

Reinventing Stereotypes: An Exploration of Digital Orientalism in Western Media Representation of the Middle East.

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Abstract: *This research study critically examines the subjective attitude of Western digital media towards the Middle East, portraying it 'exotic' and 'technologically low-born' region. Digital orientalism, choreographed by the Western digital elites, pontificate on the malicious stereotypes and generalization to denigrate the foreign cultures, especially that of the Middle East. The 'polemical orientalism', a key facet of digital orientalist cyberspace, is riddled with aggressive rhetoric, criticizing and demeaning the Eastern culture and societies. This study has technically employed the method of critical discourse analysis to skillfully analyze online news, articles, and social media posts disseminated by the leading Western media conglomerates. The central objective of this research study is to thoroughly identify and demystify the prevailing stereotypes and the biased representational framework denigrating the Middle East, examining how digital orientalism gives a substantial impetus to cultural hegemony and the prevailing power dynamics. This research study's finding uncover the disruptive and polemical stereotypes and narratives in Western media, highlighting a need of refined understanding of the equitable and inclusive portrayal of the Middle East region to nurture diversity and strengthen cross-cultural understanding.*

Keywords: Digital Orientalism, Orientalism, Reductionist assumptions, Western digital hegemony, Cultural fetishism, Strategic essentialism, Epistemic mechanism

Introduction

Orientalism is an academic discipline primarily advocated by the Western intellectual circles in order to recognize the Eastern culture as 'exotic' and 'primordial', primarily not compatible with the Western hegemonic values and ideologies. This contemptible portrayal of the 'orients' has been a deliberate effort on part of the Western media circles and has been a subject of intense discussion and scrutiny. This *oriental cliché* has further given impetus to an already pervasive culture of misrepresenting Eastern cultures as 'low-born' and 'despotic'. Contextually, Orientalism, is "the effort of the West to facilitate the establishment of the hegemonic structure by building itself over the East."

This concept of '*Orientalism*' received a substantial impetus after the emergence of *digital orientalism*, a new concept referring to the ways through which Western media portrayal of the Middle East strategically substantiates and reimagine the pervasive stereotypes, often through the employment of digital technologies. This digital orientalism is promoting the flow of *reductionist assumptions*

perpetuating the digressive and stagnant imagery of the Middle Eastern culture.

Contextually speaking, '*reductionist assumption*' implies the oversimplification or generalization of the intricate Eastern cultures, histories, and social milieu into simplistic and absurd stereotypes. These assumptions substantially approve of the perspectives put forward by Lewis Henry Morgan. L. H. Morgan spotlights the undisputable fact that societies have three stages of development which classifies savagery, barbarism, and civilization and defines the stages with technological development levels. (Bates, 2009)

Taking these stages videlicet *savagery* and *barbarism* as one of the pretexts on part of the '*Occident*', considering the Eastern societies still stagnant and have not divorced from the stages of *savagery* and *barbarism*. In this context the Western society openly mislabel the East as a '*misfit*' in this globalized world, pushing the Eastern cultural identity and recognition into oblivion, preventing it from the third stage of civilization. Engels, an erudite scholar has taken deep inspiration from the L.H. Morgan, defining the western history as a representation of the general development of humanity and approached the development of society and civilization *unitary*. He critically portrays a nasty imagery of the Asian type society as;

"In the Asian type society, this type of society has been somewhat pushed out of the history, as the state and society that pulled it around were considered separately."

In context of '*reductionist assumption*', the Eastern society has been portrayed as a *monolithic* entity and *undemocratic*, lacking a genuine historical roots and legacies. running counter to the universal values of the Western societies (San, 2011).

These cheery picked and de-humanizing Muslim-centered stereotypes unleashed by the *digital cyberspace* operating in the hands of Western digital '*occident*' are severely afflicting the very image of the Muslim virtual Ummah. This in turn fuels '*cultural racism*' a phenomenon evident that implies Muslims are incompatible with the West and indeed pose a great threat to *secular multiculturalism*. These so-called radical views are strongly promoted in the Western digital circles especially, in Britain, mislabeling the orients as *anathema* for Western cultural integrity.

Since July 2006, when the British government made it public to counter international terrorism (CONTEST), the internet has been identified as a key domain where many types of radical and anti-Islam views are floating and strongly promoted, providing the chances of giving more impetus to reinvent a new torrent of stereotypes directed against the Middle Eastern cultures. Technically speaking, tackling these pernicious issues of online defamatory campaigns, online radicalization, and online Islamophobia have not been strategically countered but still persist (Jan, 2022).

To counter Islamophobia created through the *digital orientalism*, there have been some cardinal facets espousing the Muslim images across the digital frontiers.

This argument has been supported by the groundbreaking research on Islam in cyberspace, published by two intellectual scholars namely, Anderson and Eickelmsn in 2003, explicitly reads "*Muslim were among the first engineering students to create websites at the dawn of the internet, before mainstream Islamic organization posted official websites.*" This brings a vivid picture of the Muslims who have contributed exceptionally in a myriad domains of the intellectual climate, dispelling the despicable myths and stereotypes imposed by the Western media elites (Hamid, 2017).

Digital orientalism has been actively responsible for disseminating hatred and fear by working on the *vacuum* left by the Eastern (orient), giving authority to the Western (occident), paving a way to mislabel the Middle Eastern as '*human animal*'. In this context, our understanding of the digital anti-Americanism and orientalism is embryonic as it has been a vast and extensive domain where the imposed and cheery-picked stereotypes on part of the Western against the Middle Eastern people go counter to each other. This nasty practice of employing the tool of digital orientalism is harnessed by

the mechanization of a new potent dimension called *neo-orientalism*. Neo-orientalism implies the contemporary manifestation of orientalism, which is a Western framework for understanding and representing the Eastern world, specifically the Middle East and Asia. This potent tool of digital orientalism plays a central role in creating an abusive climate of attaching the baseless allegations and stereotypes against Muslims hailing from the Middle East.

Realistically speaking, this digital neo-orientalism is perpetuating in the US war films and videogames, depicting Eastern people as '*barbaric and terrorists*' who deserve *in-human* treatment on part of the *Civilizing Europe*. This hate-driven climate is further exacerbated by the US digital *epistemic power* hell-bent on to impede intergroup rapprochement because digital entertainment media *intentionally and substantially propagates this fear and instigates bias against the orient* (Fattoumi, 2023)s.

This digital orientalism is promoted with a solemn objective to oversimplify the orient's traditional roots and their primordial legacies. It is harnessed by the four fundamental discourses, giving unflinching impetus to negatively portray the Orientals. As per an erudite intellectual, Edward W. Said, a professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University, *there have been four notable discourses on Orientalism including postcolonial power that is about the expression of imperialism followed by controlling economy and cultural domination. Intellectual power releases Western documentation, research and study of the East by the Western in the name of education and knowledge. Culture power becomes one of the ways to justify the practice of Western colonialism and endo-colonization and to modernize the East through texts or literary works. The last is the moral power including spreading the religions and planting religiosity in order to produce what the East can and cannot do.*

Dominating these slurring stereotypes against the East especially, the Middle East, all these tactics and stratagems are impeccably employed to dominate the postcolonial power, intellectual power, cultural power, and the moral power, bringing the oriental legacies into oblivion.

Strategic location has been a significant term used in this context that prolifically describes the author's position in a text regarding to the oriental material he writes about. This position tactically employed by Western Digital *Occident* (anti-East) to de-construct the acclaimed status of Eastern civilization in this digital driven era. This strategic location is central to critically analyze the relationship between texts and the way in which group of texts (types of texts and textual genre) overlap. This can be strategically used by the Western digital cyberspace with an objective to implant an inferior status of orientals through *epistemic mechanism*. In the context of digital orientalism, "*strategic formation*" implies the deliberate and systematic construction of Orientalist representations, narratives, and discourses in digital media. It also carves out sophisticated digital strategies to mold public opinion, influence policy formulation, and to justify the dominant Western perspectives on the East (Widjajati, 2022).

These orientalist tropes and stereotypes have been incessantly perpetuated through techno-orientalism, a new term initially introduced by David S. Roh in his seminal book written in 2015 namely, "*Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and the Media*". This techno-orientalism strongly believes in the concept of '*Technological Determinism*', implying that bringing Eastern cultures into the fold of Western civilized culture to maneuver on the trajectory of social, cultural, and economic transformation. Technology has been the *primary driver*. Such pathetic oriental tropes, stereotypes, and narratives are reinforced and perpetuated by a myriad of digital technologies, falling out rightly in the domain of neo-orientalism, a brain child of digital orientalism. This vividly brings forth the imagery of the Eastern cultures as '*technologically low-born and inferior*'. Additionally, a repertoire of strategies has been in full operation, fueling stereotypes of considering Middle Eastern people as *terrorist, fundamentalist, monolithic, underdeveloped, anti-West or anti-Americans, Bedouin* and the list goes on. It intentionally chalks out the European imagery in its differential relation towards

both the '*oriental*' and the American myth of electronic space (Marchart, 1998).

Digital Orientalism is inextricably tied to the notions of *Eurocentrism* and Orientalism. One significant reason that determines the everlasting connectivity between digital orientalism and Eurocentrism is that they share the same historical legacies, tracing their roots in both imperialism and colonialism through which Western power corridors imposed their hegemonic values over the Eastern societies. They employed and strategically reinforced their dominant narratives, centering the Occident perspectives and their *intellectual credibility*, marginalizing the Eastern one. Through its technological superiority, these Occident are hell-bent on to erase the agency and voices of Eastern cultures. Through this technological sophistry, they keep perpetuating the negative tropes and stereotypes against the Middle East and the Asia. Eurocentrism and Orientalism are the practices of "*ordering, bordering, and othering in knowledge productivity, shaping and molding our geographical imaginations and our geographical representations.*"

As per Virginie Mamadouh, these Western Digital Occident have devised many tools and strategies to advance the concept of Eurocentrism not only in the west but also in the East. These tools are media representation, cultural appropriation, and historical revisionism, language dominance, and digital platforms. These tools are masterfully used by the West to mislabel the East, reinforcing the negative stereotypes of non-western places and people (Mamadouh, 2021).

These pervasive tropes and stereotypes created against the Middle East received massive coverage and attention after the Ottoman empire fell at the hands of British in WW1, mislabeling the Middle East with vernacular and derogatory stereotypes and tropes as "*a region of savages*". The post-WWI academic climate suddenly changed as the West introduced new ways of portraying orients in video games and other digital circles notably called the digital orientalism. The most pervasive stereotypes fueling anti-Muslim rhetoric was:

"Every Muslim is a terrorist, period.

Shut your mouth."

Even others persistent oriental tropes were finding their ways in Western anti-orient discourses viz. "*exotic and jihadist.*" Although these despicable and biased stereotypes have been negated by Chicharito during his interview on CNN news (Darkness, 2019).

"I, am not a Muslim...

but the best person from my view is the Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H).

As per research, among 1,000 films from the year 1896 to 2,000, 936 had been reported anti-Arabs and anti-Muslim, exacerbating negative stereotypes associated with Arabs. These negative tropes have been a staple food of the digital orientalism industry. For instance, in the '*India Jones and the Temple of Dooms*' in 1984, India has been labelled as '*a place of savage customs*'. In the same vein, after Oklahoma City bombing in 1995 the term '*Middle Eastern Terrorism*' was all over the media coverage. In reality, two Americans were responsible for carrying out this heinous attack. This categorically brings forth the '*excluded*' status of the Middle East in the very eyes of Western world. This biased portrayal of the '*orients*' has caught a steady criticism from various intellectual and academic quarters in the East as explicitly reflected as:

"Poster hold by a student (Columbia), why require me to read Professor Edward W. Said If you don't want me to use it?"

The stereotypical construction of '*us*' versus '*them*' has been a catching phrase of the Western digital media. This bipolar construction is based on culture, religion, and race. Rationally speaking, these trio facets viz. culture, religion, and race of the Arabs and Muslim societies are still demonized as:

"The portrait of Arabs and Islamic culture is still biased"

De-centering the digital orientalism that promotes the notions of *Eurocentrism* and *techno-orientalism*, it is high time to address such detestable oriental tropes and stereotypes by maneuvering a counter discourse on digital front on a massive level.

“Not to show that my history is better than you, or my history’s worse than yours. I’m the victim and you’re somebody who’s oppressed. But rather to understanding history in terms of other people’s history.....”

This can only be possible through *strategic essentialism* of the East (orient), a term initially incorporated in postcolonial discourse by *Gayathri Chakravarty Spivak*, referring to the fact that Orients must have a well-thought-out narratives and discourse to dispel all negatively imposed stereotypes and trope on part of the Occident (Explained, 2024).

Digital orientalism is intentionally used by the Occident, considering the West as the ‘*paragon of virtue*’ while they associate *fanaticism*, *violence* with the Arabs and with Islam. (Edward W. Said)

“Fanaticism, violence, always associated with the Arabs, with Islam.”

“The human side of the Islamic and especially Arabic world in such coverage is rarely found in such coverage.”

Contrary to these fallacious digital-driven stereotypes, Edward W. Said has struggled hard to dismantle these cherry-picked stereotypes and to bring the global focus towards the human side of the Islamic and Arabic world, posing disastrous consequences for the very survival of the Middle Eastern imagery in digital globalized world.

“The human side of the Islamic and especially Arabic world is rarely found in such coverage.”

The de-humanizing language on part of the Occident is skillfully used to perpetuate such oriental fanatics in digital media circles where Arabs are portrayed either *Villain* or *fanatics*. (Fatima Bhutto in Doha debates) This digital orientalism is hailed as a *sinister project* through which the Middle East (Arabs) is painted as a technologically low-born area, influencing the western thoughts negatively (Debate, 2023).

The transformation of orientalism through *mutation*, a term incorporated by Ahmad. H. Sa’di, in his article titled “*Orientalism in a globalized world: Said in the twenty first century*”, into a new form called digital orientalism, technically speaking, will potentially engender a *paradigmatic change* and strongly argue that alongside the old-style orientalism, a more sophisticated, subtle, and up-to-date perspectives would emerge called digital orientalism (Sa’di, 2020).

Internalized orientalism refers to the process through which individuals from non-western cultures, particularly from Asia and the Middle East, internalize and accept the negative stereotypes, biases, and prejudices perpetuated by orientalism.

Through this mechanism, the West has compelled the *East* or *South* to comply with the imposed stereotypes deliberately thought out to dehumanize Arabs and reduce the human agency, putting the East in the *psyche of inferiority complex*. To escape such *oriental clutches*, the orients need to de-westernize the digital cyber-space and other communication researches by depicting the positive contributions on part of the orient a process known as *strategic essentialism* (Alahmed, 2020).

The phenomenon of *digital orientalism* is harnessed by some digital tools and discourses to perpetuate the orientalist discourses through *objectification*, *essentialism*, and *commodification*, exploring the orientalism embedded in the digital media. It also employs the digital rhetoric to investigate how discursive elements unique to digital media, such as YouTube thumbs nails and intro clips, can potentially construct orientalist meaning in text. Central to this *modus operandi* is the *2inaZoo*, a YouTube channel, employing digital tools to perpetuate orientalist discourses, considering them as mentally and rationally inferior and low-born antithesis of the occident (the West) through a discourse

that “*is produced and exist in an uneven exchange.*”

Orientalist discourse in digital text implies the perpetuation of stereotypes, biases, and cultural misunderstandings about Eastern cultures, societies, and people through digital media. These are materialized through *exoticization*, *cultural appropriation*, and *Eurocentrism*, mislabeling Middle East as mysterious and exotic orients (Payalagpal, 2024).

Western prejudice has been reflected in a myriad of *media theories* promulgated by the digital orientalist outlets, portraying the Middle East in a denigrated stereotypical representation in terms of *values*, *belief system*, and *communication model*.

To de-center these stereotypes, *Virtual Ummah* must come across with *Islamic communication paradigms*, dispelling various nasty “*__isms*”, affecting a potential revolution in the interpretation of Islam cultures and values. *Essentialist thinking* is one of the cardinal insights into this de-westernizing paradigms, sensitizing Eastern values in their own psyche and countering the *cultural fetishism* _ a process technically employed to reduce the intricate practices, tradition, and identities to simplistic, exotic, and low-born representation.

This process is strategically carried out through social media, online coverage, and digital media to reinforce the notion of stagnant “*oriental*” culture (Mowlana, 2003).

Analysis and discussion:

Digital orientalism is a strategic approach on part of the West, considering the East as an *inferior entity* in this highly sophisticated technological era. Central to the digital orientalism is the concept of *polemical orientalism*, an approach through which aggressive and demeaning narratives and rhetoric are deliberately maneuvered against the East especially, the Middle East and Islam. In digital orientalism, the West totally relies on their “*strategic position*”, a vantage point through which they portray the negative imagery of the Middle East in both print and electronic cyber spaces. These digital media outlets are professionally handled by the West to perpetuate the *denigrating stereotypes* and subversive rhetoric, reducing the Middle East to *terrorism incubator*, an area inherently responsible to spew violence and terrorism.

Eurocentrism and the *techno-orientalism* have been the offshoots of this digital orientalism, strategically choreographed to epitomize the Western ideals, values, culture, languages, and ideologies at the cost of the Orient (Middle East, North Africa, Asia). The denigrating dimension of the digital orientalism has caught an explicit attention in context of mislabeling the Arabs as “*terrorist others*” and “*the human animals*”. This has employed a subtle subjective approach towards the Muslims hailing from the global south where they have been placed in the category of “*lacking diversity*” and “*monolithic*”, no representation. Digital orientalism is giving a strong impetus to the pervasive stereotypes by the application of a technique known as “*visual representation*”. This modus operandi is cunningly choreographed by the Western digital narcissist hell-bent on to erase the traditional roots and identity of the Muslims specifically, in Middle East.

Cultural imperialism and hegemony have been the two critical tactics and stratagems the West is overtly and covertly incorporating in the digital discourses to push the orients’ narratives and strategic position into oblivion. This demeaning approach on part of the hypercritical west has been pragmatically denounced even in some Western societies. As per UK home office (2006), the internet, an imperative medium of digital orientalism has been identified as a domain where a myriad types of radical views and perspectives are strongly promoted. This in turn leads to *cultural racism* which is conspicuously evident in the fact, portraying Muslims are incompatible with the West, jeopardizing the civilized values and norms of the Western civilization and indeed pose a devastating threat to the *secular Multiculturalism*.

De-westernizing these dominant entrenched stereotypes and tropes, portraying the Middle East as ‘

inherently violent and *technologically low-born*’ region, there must be a counter approach on part of the Muslim and specifically, Middle East to adopt the notion of *strategic essentialism*, a term initially incorporated in postcolonial discourse by Gayathri Chakravarty Spivak, referring to the fact that Orientals must have a well-thought-out narratives and discourse to dispel all negatively imposed stereotypes and trope on part of the Occident.

Additionally, to dispel and to de-mystify the imposed entrenched stereotypes and denigrating generalizations, the *Virtual Ummah* must step forward with genuine measures, calling for *critical re-evaluation* of the digital Western media accompanied by an inclusive portrayals of the region to promote digital harmony, diversity, and cross-cultural understanding.

Conclusion:

Summing up, this study explicitly brings forth a vivid understanding about how *digital orientalism* perpetuates and reinforces *nefarious* stereotypes and anti-Middle East narratives. Through the close scrutiny of critical discourse analysis, the western digital orientalism is on the rise, imposing its *cultural hegemony* over the *East* through a myriad of digital tools viz. exoticization, cultural appropriation, and de-traditionalization of the Orientals’ societies. It also focuses on the refined understanding of the intricate power dynamics of the Middle East, running counter to the prescribed narratives of the West.

Last but not the least, this study thoroughly demands that *re-evaluation* of the digital Western media be given constructive thoughts that will ultimately lead to the equitable and an inclusive portrayal of the Middle East. A pluralistic and equitable digital cyberspace is vitally central to promote diversity especially, cross-cultural understanding, paving a way to demystify the western narratives and myths associated with Middle East. Once these optimistic parameters are set, the digital misunderstanding on both sides can be cogently negotiated that will pave ways for creating an inclusive, fair and representative digital cyber sphere.

Final thoughts:

Digital orientalism must have an inclusive and equitable approach towards depicting the Middle East in Western digital circles. These constructive approaches will nurture a *climate of mutual trust*, leading to *diversity* and *cross-cultural understanding*. These prospects can only be materialized through *digital activism*.

Acknowledgment:

The authors acknowledge the valuable support of the *editorial committee* of this publication and in particular Prof. Dr. Atta Ullah Jan, Qurtuba University of Science and Information Technology, Peshawar for extending his invaluable support and guidance throughout this research study.

Thanks also goes to the Journal *proofreading committee* for extending their generous support in finalizing and approving our paper.

Disclosure statement:

The authors declare that they have no *conflict of interest*. This research has not received any specific funding from any agencies in public, commercial, or not-for-profit organizations.

Additionally, the authors have no financial or personal relationships that could have influenced the research findings. All concerned data and materials used in this research are properly cited and referenced. The authors are responsible for the *content* and *clarity* of this research article.

Funding:

The authors have no funding to report.

Competing interests:

The authors claim no competing interests.

Dedication:

In honor of the ‘*misrepresented*’ who have been denigrated by mainstream Western media.

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