

# The Emergence of Neo-Orientalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Exploring the Discourse for the Development of Islam and the Muslim World

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## Abstract

*The development of neo-orientalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century investigates the advancing talk encompassing Islam and the Muslim world. It digs into the authentic setting of Orientalism, accentuating Edward Said's persuasive study and its effect on the Western impression of the East. The conversation follows the advancement of neo-orientalists, featuring its coherence with traditional orientalism while adjusting to contemporary intricates, particularly after the occasions of 9/11. The point of this paper is how neo-orientalism mirrors the moving elements between the West and the East, examining the interconnectedness of islamophobia, scholarly exploration and worldwide legislative issues. It then explores the intersection of secularism and religion in the context of Orientalism, emphasizing the influence of Western scholars on Muslim-majority nations. It also presents a comprehensive manifestation and its impact on cultural perceptions and academic discourse.*

Keywords: neo-orientalism, orientalism, the Muslim world, secularism, seismic events

## Introduction

In the multi-layered domain of present-day talk, Neo Orientalism arises as a reference point, enlightening the complicated exchange between the Orient and the Occident. Much like a river flowing alongside its classical predecessor, this intellectual current carries fresh currents of thought while maintaining the echoes of historical undercurrents. As it sweeps through contemporary literature, neo-orientalism kindles a fire of discussion, interrogating the Western perspective on Islam and the Islamic world, especially in the aftermath of the seismic events of 9/11.

Pertinently neo-orientalism is a continuation of Orientalism in which Orientalism emerges as a subject in the West to study the Eastern societies, languages, and cultures by Western scholars. Yet, the term's evolution bears witness to the profound impact of Edward Said's seminal work, acting as both a critique and a cornerstone.

Said's powerful insights dismantled the disguise of Orientalism, unveiling it as not just a scholarly endeavour, but a construct that wove the threads of Western imagination into the very fabric of the East's portrayal<sup>i</sup>. Moreover, Said's pioneering spirit didn't merely shine a light on the intricate Western portrayals of the East; he navigated the labyrinth of power dynamics. His narrative revealed how knowledge was wielded as a tool, shaping perceptions, and reinforcing hegemony. "The Western depiction of the East as fragile, subservient, and inferior", he argued, "wasn't merely academic, but a mechanism that perpetuated stereotypes, influencing wider narratives of racism, colonialism, and feminism"<sup>ii</sup>.

## Characterizing Orientalism and Neo-orientalism

Orientalism alludes to the review, translation and reviews of the portrayal of Eastern societies particularly those of central Asia and the centre East by researchers, specialists and essayists from the West. Orientalism, as Edward Said utilized the term can be characterized as a philosophy which advances the 'West and Islam' dualism and the possibility that 'others are less human'. Specifically, Said stresses the point that the West,



Europe and the United States look at countries of the Orient through a lens that distorts the reality of those places and the people who live there. He calls that lens through which the West perceives and conceives that part of the world "Orientalism"<sup>iii</sup>. Since Said first published his ideas in 1978, however, the world seems to have become much more interdependent and political interrelations between the West and Islam have changed dramatically. The intricate notion of Orientalism has been extensively explored within the realms of humanities and social sciences. It serves as a lens through which we comprehend the unique portrayal of the Arab-Muslim world. Over time, Orientalism has manifested in different historical contexts, consistently highlighting distinct Western perceptions of the Orient. In the contemporary landscape, the concept has transformed, encompassing fresh depictions of the Orient. Modern renderings of Islam and the Muslim world now hold sway over the Western public sphere, casting a new light on this intricate relationship. Therefore, Orientalism, a captivating voyage through Eastern history, languages, and cultures, has metamorphosed into Neo-Orientalism, an academic concept that emerged in the aftermath of 9/11. This contemporary intellectual movement zeroes in on Western perceptions of Islam and the Middle East, with a laser focus on comprehending the uniformity of Middle Eastern and Islamic societies. Neo-Orientalism symbolizes a modern-day manifestation of Orientalist thinking, artfully unravelling the intricate interplay between the East and the West<sup>iv</sup>. Dag Tuastad, a discerning observer, harnessed the power of neo-Orientalism to unearth the veiled agendas of American neo-colonialism and neo-liberalism in the Middle East, unmasking their perceived superiority<sup>v</sup>. This shift from classical Orientalism to Neo-Orientalism ushers in a new era of analysis, seamlessly threading the historical tapestry into the contemporary narrative.

A comparative lens reveals that while classical Orientalism anchored itself in historical underpinnings, Neo-Orientalism is intricately woven into the fabric of our dynamic times. The tumultuous shifts in global politics and evolving interests have propelled neo-Orientalism to the forefront, leading to a conceptual synergy between past ideologies and contemporary complexities. Edward Said's profound notion of "21st Orientalism" encapsulates this surge, spotlighting an "aggressive Neo-Orientalism" born in the crucible of the post-9/11 era<sup>vi</sup>. Additionally, neo-Orientalism, as a modern discourse, casts a spotlight on Arab Muslims as individual actors and Islam as a multi-dimensional institution. Said's contention about Islam's regression stimulates inquiries about democratic systems and the overarching implications for the future. This evolving narrative of Neo-Orientalism traverses the precarious bridge between perceived threats and the delicate preservation of democratic values, echoing resoundingly within the contemporary discourse.

The evolution of Neo-Orientalism is inextricably intertwined with seismic shifts in global politics, culminating in a redefined geographical scope. The term "Orient", once anchored in historical contexts, dynamically adapts to the oscillating tides of global transformation. Catalysts like the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent global ripples recalibrate the traditional Orientalist paradigm, giving rise to Neo-Orientalism with the Arab world occupying its epicentre. Amid the rich academic work, the towering figure of Bernard Lewis exemplifies the ethos of Neo-Orientalism. Lewis, influenced by scholars like Daniel Pipes and Samuel Huntington, delves deep into the labyrinth of terrorism, tracing its origins to the cauldron of Islamic-Western tensions. Through works like "THE CRISES OF ISLAM: HOLY WAR AND UNHOLY TERROR," Lewis bridges the chasm between established paradigms and the emergent Neo-Orientalist perspective<sup>vii</sup>.

In this symphony of ideas, scholars' works resonate harmoniously. Edward Said's seminal work "Orientalism" pierces the veil of traditional norms, revitalizing intellectual debates. whereas, Mohammad Samiei, in his article on neo-orientalism, heralds a post-Orientalist era characterized by paradigm shifts and new dimensions. furthermore, Mubarak Altwaiji's exploration of Neo-Orientalism uncovers its intricate layers. Bernard Shaw's "What Went Wrong" serves as a historical testament, while Bernard Lewis, through his writings, foments perceptions of Arab Muslims in the American psyche. Therefore, neo-Orientalism emerges as the bridge linking epochs in the grand tapestry of discourse. It intertwines classical wisdom with contemporary conundrums, crafting an intellectual narrative where the East harmonizes with the West, history dances with the present, and ideas converge in a symphony of comprehension and enlightenment.

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**Neo orientalism in the 21st century**

The epoch-defining events of 9/11 cast a long shadow, casting their influence not only on geopolitics but also on perceptions and scholarly pursuits. This catastrophic event led to a global recalibration of relationships, with Arab-American dynamics transforming profoundly. Some view 2001 as a symbolic year zero, a moment that irrevocably shifted perceptions. This shift brought to the surface not just the tensions between cultures, but also the need for comprehension, the yearning to understand what led to these divergent viewpoints. Besides, the academic arena, ever sensitive to seismic shifts in the world, felt the ripples of these events. The injection of a "neo" dynamism into the Arab world, traditionally seen as static, marked an intellectual renaissance. As the world grappled with new political currents, the term "Orient" itself transformed. The 9/11 attacks, the ensuing American responses, and the evolving global political landscape collectively became a prism through which the classic Orient was reevaluated, ultimately heralding the emergence of a new academic epoch, one where the Arab narrative assumed centre stage. This resurgent current, Neo Orientalism, finds its pulse intertwined with the tides of post-9/11 American cultural shifts. As the landscape evolved, neo-Orientalism extended its reach beyond Western interpretations. It embraced voices from the contemporary Middle Eastern milieu, each perspective contributing brushstrokes to the canvas of discourse. As if in a symphony of interconnectedness, this resurgence is not just an isolated surge, but an extension of earlier waves. The discourse encompasses the broad spectrum of essentialist images, reconstructions of Islam, and the vibrant narratives of Muslim societies and communities in Western domains.

The aftermath of September 11, 2001, saw the initiation of the "war on terror," as American policymakers confronted the enigma of non-state actors. This marked the start of a vigorous intellectual exploration into the ideological underpinnings of these entities. As Western thinkers and academics delved into the depths of motivation, causation, and counteraction, neo-Orientalism became a lens through which to view the complex mosaic of ideologies that shaped these events. Therefore, Neo Orientalism, a living continuum, stitches the past to the present, and culture to politics. It becomes the conduit through which diverse narratives, ideologies, and perceptions converge and diverge. In this symphony of thought, the past harmonizes with the present, the Western gaze intertwines with the Eastern perspective, and the intricate fabric of neo-Orientalism continues to be woven, painting a portrait of the ever-evolving interplay between cultures and ideologies.

The history of Islam-West relations has traversed diverse phases, encompassing collaboration, conflict, and misunderstandings. The post-9/11 time reshaped the Western impression of Islam touching off the flairs of islamophobia and its weeping repercussions. Recognizing the multifaceted elements of this relationship is vital for encouraging compassion, advancing comprehension, and working with open discourse to connect separates and take a stab at serene conjunction.

The aftermath of 9/11 and subsequent developments laid bare the divide between the Western and Muslim worlds. Despite some nuanced shifts in perceptions, it remains evident that the Western viewpoint on Islam has not undergone substantial transformation. The perpetuation of public discourse that stokes fear and incidents targeting Islamic symbols and establishments further fuelled the proliferation of Islamophobia on a global scale. This surge in Islamophobia is not an isolated issue; it intertwines with a broader array of factors that mutually exacerbate the phenomenon. The interconnectedness of violent terrorism and Islamophobia creates a vicious cycle, where one perpetuates the other. Western scholarship and media, especially in the United States, frequently framed events like 9/11 within the context of religious extremism and global violence, cultivating stereotypical and fear-inducing images of Muslims. Scholars have delved into the discrimination faced by Muslim and Arab Americans, which often hinges on factors beyond religion, including race and heritage. Thus, the aftermath of 9/11 bore significant consequences, both economically and politically, particularly within the Muslim world. The ensuing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, triggered by the global war on terror, brought substantial suffering and upheaval to these regions.

The relationship between Islam and the West holds its origins in the post-Treaty of the Hudaibiya period, a time marked by both cooperation and conflict. While the exact starting year is subject to debate, it is widely

acknowledged that this interaction commenced after the treaty, signifying a crucial juncture. What began with promise eventually evolved into periods of discord, unfolding a narrative that encompasses not only episodes of warfare and mutual suspicions but also significant contributions in terms of economic exchange and intellectual engagement. In any case, the direction of this relationship took a huge turn during the mid-nineteenth hundred years, as Muslims were defied with a diverse test as Western progress. The occasion of 9/11 went about as a seismic shift, everlastingly changing the Western view of Islam. The shocking assaults, coordinated by fanatics who misshaped Islamic standards, to legitimize their activities, caused a significant change in how the religion was seen in the Western world. As a result, Islam became inextricably linked to terrorism and extremism, with media coverage and public discourse amplifying this association.

The persevering accentuation on the strict inspirations driving the assaults engendered the insight that Islam was intrinsically savage and on a very basic level in conflict with Western qualities. This finished with the authoring of the expression "islamophobia" typifying the separation, bias and predisposition Muslims face day today. Nonetheless, this change in discernment was not restricted to the way of talking alone; it converted into substantial strategy choices. Western governments introduced security measures that disproportionately targeted Muslim communities, triggering concerns about surveillance, profiling, and discrimination. These actions curtailed civil liberties and deepened the perception that Islam and its followers posed a grave security risk. Moreover, the cultural and religious practices of Islam underwent heightened scrutiny in the Western context. For instance, practices like veiling, which hold profound religious significance for many Muslim women, were frequently misinterpreted and misconstrued as symbols of oppression. Debates arose about the compatibility of Islamic practices, including Shariah law, with Western legal and social systems. Regrettably, these debates often lacked nuance and complexity, leading to an oversimplified understanding of an inherently diverse and intricate religion.

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In his extensive body of work, Edward Said notably refrained from explicitly addressing the dichotomy between secularism and religion. Instead, he meticulously explored diverse cultures and faiths, arguing that pervasive cultural hegemony stifles true freedom. Said's profound insights illuminate the notion that genuine liberation can only be achieved by transcending the constraints imposed by cultural dominance<sup>viii</sup>. According to Bruce Robinson, muftis and others, secularism in Said's perception is not against religion. Still, in reality, secularism is an anti-religious term used by Westerners and orientalist against Muslim-majority nations in Asia, and Africa and Muslim minority nations in Europe, America and Australia. The term secularism was invented by George Jacob Holyoake in the 1840s advocating that a state should be tolerant to various faith and philosophical background groups. Secularism emerged in the Arab world under the influence of Western orientalist scholars and contemporary modernists of each faith group scholars. The abuse or misuse of Islam in politics or ruling the nation has been a characteristic of Muslims from the beginning of Islamic civilization, while Orientalism is the study of faith or religion, culture, society and politics invented and introduced in the 16<sup>th</sup> century by the university alumni scholars in Europe and later it expanded in other parts of the globe. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century,

modern orientalism scholars regarded religion as a crisis in the state whether non-Muslim majority or Muslim majority nations and as a result, they adopted and influenced any practitioner faith groups with secularism including Muslims. Modern Orientalism is a “set of structures that came from the early Orientalism,” after the Middle age or age of Renaissance and these structures have been secularized and rationalized given the scientific terminology. Orientalism influenced the Arab world as well with the rise of the secularist model following their independence in the 20<sup>th</sup> century from the British colony with their influence on orientalism.

## Conclusion

In the intricate tapestry of East-West relations, the evolution from classical Orientalism to the nuanced contours of Neo-Orientalism unveils a profound journey through time and thought. Edward Said's seminal work that shattered the illusions of Orientalism, acts as both critique and cornerstone in this transformative narrative. The post-9/11 era ushered in a new epoch, where Neo-Orientalism seamlessly weaving historical underpinnings into the weave of contemporary complexities.

As scholars like Bernard Lewis and contemporary voices like Mohammad Samiei and Mubarak Altwaiji contribute their insights, Neo-Orientalism emerges as a bridge between epochs, harmonizing classical wisdom with present conundrums. The repercussions of 9/11, while creating a long-shaded area of islamophobia and worldwide recalibrations, likewise turned into the impetus for a scholarly renaissance, testing previously established inclinations and pushing the Bedouin story to the very front. The split between the Western and Muslim universes, uncovered by 9/11, highlighted the significance of cultivating discourse, dissipating generalizations, and embracing the complexities of a different and rich embroidery of societies. Edward Said's exploration of cultural hegemony and the intertwining of secularism and religion adds depth to the discourse, urging us to transcend constraints imposed by dominant narratives. In this grand narrative, neo-Orientalism not only stitches the past to the present but also becomes a conduit for diverse narratives, ideologies, and perceptions to converge and diverge. It is a living testament to the ever-evolving interplay between cultures and ideologies, urging us to seek comprehension, enlightenment, and harmonious coexistence in the vast and interconnected realm of human discourse.

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