THE GENRE OF ORIENTALISM IN MODERN MALAYSIA: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

This article will essentially focus on the attitudes of recent Malay-Muslim scholars concerning the authority and relevance of orientalist work in the field of Islamic studies. In order to achieve this objective, the article was designed to consist of various sections, the first of which is the introduction, which explains the background and methodology of the study. Secondly, the article contains an analysis and review of the literature on this particular subject. Thirdly, an exposition of the negative attitude of Malay-Muslim scholars’ towards the genre of orientalism - and fourthly, a clarification of the positive attitude taken by Malay-Muslim scholars on the nature of orientalist work. Finally, the study will be summarized in the conclusion.

Introduction

Nowadays, with the advent of globalization, we may notice that the world’s centre of Islamic studies has been widened into three main locations; the West, the Middle East and the Malay Archipelago (i.e. Malaysia and Indonesia). Each of these regions is characterized by their own unique perspectives on the subject of Islamic studies. While the Western scholarly milieu is normally considered the centre of orientalism, the Middle East as well as the Malay Archipelago scholarly contexts encompass both the traditional and reformist perspectives. Since the tragedy on September 11, several universities in Malaysia, such as the University of Malaya, have become highly influential, with a major influx in the number of foreign students, i.e. those from Middle Eastern backgrounds. However, in terms of modern methodologies and bibliographical resources, this so called ‘centre’ of Islamic Studies was still unable to match the western centre. This is the case due to the outstanding reputation enjoyed by the ‘centre of orientalism’ itself, coupled with the western world’s supremacy in the latest information technologies. Faced with this western domination, especially in terms of the study of the teachings of Islam, Muslims need to develop the discipline of ‘Occidentalism’, in order to meet the potential domination of western
In order to achieve such an objective, Muslim academia will require a selective approach in scrutinizing both the positive and negative elements of the genre of Orientalism. Such a course of action could be arranged by generating an Occidentalist research centre. So far, we can identify two major tendencies evinced by Malay-Muslim scholars on this subject, i.e. the negative and positive approaches. Hence, this article will identify both points of view by utilizing ‘Critical Discourse Analysis’. This particular analysis will contemplate each of the intellectual discourses in terms of historical and philosophical beliefs held by the selected scholar. Furthermore, this analysis will attempt to avoid the legalistic formalistic approach of assessing a point of view without offering any constructive suggestion.

The Literature Analysis

Naturally, study of the paradigm of Orientalism had often been carried out by Islamic scholars in the modern age, due to the significance of this work in attending to the current needs of Muslims. However, some of these studies seem to be quite limited in scope, so that they will, in all likelihood, fail to overcome the problems faced by the modern Muslim world in this respect. These studies can be classified into several basic types:

1. Studies that describe the historical development of the genre of Orientalism, particularly those that also involve a study of Islam and the Muslim community. Regrettably, these studies have in the main been conducted by Muslim scholars upholding the negative point of view, without revealing the positive elements of the genre of Orientalism. In this way, such studies seem to be of a nature similarly excessive as of those of the orientalist themselves, and therefore need to be evaluated objectively by modern Muslim scholars.

2. Studies done by western scholars who sympathize with the Muslim community, by exposing all the shortcomings of the type of Orientalism practiced by the western media.

3. Studies done by Malaysian and Indonesian scholars revealing the biased nature of many works produced by western scholars. Most of these studies have focussed on the history of Malaysia and Indonesia without specifically touching upon the subject of Islamic studies.

4. Studies on the various fields of Islamic studies engaged in by western Orientalists. The inadequate nature of these studies can be perceived through the fact that no proper methodological framework is used by these scholars. Therefore, such researchers tend to have a distorted picture of the Muslim’s worldview, and have been influential largely with the masses who are lacking in basic knowledge about Islam.

5. Study of the historical background of the Muslim community in the Malay Archipelago, produced by western scholars. Since this material was produced by British bureaucracy, most of its perspectives correspond to the colonialist point of view, including the concept of the ‘white man’s burden’ that attempts...
to justify the colonization of the Malay Peninsula. Therefore most of its descriptions are aimed towards decreasing the influence of Islam in the Malay Peninsula.¹¹

(6) Studies conducted by recent western scholars who separate the political standpoint held by western scholars into two different groups - those whose are hostile to the traditional Muslim perspective, and those who are sympathetic and more objective in scrutinizing the Muslim world. Regrettably, the camp of scholars hostile to Islam is alleged to have influenced western political power.¹²

(7) Studies that describe the historical development of classical Orientalism without mentioning the latest trends and philosophical perspectives in the field, such as the post-colonialism that has influenced modern western studies of Islam.¹³

(8) Studies that reveal the content of the research studies as well as the types of approaches adopted by the modern Orientalism research centre in Canada. These studies were produced by a number of western graduates. It seems that the study brings out the positive elements of the approach in place at the centre, without mentioning any negative element. These studies were confined to a Canadian university, and did not include mention universities in other western countries.¹⁴

(9) Study proposed by modern Muslim scholars who encourage us to develop the discipline of ‘Occidentalism’, as the best method for assessing and checking the influence of the western paradigm (particularly that which is Euro-centric) in studying Islam and the Muslim communities.¹⁵

The Authority and Methodology of the Genre of Orientalism: The Negative Attitude

We are able essentially to identify two main attitudes held by Malay-Muslim scholars toward the genre of Orientalism; i.e. the negative, and the positive attitudes. Those who dispute the authority of the Orientalists, as well as the validity of the research methodology, that they advocate, base their views on several principles, namely that:

First, any authentic knowledge of Islam can only be known, and subsequently written about, by Muslim scholars themselves. On this basis, any form of research in Islamic studies produced by the non-Muslim should be rejected due to the fact that their work is, a priori, based on the western secular epistemological point of view.¹⁶ Additionally, these groups openly declared that anyone who had studied and sought to utilize anything of the paradigm of orientalist study of Islam can rightly be accused as being a collaborator with orientalism, and therefore must be strongly opposed by the Muslim community.¹⁷

Second, the work of the Orientalists was motivated solely and explicitly by their goal of destroying the basic principles of Islam. This desire arose as a result of the eternal rivalry and enmity between Islam and ‘the West’ (represented by the Jews and Christians), and was stirred by the Crusades.¹⁸ Consequently, the work of the
Orientalists can be considered an attempt to humiliate Muslims, since most of the teachings of Islam have been declared in their works as being wicked and in contradiction with the principles of modernization.¹⁹

Third, the western’s paradigm in studying Islam was dirtied with secularism, which is contrary to Islamic principles. This paradigm comprises of many facets, one of which involves:

(1) Setting up the basic premise that Islam is a false religion. This premise was conceived by Darwin’s theory of evolution, which stated that the western secular civilization was the most advanced of all civilizations due to its rejection of any form of religion.²⁰ Based on this theory, any society, such as the Muslim community, that strongly adhere to religious doctrines, can rightly be considered a primitive one. Any human suffering is the result of human weakness in feeling it necessary to hold on to misguided religious beliefs. Therefore, any study of Islam must be begin with various negative hypotheses, which the Orientalist then attempts to validate with various absolutely fabricated ‘facts’, as it deems fit.²¹ Among such hypotheses is that the Prophet Muhammad is no more than an ordinary yet cunning person who had simply fabricated a new religion, namely Islam.²² This has been done through his close familiarity with Jews and Christians.²³

(2) Stipulating that Islam should not be studied as a religious based on a revelation from God. Instead, it is merely a religion the origin of which lies in a primitive Middle Eastern community.²⁴

(3) The relative value of any religious commitment (the ‘birds-eye’ view). Any researcher of Islam must free himself from evincing any personal religious commitment in their studies of Islam. By undertaking such an approach, their research takes on facade of being critical and balanced.²⁵ This is done to make any religious study ostensibly objective, scientific, value-free and unbiased, despite being based on a particular world-view held by the researchers.²⁶ This approach seems idyllic, but in actual fact its actualisation is a mere myth, due to two main factors. Firstly, the researchers concerned are inevitably affected by their own world-view, distorted by elements such as self-trust, self-interest, social barriers and assuming existing knowledge.²⁷

(4) The strict requirement to select the sources of the study. A form of strict quality standards to which any source of material involving the study of Islam has been subjected.²⁸ However, while such strict requirements were stipulated concerning authenticity and rationality for Muslim scholars, great liberality was simultaneously evinced concerning the application of these standards to the work of old-school orientalists. Most of these works were based on pure fantasy and stories springing from the enmity caused by the Crusades.²⁹

Fourth, the modern orientalist associated closely with western political power in spreading western secularism throughout the world, including in the field of Islamic studies. Although secularism is often described by terms which usually have a
positive rhetorical impact e.g., ‘modernization’ it can be considered as principally the embodiment of anti-religion, which denies divine power in human life. Essentially, secularism had perceived that human suffering throughout history was due to the fact that humanity had been deceived by notions of ‘divine power’. In due course, this so-called ‘modern orientalist’ had become the main tool for the western super power in suppressing the Muslim community.33

Authority and methodology research in the centres of orientalism:

Positive Attitude

In contrast to the former attitude, one may notice that there are also several Malay-Muslim scholars who had perceived the genre of orientalism in a more positive manner. Naturally, their point of view is in accordance with the rational paradigm of Islam, that requires its adherent to take a selective approach in the evaluation of any matter. It seems that their standpoint was formed by several factors, including:

First, that fact that it was in accordance with the past precedent of classical Muslim scholars. Throughout the history of the Muslim intellectual tradition, we observe several Muslim scholars who, after careful examination responded positively to the work of non-Muslims, and regularly responded to such ideas respectfully.34 What is more appealing; the nature of such work was that it was not confined in its application to the non-Muslim point of view, but also applied to their fellow Muslims.35 This effort was continued by modern Muslim scholars who have explained the history, tactics and weaknesses of this genre of Orientalism. Today, it becomes the main responsibility of the Muslim scholar to respond to the stereotype of ‘extremism’ cast upon the Muslim community. In undertaking such an endeavour, the Muslim scholar will undoubtedly need to carefully scrutinize both the negative and positive aspects of the work of the orientalist. This work must be carried out by those who have graduated from the western academic world.36 In commenting on this issue, Wan Mohd. Nor Wan Daud has clearly stated that those Muslim scholars who had taking a negative attitude towards the genre of orientalism were infected with ‘westphobia’ syndrome, i.e. some sort of the malady of the mind causing people to become inflamed with irrational hatred of the west. Essentially, this disease resulted from the a fragmentation of mind, a kind of xenophobia which led its advocate to be irrationally afraid of the outside world.37

Second, This approach corresponds to the latest methods of the philosophy and sociology of knowledge in the field of Islamic studies. Such philosophical approaches state that any study of Islam must avoid a legal, formalistic (‘black or white’) perception of things, which normally leads research to be rigid and lacking in constructive effort to really educate their main audience, i.e. members of the community. Therefore, any Muslim scholar should utilize a holistic (comprehensive) assessment of an object in the process of research, including those related to the issue of orientalism. This suggestion is in concurrence with the new paradigm in the sociology of knowledge voiced by many modern scholars. It consists of several approaches:38

(1) Mechanism; an approach which is more holistic rather than the formalistic approach (Formism). It requires the emphasising of the mechanism and continuation of the proposed subject matter. According to this paradigm, any
matter related to the human community will involve a process of continuation, since human society is not static, but rather constantly undergoing transformation, whether this fact be for the better or worse.

(2) Organism; the whole reality of life is basically operating as a harmonious integration between internal and external factors. On this basis, the best method for understanding the reality of human life must incorporate all forms of scientific disciplines, such as history, sociology, economics and so forth.

(3) Pragmatism; all human phenomena studied are contextual in nature, there is nothing in this life that is not related to a particular context and specific condition. On this basis, studies of the human element in any subject, such as in the genre of orientalism, will become more in-depth by incorporating contextual aspects.

By analysing all the negative views expressed above, we are able to perceive some major weaknesses that exist in their viewpoint, some of which are discussed below:

(1) Such negative opinions appear to be deficient in rationality, as they are based on false generalizations. Irrationally, they attempt to deny any contribution made by orientalists.

(2) They assert that the western world is an absolute centre of evil power as well as a centre of diabolism, which no healthy mind can condone. The falsity of this position can be proved by the fact of the mere existence of good government as well as the civil society in western society. Besides, we may observe that many of the leaders of Islamic movements, who had been oppressed by their own Muslim governments, migrated to western countries. They ended up becoming a major nucleus responsible for developing the spirit of the revival of Islam in the western world, a place which would therefore seem to be conducive to the development of intellectual freedom.

(3) They are not acquainted with the latest philosophical and methodological improvements cultivated by western Orientalist research centres. This consists of acceptance of the western academia frame of mind along with a fair scientific paradigm in performing scientific research. Edward Said’s criticism of the past orientalist work had most dominantly affected many western experts in the field of Islamic studies. This state of affairs also transpires due to the dominance of the philosophy of post-colonialism, i.e. a new form of consciousness that questions the reasons for the failure of the old western modernization framework, which had been based on the ideology of secularism. In respect to such a change of consciousness, all major world religions have united with one other to challenge the agenda of globalization. If past Modernism emphasized a principle of secularism that disallowed any form of religion in human life, post-colonialist thought has tried to apply the concept of a ‘return’ to religion. Awareness of the deficiency of Darwinian euro-centric paradigm has been a concomitant of this agenda.
Hence, according to those who hold this ‘selective’ attitude, it is possible for us to acquire various valuable assets and methodological benefit from the work accomplished by the western centre of Islamic research, benefits that include:

1. The orientalist having achieved much outstanding work in producing a mechanical data analysis of Islamic tradition. This includes valuable materials like the Index Islamicus, Encyclopaedia of Islam, Mu’jam (the Muslim textual index) and translations of the major Islamic sources such as the Qur’ān, Sunnah, the Prophet’s biography as well as many of the works of past Muslim scholars. This mechanical data analysis work has facilitated research conducted by any researcher, including Muslims themselves.46

2. The methodology of Islamic studies employed by Orientalism combined normative and historical methods. Such methods will facilitate any research in Islamic studies that incorporates what is in the text with the reality that exists in society.

3. Orientalists have shaped their studies of Islam with a philosophical stance that has led to the emergence of several types of dynamism in their methodology and findings. Obviously such a philosophical stance required any research to be carried out though a type of critical analysis that precluded any fanatical affiliation toward any respected scholar, including the most famous of the orientalists. In their teaching of Islamic studies, the student is required to analyse and criticise certain major works of Muslim scholars as well as that of famous orientalists (such as the works of Ignaz Goldziher, Joseph Schacht, Patricia Crone, John Burton and others). Consequently, the student must formulate their own view pertaining to the selected issues. This approach is conducted under the supervision of the orientalist itself.47 As a result, students trained and forced to be critical tend to produce new theories, even though these theories may contradict other theories formulated by well-known orientalists.48 Hence, we observe that several new theories in Islamic studies have been initiated, such as the work done by Wael Hallaq, which discards the theory of the ‘closure of the gate of Ijtihad’. Such theories, initially proposed by Joseph Schacht, had suggested that the development of Islamic law had been ‘frozen’ due to the closure of the gate of Ijtihad by Muslim scholars in the fourth century. Instead, as emphasized by Hallaq, the dynamic established by the engagement of the principles of Islamic jurisprudence with the needs of Muslim society was still in place even after the fourth century. This was based on Hallaq’s analysis that clearly showed that Muslim scholar within this period were still utilizing their personal views (ijtihad) when faced with legal issues.49

4. Any results of research findings produced by the orientalist have to be presented and debated in the seminars / symposiums of oriental studies held by the Middle East Studies Association (MESA). Such events are attended by a large number of experts, including both Muslims and non-Muslims. In this
seminar, any views, approaches or theories related to the subject of Islamic studies will be assessed according to strict stipulations by experts from various backgrounds.  

(5) Orientalists have constantly pursued the latest methodological advancements in the study of Islam. Based on the modern paradigm of the western knowledge tradition, any decent work on knowledge should follow the progress of new theories and scientific methodologies, both of which are constantly growing. In former times, the studies performed by orientalists did not use scientific methods – they would freely use sources based on myths. This trend was changed, however, when western scientific methodology began to influence orientalism.

Conclusion

As a final conclusion, we may conclude that present-day Malay-Muslim academia are in urgent need of developing a better framework, i.e. a selective approach in assessing more fairly the genre of orientalism. By doing this, any attempts to develop discipline of ‘Occidentalism’ would become more constructive, not only in the field of Islamic studies but also in extension towards a dialogue between the Muslim and western community. However, there is a danger that such a positive aspiration will be obstructed from being realised due to the perseverance of extremist groups of Malay-Muslim scholars. They strongly oppose any work done by the non-Muslim scholar, regardless of the result of that work. Significantly, although they claim to adhere to the Islamic world-view, their extreme stance toward others may lead to a proliferation of the self truth claim, xenophobia, and authoritarian syndromes, by which the development of the Muslim community will become further complicated.

References

6. Asaf Hussain, “The Ideology of Orientalism”, in Orientalism, Islam and Islamists,


18. Ahmad Ghorab, *Subverting Islam: The Role of Orientalist Centres*, pp. 16-17

19. Ibid, pp. 3-5.


21. In this matter, Muhammad Asad said: “With few exceptions, even the most eminent of European orientalists are guilty of an unscientific partiality in their writings on Islam. In their writings it almost appears as if Islam could be treated as a mere object of scientific research, but as an accused standing before his judge.” Muhammad Asad, *Islam at Crossroads*, Lahore, 1974, pp. 62.


Muslim Education Quarterly, Vol. 24, No. 1 & 2, 2011
The Islamic Academy, Cambridge, U.K.


