

Unmasking Orientalism: Stereotypes in Education and Media in 20th Century America and Europe

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Abstract. This article examines the influence of Orientalism in both education and media during the 20th century in the United States and other European countries. The analysis highlights the significance of Orientalism and how it contributed to the stereotypes in education and the media. This research paper draws upon a diverse range of sources, including American textbooks, American and European films, and newspapers in the United States and across Europe in the 20th century. While the article briefly touches on Orientalism in education and media generally, its primary focus lies in dissecting Orientalist themes within American and European textbooks, films, and newspapers from this era. The examination of textbooks reveals how both Americans and Europeans portrayed Asians through a lens tinted by stereotypes and occasional hostilities. Likewise, in the realm of films and newspapers, an abundance of questionable Orientalist elements often misled readers and viewers, fostering a distorted understanding of Oriental cultures. These works, laden with biases, readily engendered stereotypes of Asians among European audiences. By shedding light on these dynamics, this research paper seeks to catalyze a positive transformation in American and European education and media, while also offering a challenge to the enduring presence of Orientalism.

Keywords: Orientalism; Education; Media; Stereotypes.

1. Introduction

Orientalism, a term coined by Edward Said, mainly indicates how the West understands and represents the East through the lens of stereotypes and biases. Said stated that the construct of the "Orient" is an authentic depiction but rather a construct shaped by European political ideology, serving as a means for Europeans to exert dominion and control over the Orient [1]. Due to Western colonial powers, European countries and the United States treated Asian countries as exotic and backward.

When Orientalists set out to depict Eastern cultures, they frequently use stereotypes that lead to biases and misleading interpretations. It is closely aligned with politics, in particular, the ideology of imperialism. In addition, exoticization is another key element since Orientalists usually depict Eastern cultures as exotic, mysterious, and superstitious. They tend to mention the stark differences between the Western and Eastern cultures, thereby fostering a sense of alienation between the two. Orientalism, as a construct, is akin to a structure built upon shifting sands, as it is constructed upon stereotypes, biases, racism, and prejudice. As such, it lacks a stable foundation, being replete with questionable and erroneous assumptions, not least among them being the pervasive exoticism that permeates its portrayal of the East.

The main purpose of this research paper is to find instances of Orientalism within the realms of education and media in the 20th century in the United States and other European countries. Yoshiko Nozaki's research argues that postcolonial views may provide people with a collection of practical theoretical tools to challenge the dominant approaches to teaching and researching Asia in an educational way. He criticizes mostly how Orientalism emerged in the United States education system [2]. Furthermore, Banafsheh Ranji denounces Orientalism, with a focus on its manifestations in the media [3]. The outcomes of this research paper align with the findings of these previous works, as it scrutinizes and critiques the negative manifestations of Orientalism. Importantly, it establishes a foundational framework by amalgamating both educational and media aspects of Orientalism from the 20th century. While prior research has separately spotlighted either media or education within the

context of the United States or a specific European country, this paper ambitiously synthesizes these disparate threads, delivering a comprehensive examination of 20th-century Orientalism across both media and education in the United States and Europe.

2. Orientalism in Education

Education in the 20th century had a giant impact on the United States and other European countries. As Edward Said aptly pointed out, Orientalism is a construct built upon biases, racism, and prejudice. It influenced and even misled how the Western world understood the realities and cultures of the “Orient”. In other words, education was one of the media through which Orientalism was reflected in the United States and other European countries in the 20th century. As Nozaki argued, scholars in the West, particularly in the USA, frequently incorporate an implicit or explicit binary opposition in their teachings about Asia. This division often manifests as a contrast between the West or the USA (referred to as “us”) and the East (referred to as “them”) [2]. This showed that the United States and other European countries had a problematic educational system that treated Eastern countries with biases and stereotypes.

2.1. The Orientalism in Textbooks: The Depiction of Japan

The portrayal of Eastern countries as enigmatic adversaries in the educational curriculum perpetuated negative biases and misconceptions. Textbooks, the key elements in education, could convincingly demonstrate stereotypes and faulty assumptions about Oriental countries in their education system. A notable example is the American History textbook *Chronicle of the 20th Century* published by Jacques Legrand in 1987 [4]. It contained information that had the potential to mislead students and readers about the Oriental image.

An illustrative example of Orientalism's influence on education is evident when considering how the depiction of historical events can reinforce stereotypes. For instance, when the textbook discussed the war between Japan and Russia, it depicted the Japanese as a fierce and evil character who whips Germany. American history textbook used a German cartoonist's work to convey its intended narrative. It is inappropriate since it could perpetuate stereotypes among American students, shaping their negative perceptions of the Japanese. Their understanding is not merely about the historical war itself, but also about the Japanese as people. Gradually, some of them would form prejudiced views about the Japanese and treat them in a different way. This instance illustrates how Orientalism manifests in education, revealing how American textbooks selected questionable and biased content, like the German cartoon, to shape students' historical comprehension.

This phenomenon is underscored by Benjamin Ramirez's research. He argued, “As the textbooks conclude the wars and conflicts between the Indigenous peoples and the US settler colonialists, the textbooks also begin to include discursive elements that imply the downtrodden Indian stereotype” [5]. His main point is how textbooks may mislead readers to understand Indian culture and form a negative stereotype toward Indians. Therefore, it proved that textbooks can indeed influence readers to form stereotypes about people from other countries.

2.2. The Orientalism in Textbooks: The Depiction of China

Nevertheless, such biases are not limited to the portrayal of the Japanese alone; they extend to other “Oriental” countries as well. For instance, when discussing Chinese history, the American history textbook referred to Chinese people in the 1910s as having the queue hairstyle and the president wearing a dragon robe [4]. While this description accurately depicted historical attire, it risked misleading readers into believing that these characteristics represented the late 20th-century Chinese population as well. These impressions could lead to the perception that not only the Chinese but also other Oriental countries were backward. This behavior aligns with Edward Said's observation: This approach does not necessarily convey a deliberate intention or will to comprehend. Instead, it

can be seen as an effort to not only understand, but in some cases, to exert control, manipulate, or even assimilate a markedly distinct (or alternative and innovative) world [1].

While the inclusion of questionable content in educational materials may not always be intentional, its consequences can perpetuate stereotypes that influence learners' perceptions. Such manifestations of Orientalism not only distort the understanding of various cultures but also wield control and manipulation over Oriental countries and have a negative impact on them.

In conclusion, the presence of Orientalism in education underscores the significant impact that biases, stereotypes, and cultural misunderstandings can have on shaping perceptions of Eastern cultures in Western societies. The analysis of textbooks and educational materials reveals how historical events and cultural representations can inadvertently perpetuate negative stereotypes.

3. Orientalism in Media

Media in the 20th century played a significant role in a revolutionary transformation that opened a new era for spreading different cultures around the world. Two particularly influential sorts of media were print media and cinema, which may have essentially reflected and demonstrated Orientalism in the United States and other European countries in the 20th century. As Said argued in his paper, television, films, and various media outlets have tended to shape information into increasingly uniform formats. In the case of the Orient, this standardization and the perpetuation of cultural stereotypes have reinforced the influence of the nineteenth-century academic and imaginative portrayal of the Orient as an enigmatic and mysterious entity [1]. Given the high degree of connectivity of media, any type of media that reflects negative Oriental elements could easily spread around the world and form stereotypes.

3.1. Orientalism in Cinema

On the one hand, cinema, as a great way of entertainment and reflection of societal values, became a major cultural phenomenon in the United States and European countries in the 20th century. Also, a number of American and European films have prominently exhibited Orientalism. For instance, *Blade Runner*, a 1982 science fiction film directed by Ridley Scott, contained a multitude of questionable oriental elements that may mislead viewers in their understanding of Eastern cultures [6].

For example, one scene (0:07:27) shows a Japanese geisha on a billboard adorned with flowers on her head. This portrayal exhibits Orientalism as it aligns with the historical depiction of geishas in Japan as artists showcasing their talents in singing and dancing. Nevertheless, movie *Blade Runner* depicts Japanese cultures without a deep understanding of their context. The Japanese geisha on the billboard could be seen as an example of visual exoticism, which presents and idealizes Asian cultures. These cultures are presented in a mysterious atmosphere, and it may mislead some viewers into thinking that all Asian women look like her. Additionally, another scene (0:57:04) depicts an Asian woman wearing a traditional rice paddy hat and oil-paper umbrella. Her attire looks more like that of China's agricultural period, but it is depicted in a 20th-century science fiction film. This persistent representation demonstrates how the director used stereotypes to express Asian culture. Although unintended, these examples may have influenced the impressions of American and European viewers toward Asian women at the time.

Furthermore, the film *Blade Runner* not only describes Asian women with stereotypes but also extends these stereotypes to Asian men. As one scene shows (0:08:40), an old Asian man is shown wearing traditional attire, which is rarely seen in the 20th century. Park argues that in films like *Blade Runner* and *The Matrix*, both approaches to depicting East Asians and East Asian Americans in cinema have failed to tackle a socially and artistically ingrained method of portraying Asiatic peoples, locations, and cultures on the big screen [7]. The three scenes discussed above support his statement, as they demonstrate the misrepresentation of Asian culture by filmmakers in the 20th century.

While discussing a single 20th-century film may not be sufficient to substantiate the presence of Orientalism in cinema, another film, *The Thief of Bagdad*, directed by Ludwig Berger, Michael Powell, and Tim Whelan in 1940, provides a strong case [8]. This British film presents an idealized image and version of the Middle East. Nonetheless, the description of Middle Eastern cultures is biased, and it may enhance the stereotypes associated with Orientalism. The revelation of Orientalism was not intentional. As Weber Alan noted, Powell's adoption of Orientalism in his work was likely not a deliberate stance, but rather a reflection of the prevailing attitudes in his social milieu. This is particularly evident in his creation of numerous films with a strong pro-British sentiment, some of which bordered on being outright propaganda, both during and after the WWII era [9]. This British film was produced in 1940 when the British still colonized India, so it was reasonable to assume that the director Powell was influenced by the social environment. Despite Powell's unintentional stance, this film may have affected both European and American viewers since it could make them treat Asians differently. As a result, both the cinema and the media could present Orientalism and reinforce stereotypes about Asians. It might further form an infinite loop as more and more film directors tend to describe Oriental cultures without deep understanding.

3.2. Orientalism in Print Media

Print media also played a significant role in documenting historical events, disseminating information, and shaping the public's opinion. It was highly communicative, so it could easily assist Orientalists in disseminating misleading information about Eastern cultures. For instance, *The New York Times* published an article titled "Vietnam Reds Put Troops and Tanks in Highland City" by James Markham during the Vietnam War [10]. Although discussing the conflict, the article depicted the North Vietnamese as enemies and communists, reinforcing negative stereotypes and potentially fostering hostile attitudes towards Asians. Similarly, European newspapers also reflected Orientalism. Esra Arcan pointed out that when Elgamri analyzed the portrayal of the Islamic world in British newspapers like *The Times*, *The Guardian*, and *The Independent*, it becomes evident that the depiction of Islam tends to lean towards the negative side [11]. In newspapers, British authors often depict Muslims as symbols of violence and intolerance. They portrayed Muslims negatively and perpetuated Orientalist stereotypes. Therefore, both American and European newspapers contained a large amount of questionable and biased oriental elements. They described Asian countries as enemies and "others", which caused Americans and Europeans to form a negative impression toward Asian people and cultures in the 20th century.

In conclusion, both movies and newspapers in the 20th century were vehicles for Orientalism, often influenced by political agendas and imperialist ideologies. These media sources produced biased information that contributed to stereotypes and misconceptions about Asian cultures in Western societies.

4. Summary

This research paper demonstrates how American and European education and media were biased in the 20th century, which led to stereotypes toward Asians and misunderstandings of Asian cultures. More specifically, American textbooks used cartoons created by European orientalist as instructional tools throughout the 20th century, contributing to these misconceptions. Furthermore, numerous American and European films, as well as newspapers, incorporated biased oriental elements that had the potential to misinform their audiences. These instances collectively underscore the extent to which Asians were portrayed negatively in both the media and academia during this era.

While the research paper effectively explores the use of biased cartoons by German cartoonists in American textbooks, it does not include European textbooks to prove Orientalism in European education. The future researcher may add the European textbooks as examples to show how European education led to prejudice. However, this research paper offers many great explanations and examples that can serve as a foundational resource for future researchers. Furthermore, it lays the groundwork

for potential comparisons between Orientalism in the 20th and 21st centuries, offering a springboard for continued exploration in this critical field of study.

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