

## **Eurocentricism and Academic Imperialism**

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Perhaps an appropriate way to begin this article is by taking a look at the commonly used phrase ›international community‹. The term is used regularly when one reads newspapers, internet news sources, or watches television. It comes up when issues of global concern are discussed or are deemed to be at stake and usually some sort of universal consensus is sought in order to deal with the issue. The projection of the idea that some form of consensus has been achieved or is lacking is what is of interest here.

It is quite plausible that numerous issues exist for which there is a strong degree of harmony among members of the ›international community‹. Of course, this does not necessarily mean that such an agreement is founded upon reason or that it is even legitimate. Hence, if there is a broad consensus that global warming (largely a product of western ›progress‹, but that is another issue) does not exist or is not a very pressing issue, almost all scientists who work in the field would reject this consensus as unreasonable and based on false information. Many would probably argue that important centers of power, wealth, and authority have something to do with such a belief, as well as with the general complacency that exists in this regard.

If the majority of the nations of the world recognize apartheid or any other form of institutional racism, whether in South Africa, Palestine, or anywhere else, as a legitimate form of government, many would argue that majority support does not necessarily constitute legitimacy. Even if the majority of the people residing in such lands, or the majority who are given the right to vote, were to also recognize such forms of government as justifiable, opponents would continue to reject the moral legitimacy of racial or

tribal hierarchy, whether they are based on some form of democratic consensus or not.

The idea of an international consensus is also viewed as questionable when representatives of nations in the international community are not necessarily seen as reflecting the dominant views in their peoples. In countries like Saudi Arabia where women do not have the right to drive a car or to hold an independent bank account, it is plausible to conclude that the representatives – the rulers - of the country, named after the ruling Al-Saud family, may not necessarily reflect the views of the local population. Even if it is concluded that such a regime is legitimate, it is not necessarily representative, and therefore its leader's contribution to consensus in the international community does not necessarily reflect actual consensus among the local population.

Just as important are the means by which the international community actually reaches some form of consensus. In any debate it is often believed that all arguments need to be taken into account, evidence needs to be studied objectively, and that the different sides must have sufficient, if not equal opportunity in presenting their position. However, critics argue that international bodies such as the United Nations and its affiliated organizations are dominated by a small, but powerful, minority of countries and that by their nature these institutions cannot reflect the will of the international community. This domination does not simply exist in the decision making processes of these organizations, but significantly it exists at all levels, as even the bulk of employees and experts at such organizations typically come from certain member states or have intellectual affiliations to such states.

In addition, almost all information outlets that help produce knowledge or shape global public opinion are directly linked to powerful countries or centers of power associated with such countries. Therefore, in the absence of any form of democracy in the production or dissemination of knowledge and information, rather than mere access to existing knowledge, much of the resulting consensus among the international community can be viewed as questionable.

However, from the author's experience, when the phrase ›international community‹ is used by western leaders, thinkers, politicians, or media outlets, none of the above issues really matter very much. Although it is not

usually stated explicitly, the international community for the most part seems to consist of North America (meaning the United States and Canada), (Western) Europe, a couple of other countries that cannot be ignored because of their sheer power or their presence in the United Nations Security Council -- nations that have the right sort of ›historical‹ and ›cultural‹ or to be specific ›racial‹ background (such as Australia), and of course, the Israeli regime.

When a country has difficulty with the so-called international community, it basically means that the problem is with the US, its allies, and perhaps a few other willing governments or governments forced to align themselves or to cut a deal with them. Thus, for example when it is said that the international community is suspicious of Iran's ›real‹ intentions regarding its nuclear program, it really means that the United States and its western allies have a problem with Iran, the essence of which may or may not really have to do so much with the country's nuclear program than with its support for the Palestinian people. In other words, the world is often viewed in a decidedly Eurocentric manner, a condition which has existed for centuries in much of Europe and later on in the United States as Orientalist texts clearly reveal. To put it crudely, when the term ›international community‹ is used in much of the western media, it usually means the ›West‹ and the white men who dominate it.

Orientalism describes the various schools of thought and methods of thought or investigation through which Europe came know the ›East‹. According to scholars, it was and still is through this discourse and its construction of knowledge that the West has been able to legitimize and maintain its hold over the allegedly uncivilized ›Other‹. A major and repeated feature of Orientalist analysis in all its various forms is that it constantly confirms the thesis that the Orient is primitive, mysterious, exotic and incapable of self-government. This continues to be the case today, when extensively written and evidently academic texts with bizarre titles - such as *The Persian Puzzle* - are viewed as insightful and representative of reality, as if the lives of roughly eighty millions Iranians are some sort of mystery under the disinterested gaze and scrutiny of the western ›scholar‹.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict Between Iran and America*, New York: Random house, 2004.

As in the case above, the idea of representation is usually based upon a notion of being faithful to the original. However, representation is largely interwoven with many other things besides ›truth‹. It is defined not just by inherent common subject matter, but also by a common history, tradition, and universe of discourse that exists within a particular field. Representation is a phenomenon created by writers, intellectuals, artists, commentators, travelers, politicians, as well as others working within similar discursive formations. These discursive ›practices make it difficult for individuals to think outside them – hence they are also seen as exercises of power and control.‹<sup>2</sup>

Two problems that result from Orientalist representations almost immediately come to mind. Orientalist modes of thought and representation create a somewhat monolithic and stereotypical ›Other‹. While different religions, sects, cultures, and races are not seen as identical, and in some instances they may be presented as actually being quite diverse, they are still deemed similarly inferior. According to Edward Said: »In quite a constant way, Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand.«<sup>3</sup>

Through this Eurocentric discourse of superior wisdom and moral neutrality, a relatively homogeneous ›Other‹ encompassing much of the world was created. In other words, the Orient has actually been constructed by the neutralizing of the stereotypes and assumptions of Orientalists.

However, what seems to be even more important than mere western assumptions of cultural superiority, is how through a position of domination the mythical West is even able to tell these ›truths‹ and ›facts‹ to non-Western cultures. Such ›truthful‹ representations not only aid the imperialist or hegemon in justifying their actions, but they also serve to weaken the resistance of the ›Other‹ as it changes the way in which the ›Other‹ views itself. This often creates a form of double consciousness, similar to that which has been discussed in detail in African America Studies. The local community views itself through its own eyes, as well as through the eyes of

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<sup>2</sup> Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, London: Routledge, 1998, p. 39.

<sup>3</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985, p. 7.

the ›rational‹, ›civilized‹ and ›superior‹ hegemon. Television, the internet, journals, newspapers, and literary texts, all of which are dominated by the ›West‹, are key means through which this particular feeling or sensation comes into being.

Significantly, a major phenomenon in recent decades within Orientalist discourse is the indigenous Orientalism that can be seen in the works of some scholars, writers, and thinkers. These writers are sometimes referred to as ›captive minds‹, ›brown sahibs‹, or what Malcolm X would call the ›house Negro.‹<sup>4</sup> Defined by their intellectual bondage and dependence on the West and, at times, likened to pop psychologists in their writings about the ›natives‹, their western counterparts believe them because, as native informants, they are seen to be in a position to produce authentic representations of the Oriental psyche. These are people who are identified or even identify themselves as westernized in orientation, thought, and ideology.

Indeed, one's knowledge of the rest of the world is highly influenced by the sheer power of western culture. Beyond the fact that most of what we have access to read is about western civilization, our knowledge of Latin American, African, and Asian peoples, countries, and civilizations is regulated by the dominant discursive practices in the west. The former Iranian Ambassador to China Dr. Javad Mansouri, once told an audience at the University of Tehran that in a meeting with the Chinese Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi, he told the Minister that almost all knowledge, whether academic or popular, about China in Iran comes from western sources. In response, the Chinese Foreign Minister complained that the same problem exists in China when it comes to the Islamic Republic of Iran. Hence, as we see non-western societies largely through western eyes and western texts, they all seem decidedly backward, often threatening, and in one way or another in need of some sort of reform to evolve and become ›more western‹ and civilized.

Even when looking at local cultural products, one can often see elements of western cultural hegemony. For example, for many years now Iranian television channels have been regularly showing a Japanese TV animation series called Captain Tsubasa, which is called Footballeesta in Iran. De-

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<sup>4</sup> Rudnick, Smith, and Rubin, *American Identities: An Introductory Textbook*, Massachusetts :Blackwell, 2006, p.123

spite the fact that the story is about the feats of a Japanese youth football team and their captain, like much of Japanese anime the physical appearances of the characters are not very Japanese. In fact, in the series most of the football players have eyes that are as round as coins. Among some of Iran's own cultural products, there are an interestingly significant number of journals that can be found at newspaper stands with cover photos of fair-skinned children often with blond hair and blue eyes, whereas most Iranians have dark hair and brown eyes. While it seems at one level that these journals are a local manifestation of western society's obsession with being beautiful, it seems that the standard of beauty in such texts is linked to power and the dominant global culture. In other words, for a segment of the population at least it seems that the standard of beauty is somehow ›western‹, as there is little sign of Peruvian, Chinese, Indian, Indonesian, or Nigerian looking children on the covers of such journals.

Indeed, it is not entirely unheard of for some students at my university to show excessive admiration towards western, especially western-looking, visiting academics. Such students also demonstrate greater respect for those who work or who have studied in western and especially American academic institutions, even if those institutions are mediocre or the individual shows little sign of significant academic achievement. Such people also hold a special admiration for those writers, artists, or thinkers, who have receive western awards or recognition and they often find it difficult to accept critiques of their work, unless the critique comes from the west.

However, what is even more interesting and important for this paper is the complex manner in which this discourse is capable of influencing a sizable number of academics in Iran and especially those who label themselves intellectuals. Such people regularly assume themselves to be independent minded and objective thinkers who are uninfluenced by discourse, let alone Orientalist discourse. Nevertheless, it seems that academics and academia as well as intellectual debate are often significantly impacted by this discourse – something that is particularly true, it seems, in the case of the humanities.

There is little doubt that this has a lot to do with the fact that in humanities, the medium for communication is dominated by the English language, and since this works to the advantage of native English speakers it is difficult to imagine a level playing field. Academics in Iran who are fluent in

English are better equipped to publish, even though they may not be among the best academics in their field of research. Ironically, this imbalance is reinforced by Iranian academic institutions, which give greater emphasis on, and credit for, works published in indexed journals. Needless to say, these academic indexes are largely western and the journals are mostly in English and it is not inconceivable to imagine a specific criterion for intellectual and scientific acceptability dominant in many such journals. In order to better understand this, I will give an example.

A couple of years ago I co-authored a relatively long article titled ›Constructing an Axis of Evil: Iranian Memoirs in the *Land of the Free*‹ with a colleague at the University of Isfahan, Dr. Hossein Pirnajmuddin. The work was focused on memoirs about life in contemporary Iran written by Iranians living in the west and published in the United States. We sent the article to a respected American academic journal, which is widely considered to be progressive in the US, for possible publication. In the article, which was later published in the *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, we analyzed these memoirs and provided extensive critiques regarding their objectivity and credibility.<sup>5</sup>

Almost all of these texts are deeply enmeshed in the politics of rendering Iran from a transnational perspective and we concluded that in these memoirs representation is regularly interwoven with other aims and projections, which militate against accuracy. The texts constantly confirm what orientalist representations have regularly claimed: the backwardness and inferiority of Muslims and Islam. The article attempted to show that writers like Azar Nafisi and Marjane Satrapi had produced gross misrepresentations of Iranian society and Islam and that they often used quotes and references which are inaccurate, misleading, or even wholly invented.

One extraordinary example that is repeated in most of these texts, concerns the Iran-Iraq war. It has been claimed by these writers that during the war Iranian combatants carried golden keys around their necks. According to the memoirs, the Iranians carried these keys, because they were told that if they died in combat they could use the keys and enter Heaven. In our

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<sup>5</sup> Seyed Mohammad Marandi and Hossein Pirnajmuddin, Constructing an Axis of Evil: Iranian Memoirs in the ›Land of the Free‹, in *American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, Volume 26, Issue 2, pp. 23-47.

article we pointed out how this absurd claim along with other such claims, reveal not only the extreme degree to which these memoirs distort reality, but also the Orientalist nature of these texts.

Obviously, after submitting the article to the journal (which will not be named, but the email exchanges exist), it was refereed. To our astonishment we were told that in order for our work to be published, we would have to prove among other things that Iranian combatants did not wear keys to heaven. In other words, we were told that in order to have the article published, we would have to prove a negative. We made some changes to the paper and, for example, we added that the author of the article was a war veteran and that he had participated in the war as a volunteer each year from early 1983 until the end of the war and that every year he would spend a number of months in the war zone. Therefore, if there were in actuality keys to heaven, the author would have had firsthand knowledge of their existence. However, the author had never heard of the alleged keys to heaven until he read about them in western-produced texts after the war.

Needless to say the paper was ultimately rejected. After it was rejected I send an email to the editor of the journal and asked a simple question: If an article or a memoir was to put forward the claim that American soldiers based in Iraq and Afghanistan were in possession of keys to heaven, would this absurd claim have to be disproved in order for a critique of it to be published? Indeed, one would imagine the sheer absurdity of such a claim would make it unnecessary for a response to be published.

Of course, such an absurd claim would have been rejected out of hand and no one would believe it, because in the eyes of Americans and other westerners, American soldiers simply cannot have such foolish, childish and immature beliefs. If Iranians make such claims about Americans it would be considered to be crude propaganda, because it runs against rationality. Nevertheless, in texts published in the United States, it is claimed that Iranians held golden keys to heaven and subsequently these texts became best sellers. They are lauded by the media, the so called ›Iran experts‹, and the general public as authentic representations of Iran, because for the most part these people have for centuries led themselves (or others) to believe that irrational behavior, stupidity, ignorance is the norm among



Iranians as will many other Orientals. It is no wonder that such accusations are easily believed.

Therefore, one can conclude, that the same problem which exists with the phrase ›international community‹, exists for the word ›academic‹ as well. Here too, what lies behind the term which is a symbol of impartiality and knowledge is often very different from the surface. It is clear that even in academia there is an orientalist narrative that influences and changes the way we write, and more importantly the way we think. It forces us to work and think within the framework of the dominant discursive practices in the west and it is something that urgently needs to be addressed.

