



Section 4. Languages of the world

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ORIENTALIST DISCOURSE IN AMERICAN LITERATURE AND THE PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS OF PLATO'S TRIAD

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Abstract

This article examines the formation of American Orientalism as rooted in the European tradition, exploring its connection with literary and philosophical discourses through the framework of Plato's triad. The works of Washington Irving, Edgar Allan Poe, and Kahlil Gibran are comparatively analyzed to reveal how Eastern imagery is presented through the Platonic triad and interpreted within postcolonial theory (Said, Bhabha, Spivak). The study investigates the othering and degradation of Eastern peoples in Irving's historical-literary works and Poe's engagement with Eastern mysticism and Sufi symbolism, thereby uncovering the diverse trajectories of American Orientalism. These approaches have played a significant role in shaping U.S. national identity and transforming European Orientalist discourse.

Keywords: *Orientalism, Plato triad, American literature, discourse, W. Irving, E. A. Poe, K. Gibran*

Introduction

The formation of American Orientalism carries the influence of European scholarly traditions and emerges as a continuation of that discourse within a new cultural-political framework. Philological and historical methods established in Europe during the nineteenth century were transferred to U.S. universities after World War II, where they were further developed in new academic centers (Irwin, 2006; Hourani, 1984). Simultaneously, the growing political interests of the United States in the Middle East – support

for Israel, oil diplomacy, and the fight against communism – transformed this academic tradition into a politicized form (Lockman, 2004; Said, 1978). Thus, American Orientalism constitutes both a continuation of European methodology and the formation of a new ideological framework closely tied to U.S. geopolitical interests.

The literary and philosophical formation of American Orientalism began primarily in the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries, following American independence (1783) (Said, 1978; Irwin, 2006). Although

influenced by European colonial Orientalism, this formation was directly linked to America's distinctive quest for national identity (Lockman, 2004; Keddie, 1972).

Main Body

The intellectual foundations of American Orientalism rest upon three pillars. The first pillar emerged from the influence of European literature. In the early years of independence, American readers encountered the East primarily through English and French translations, especially texts such as *The Arabian Nights*. Early American writers began imitating this exotic style, depicting the East as a "fairy-tale world" (Irwin, 2006; Said, 1978; Keddie, 1972). The second pillar coincided with the Enlightenment and growing interest in Confucian philosophy. During the eighteenth century, the founding fathers of the United States – Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and others – showed pragmatic interest in Eastern wisdom, particularly Chinese philosophy, viewing it as a means to strengthen the secular and moral values of the new republic (Hourani, 1984). The third pillar was shaped by missionary activity and religious travel in the early nineteenth century. The real institutional foundation of American Orientalism was laid precisely through religious initiatives. Reports written by American missionaries in the Middle East formed the first real, albeit stereotypical, perceptions of the East in American society (Lockman, 2004; Keddie, 1972).

In literary fiction, the initial formal manifestations of this trend took shape in the first half of the nineteenth century through writers such as Washington Irving and Edgar Allan Poe. They transformed Eastern motifs into essential elements of American Romanticism and Gothic literature (Irwin, 2006). Later, in the 1830s-1840s, the Transcendentalist movement (Emerson and Thoreau) elevated American Orientalism to a philosophical peak through Indian philosophy (Hourani, 1984; Said, 1978).

Beginning with the transfer of the European tradition to the United States, American Orientalism was developed primarily through political and academic channels after 1945. As a result, the U.S. became a leading center in both Islamic studies and Middle

Eastern policy (Lockman, 2004; Said, 1978). It is noteworthy that the common ground between the political-academic development of American Orientalism (originating from the European tradition) and the philosophical-literary application of Plato's triad lies in defining both the intellectual and intercultural foundations of discourse about the East. This serves, as Edward Said emphasized in *Orientalism*, to explain both the intellectual and ideological frameworks through which the East is thought and spoken about.

Plato's triad of Goodness, Beauty, and Truth (Plato, trans. 2000) holds a central position in Western philosophical thought, aiming to explain human experience across ethical, aesthetic, and metaphysical dimensions. In literary studies, the application of the triad provides a method to uncover the philosophical foundations of intercultural dialogue in literary texts. Edward Said presents Orientalism not merely as an academic field but as a *discourse* through which the West determines how to speak about and think of the East. This discourse perpetuates Western political, cultural, and intellectual superiority. The East is presented as an «otherized» epistemological construct. According to Said, the romanticization and exoticization of the East by Western writers constitute a form of cultural superiority (Said, 1978/2003). This theoretical framework allows us to understand how the East is presented as «other» in the texts of Washington Irving and Edgar Allan Poe.

Homi Bhabha's concepts of "hybridity" and the "third space" are among the leading concepts in postcolonial theory. His approach complements Edward Said's *Orientalism* discourse and explains more subtly the intercultural dynamics of colonial relations. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha introduces the concepts of hybridity, mimicry, and third space (Bhabha, 1994/2004). According to Bhabha, intercultural encounters within colonial discourse create new hybrid forms. This theory provides a leading framework for explaining the formation of a universal humanist discourse between East and West in Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet*.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her article "Can the Subaltern Speak?" argues that subaltern groups are deprived of voice within colonial discourse (Spivak, 1988/2010).

According to Spivak, Western intellectual discourse often distorts or renders invisible the authentic voice of the East. This perspective sharpens the analysis of the “otherization” of the East in the works of Irving and Poe. Kahlil Gibran, by contrast, attempts to restore the subaltern voice in artistic-philosophical form to the Western reader, partially reclaiming the “silenced voice” described in Spivak’s theory.

When Plato’s triad is analyzed in the works of American authors in conjunction with Edward Said’s *Orientalism* discourse and Homi Bhabha’s hybridity theory, it provides a systematic means to reveal the philosophical and literary foundations of East-West relations. In Irving’s work, the <beauty> component of the triad comes to the fore, manifesting in Said’s framework as the exoticization of the East, in Bhabha’s approach as ambivalent relations, and in Spivak’s view as the silencing of the Eastern voice. Edgar Allan Poe expresses the <truth> aspect of the triad through mystical-metaphysical quests – an approach that results in the intellectual construction of the East according to Said, the formation of hybridity phenomena according to Bhabha, and the subordination of the Eastern voice to Western metaphysics according to Spivak. Kahlil Gibran expresses the triad in its entirety, giving voice to the East in Said’s framework, forming Bhabha’s ‘third space,’ and conveying the subaltern voice to the Western audience through artistic-philosophical discourse. When analyzed together, Plato’s triad, Said’s Orientalism, Bhabha’s hybridity, and Spivak’s subaltern theory reveal various forms of East-West dialogue in the works of Irving, Poe, and Gibran, offering a systematic explanation of Orientalism’s manifestations in American literature.

In the mid-nineteenth century, literary Orientalism (Transcendentalism and Dark Romanticism) preceded the academic establishment of Orientalism in U.S. literature. In the works of Washington Irving and Edgar Allan Poe from this period, we encounter references to Averroes’ philosophy and examples of Andalusian Islamic culture. While Irving describes the Andalusian Renaissance in *The Tales of the Alhambra* and *The Life of Mahomet and His Successors*, discussing the intellectual milieu created by Averroes, Poe connects the Orientalist elements in his

works – concerning the nature of the soul, cognition, and human intellectual limits – with Latin Averroism (the idea that individuals participate in a common universal intellect, i.e., Monopsychism). Poe associated the Eastern world not only with mysticism but also with remnants of ancient rational philosophy. The primary aim of these American Romantics was to demonstrate American national independence aesthetically through the creation of a national literature. They regarded nature as a living source of knowledge and expressed faith in the intuitive power of cognition. Thus they prioritized individualism and identified truth with beauty. What distinguishes them is the embodiment of Plato’s triad principle and the idea of union with or separation from nature (Burgin, 2017, p. 161–182). Loyalty to order and proportion, respect for the “organic” form of the poetic work, and establishing the author’s priority relation between form and content were also fundamental.

To explain the relevance of American Orientalism in literary and cultural history, Plato’s triad principle provides a productive theoretical framework. According to this principle, every event or cultural phenomenon is formed through stages of *cause (aitia)*, *force (dynamis)*, and *result (ergon)* (Plato, trans. 2000). In the cause stage, the intellectual origin of American Orientalism is connected to the transfer of exoticism, mysticism, and cultural stereotypes from eighteenth–nineteenth-century Europe to U.S. literature (Said, 1978; Lockman, 2004). The force stage expresses the transformation of these influences in the American milieu through writers’ and intellectuals’ ability to adapt the European heritage to the national context. Irving’s romantic exoticism in his depictions of Andalusia (Irving, 1832/1999) and Poe’s interest in Eastern mysticism through mystical symbolism (Poe, 1845/2008) exemplify these forces. In the result stage, a distinctive Orientalist model emerges in U.S. literature, wherein European perceptions acquire new meaning within American culture, becoming part of both Romantic and postcolonial discourses (Said, 1978; Bhabha, 1994; Spivak, 1988). Thus, American Orientalism emerges not merely as a continuation of the European tradition but also as an independent intellectual outcome.

Thus, the triad principle reveals the genealogy: the cause from Europe; the intellectual force of America; and the concrete literary result. This approach aligns with both Edward Said's concept of *discourse* (Said, 1978) and Homi Bhabha's theory of *cultural hybridity* (Bhabha, 1992).

The Eastern culture that influenced Europe, particularly the period of Moorish rule in Spain and the Spanish struggle, attracted the American writer and diplomat Washington Irving. He reflected the Eastern culture of that period with great enthusiasm in his works on the subject, successfully accomplishing this challenging task with remarkable artistry.

Conclusion

American Orientalism is not merely a continuation of the European tradition

but also an independent intellectual outcome. While Washington Irving strengthened the U.S. political-ideological position by exoticizing the East and othering Muslims, Edgar Allan Poe opened universal philosophical horizons through engagement with Eastern mysticism, Sufism, and metaphysical dimensions. In contrast to these two authors, Kahlil Gibran expressed the triad in its entirety, conveying the Eastern voice to the Western audience. Therefore, the works of all three authors demonstrate that American Orientalism served both as a transformation of European perceptions and as an ideological instrument for shaping national identity. Within the framework of postcolonial theory, these writers' works on the East reveal the intellectual, aesthetic, and political dynamics of East-West relations.

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