

Discussant Commentary:
Orientalism and the Poverty of Imagination

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The panel whose papers I read is well-represented by the social sciences; however, given that Edward Said himself was a person deeply steeped in the humanities, I want to begin with a return to his primary passion to set the stage for the stimulating papers that you are about to read. Doubtless, many of you have heard of the short novel by Joseph Conrad called *Heart of Darkness* (published at the turn of the 19th into the 20th century, at the height of the colonialist enterprise). This was the novel/novella that drew from the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe a scathing criticism of Joseph Conrad as racist and as Africa providing fertile ground for Conrad's destructive and corrosive vision and language about Africans. Among the many fierce debates in the world of literary studies was one that centered on the question of whether the *Heart of Darkness* should be taught or not, and whether it functions as a critique of colonialism or a racist view of Africa. Said, of course, weighed-in with his own nuanced and complex meditations.

The novella is indeed a reflection of the horrors of the colonialist enterprise, particularly in respect to its effect on the psyche and soul of the colonizer. Conrad was able to see that no good would come of colonialism, said Said. But where he failed and where the novel makes this failure impossible to ignore is in his imagining of what happens to the African once colonialism as ended. Conrad did not have the capacity to imagine a fully realized African, despite his ability to understand that colonialism would destroy the heart and soul of the colonizer. So it is a failure of imagination with regard to the African of which Conrad must be accused. He condemns the colonialist enterprise, but he cannot see beyond its demise to the African in all of his complexity and richness.

I offer as the starting point for this panel's papers the failure of imagination of the Orientalist mind. That might seem like an odd and perhaps perverse declaration, given the profusion, the abundance, of imagined portraits of the African, Asian, Middle Easterner flowing from the pens of Western writers and constructed in the minds of Western thinkers. But these representations, these discourses about the "Other," though plentiful in their manifestation, have at their center, a curious absence, a blank space—the barrenness of the West in imagining the East/Orient/Africa. And it is precisely this barrenness that leads to the desire, the need, the urgency, on the part of the Orientalist to furnish his consciousness with images of Africa, the Middle East, and Asia that bear little relation to the realities of the subjects under consideration. Under-Imagined therefore Over-Constructed. The papers in this panel show us, in different ways, the over-constructed Iraqi, Iranian, Turk, and Arab in the Orientalist mind, but an overconstruction that flows from a fundamental inability to imagine the Iraqi, the Iranian, the Turk, the Arab as a complete human.

Atossa Movahedi observes perceptively that "The recent transference of targets from states to leaders by Western politicians is a method of distancing themselves from the people of the country in question. The United States' claim of going to war against Saddam rather than against Iraqis is a good example of this paradoxical ritual." Her paper, "The Hyper-Real Enemy and Spectator-Sport Warfare in the West: The U.S.-Iraq War Paradox," offers a thought-provoking thesis of war as spectator-sport in a time of televised images and the television as a medium in search of "masculinity."

Bart Bonikowski, in his provocative paper “Flying While Arab (Or Was it Muslim? Or Middle Eastern?),” lays out the two basic motivations fueling the practice of racially profiling Arab/Muslim Americans in the post 9/11 world: a dependence on data collected by surveillance techniques as the source of reliable predictors of human behavior—an attitude deriving from a positivism so entrenched that it ignores the complexity of the human being and embraces electronic information as supreme. Such an attitude, says Bonikowski, grows out of the Orientalist mindset and the accompanying discourse it fosters. Drawing on the work of scholars like Ulrich Beck and Anthony Giddens, Bonikowski points out that one can see racial profiling as a type of “risk management” activity. In this scenario, the Arab or Muslim becomes a “manufactured risk.”

In Solen Sanli’s paper, “Veiling as Identity Politics: The Case of Turkey,” we hear about Turkey’s own internal orientalism, i.e., the project by which modernity and tradition were cast in the bipolar frame of West versus Islam. Atatürk, the founder of the modern Turkish state, “sought complete break with the Islam past and adoption of the modern, secular values of Western civilization,” says Sanli. She observes that “The roots of the ‘Turkish nation’ were discovered, and proud nationalist history began to be inculcated into the minds of the citizens. ... All the while, a carefully constructed history curriculum taught children to be proud of their pre-Ottoman, pre-Islamic Turkic past.” On this internal Orientalist stage, the body of the woman came to occupy a central position, and the wearing of the veil to register the presence or absence of an “undesirable” Islamic element in public life. Sanli’s paper reminds us of the dangers of pursuing a pure or authentic culture and identity.

Orkideh Behrouzan’s paper, “Homeless Mind: The Fate of Persian Identity in Exile,” speaks of the tendency of Iranians in the diaspora to distance themselves from the stereotypical negative images in the West of the hostage-taking Iranians and the Islamic revolutionaries spawned by the 1979 overthrow of the Shah. They achieve this distance “through a pursuit of [an] exaggerated pattern of Ancient Persianism,” argues Behrouzan, desiring to negate the “distorted international image of Iran in the west as part of the Axis of Evil.” Behrouzan observes the Persian Diaspora’s “over-glorification of the Pre-Islamic Persian identity, reviving Zoroastrian values and symbols, and persistently avoiding Islamic attachments—despite being Muslims.” In her view, such denial of an Islamic identity cannot erase the Islamic texture of Iranian identity and, moreover, does little to change the attitudes of the West toward Iran.

In closing, I want to return to the theme of the poverty of imagination. The Orientalist mind, the imperialist impulse, can only exist when the Arab, African, or Asian is construed as a blank, a void, to be filled with images of the West’s fashioning. That the nations of the West moved beyond their geographical boundaries did not guarantee that they would also move beyond the narrow boundaries of their imagination. The psychologists in the audience will probably attribute this reluctance to the Western valorizing of “a solid self,” a self that guards against infiltration by foreign elements. In contrast, an individual like Said spoke of the power of the shifting self, the special insights provided by the exile who lives a life of dissonance. Behrouzan’s essay reminds us that in “Reflections on Exile,” Said claims a special privileged perception and understanding for the exile: “Exiles cross borders, break barriers of thought and experience.... [B]ecause the exile sees things both in terms of what has been left behind and what is actual here and now, there is a double perspective that never sees things in isolation ... One gets a better, perhaps even more universal idea of how to think, say, about human right issues in one situation by comparison with another.” In other words, the exile is blessed with an abundant and textured imagination. By contrast, the producers of mass culture flatten their imaginations in representing the African, Middle Eastern, and Asian. The papers on this panel defy Orientalist producers of mass culture and the productions that come from impoverished imaginings.