalist trap. Last year, I had the opportunity to co-teach a class that explored notions of identity in Qatar. In it, I frequently found myself pleasantly shocked that my students were initiating conversations about topics as controversial and sensitive as homosexuality, religious intolerance, gender inequality, and racism. I spoke proudly to family and colleagues back home about just how intelligent my students were—what courage they possessed and what vanguards they were to be tackling these issues in the region. Then I realized just how obnoxious I sounded. What was I expecting—that only Western students are interested in or intellectually capable of talking about sexuality, race, religion, and gender issues? That most young people in the Middle East are as bigoted and "backward" as the Western media often portrays them to be and, therefore, my students are worth praising? The fact that I was impressed that Arab students were even discussing these issues at all proves that even the most open-minded Western faculty have probably been subconsciously influenced by Orientalism and its "othering" of the non-West.

I betrayed myself again when during a class discussion, my students and I debated the different meanings and values attached to Western clothing (blue jeans and T-shirts) versus traditional Qatari attire (*thobes* and abayas) and how the type of clothing a person wears can impact his or her sense of self in Qatar. But rather than calling blue jeans for what they are—Western-originated clothing—I used the word *normal* instead. I immediately apologized for using this inappropriate term, and my students all laughed. To my relief, no one held it against me, and perhaps they would not even have caught my mishap had I not pointed it out myself. But I was mortified that despite all my smug pronouncements that I had arrived in Qatar without any biases or negative constructions of the Middle East (after all, I had lived in the region before), I still clearly had. And I would have to work much harder at catching my Western self-centeredness and inadvertently internalized Orientalist cultural presumptions and categories.

Non-Western students are not immune to internalizing Orientalist constructs as well. Perhaps it is inevitable considering that, as Said writes, "There is a vast standardization of taste in the region, symbolized not only by transistors, blue jeans and Coca-Cola but also by cultural images of the Orient supplied by American mass media and consumed unthinkingly by the mass television audience." The end result is that "the modern Orient, in short, participates in its own Orientalizing" (Said, 1994, p. 325).

Faculty must try to prevent this from occurring in their students without denying the latter their sense of agency and their prerogative to dispense meaning and value to their own cultures and the world. Case in point, in the aforementioned class, students were asked to write a play and shoot a documentary film about identity issues in Qatar. One could describe most of the students in the class as being very proud of their individual backgrounds. In the class they openly discussed the cons of encroaching Westernization in the Middle East and, in their eyes, America's undeserved political and cultural dominance in the world. Yet, when it came time to express their own identity issues and challenges, many wrote scripts that implied a non-Western person would have a much better chance of expressing him- or herself in the United States than in their home country. The students had envisioned and idealized America as a country that would give them absolute freedom to articulate and live their sense of self more so than they ever could in the Middle East, regardless of whether they wanted to express their racial, gender, religious, or sexual identity. Some students had also exoticized the Arab characters in their scripts and drastically exaggerated these characters' differences from their American counterparts. Of course, my faculty colleagues and I, to ignite debate and spur self-reflection, questioned the writing choices our students had made and asked them whether they secretly

believed that the West was more culturally open and sophisticated than the Arab world. All vehemently denied this and reasserted their love and pride for their own countries of citizenship and cultural backgrounds. So why, then, did their scripts reflect the opposite? My co-teachers and I had worked diligently to convey to our students that they had full creative freedom and that we had no expectations as to what issues, perspectives, or themes they should convey in their scripts. Had our students, by consuming American and European media since childhood, absorbed and so deeply internalized Orientalist thinking to the point where they were not even aware that they were propagating it in their work? Or were they were creating Arab characters to resemble the expectations of Western audiences? Were they essentially "othering" themselves? I have no definitive answers, but I believe that these are issues that faculty must explore in their interactions with students, particularly when teaching in Western institutions in non-Western lands.

As more Western academic campuses are established internationally at the invitation of local governments, Western scholars must explore ways in which we can share our knowledge without including the unnecessary and offensive baggage that has been inculcated in us through Orientalist pedagogy. Clearly, there is foreign demand for Western-style education, and regardless of the notion's validity, Western education is seen by many non-Western nations as definitive. But while our students in these lands may have much to learn from us, we have much to learn from them, too. Can we use these teaching experiences to explore our own pedagogy's limitations? Can we come to a truly robust and unbiased understanding of and appreciation for differing worldviews and modes of knowledge?

Seth questions whether any of the above is achievable. He writes, "If we nonetheless declare that this subject's way of looking at the world is 'as valid' as ours, our intention is belied by the mode in which it is thought. Our commitment to difference remains embedded in intentions, while our categories, the grammar of our thought, lead us always into teleology and normativity. The best we can do is to be vigilant; but it is an unequal struggle, for we struggle to express one thing, while our conceptual language leads us to express another" (2007, Kindle locations 613–14).

In other words, Seth postulates that Western academics may never be able to comprehend fully the "self-understandings" of the subjects they study or the peoples and students they encounter. Even if we claim to, we may end up "bringing it under a category which erases with one hand the difference which it writes with the other" (Seth, 2007, Kindle location 617). We also may never be able to accept indigenous or non-Western knowledge as "truth." Nevertheless, as he elegantly argues (and to which I agree), it is our obligation to at least

try by refraining from projecting our Western notions and categories onto non-Western "objects of study" and recognizing that our Western pedagogy may be inadequate in explaining them. But above all, we must drop all conceit. In my own words: before walking into our classrooms, we must check our Orientalism at the door.

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