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A Critical Analyses of Edward Said's Orientalism through Foucaultian Perspective of Knowledge-Power Relation

Meenakshi Gogoi

PhD Candidate, Centre for Political Studies, JNU, (Delhi) India

Abstract

Although, Edward Said has tried to interpret Orientalism and the construction of Orient through Foucault's notion of discourse yet it can be said that he has not elaborated much upon the Foucaultian perspective of knowing colonialism through knowledge-power relation which actually applies Foucault's ideology to understand colonialism better. This paper attempts to critique Edward Said's work on Orientalism through Foucaultian perspective of knowledge-power relation. For Foucault, power is relational. So, this paper also attempts to explore Foucault's understanding of techniques and practices used to collect information about the object to be known or the object of study, in the context of colonised people during British colonial rule in India. Moreover, to explore that when the object is known, it becomes subjected to the exercise of power and then power produces effects on the objects of known.

Key Words: Foucault, Edward Said, Orientalism, Knowledge-Power relation, Discourse

Introduction

Foucault has emphasised upon that understanding of knowledge is not something independent of power. But it is integral to the notion of power and the way power is operated. Thus, knowledge does not have an independent existence of its own. Foucault wrote:-

The exercise of power itself creates and causes to emerge new objects of knowledge and accumulates new bodies of information...the exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and conversely knowledge constantly induces effects of power... It is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to endanger power. (Foucault, 1980:52)

From this perspective, it is important to follow certain procedures and mechanisms to arrive at objects of knowledge. These procedures could also be called as techniques of implementing power. The concept of power-knowledge has two implications: 1) Foucault has talked about how mechanisms of disciplinary power used as procedures for formation of knowledge and also to accumulate knowledge. Foucault did not explain that power precedes knowledge or knowledge precedes power. But he has focussed upon that the knowledge-power relations are to be analysed on the basis of the subject who knows the objects to be known and the modalities of knowledge are regarded as the many effects of implication of power-knowledge. Hence, both are integrated in nature. 2) Foucault says that there is also

another aspect of looking at power. Power can be analysed in terms of power as productive as it produces objects of knowledge and has a desire to know, to create objects. Foucault wrote:-

We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it “excludes”, it “represses,” it “censors,” it abstracts, it “masks” it “conceals”. In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. The individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production. (Foucault, 1977:194)

Thus, Foucault’s work on knowledge-power also gave rise to another aspect about the concept of individual. According to him, individual is constructed as subject of power and not a given entity. Individual is constructed historically and is the product of power effects i.e. - individual is rendered knowable through application of procedures or the process by which they are constructed. He had mentioned in his text *Discipline and Punish*, that how applying mechanisms or processes like: classification, categorisation, codification he has put forward how discourses on sanity, health, knowledge and punishment have been developed. Implication of these processes makes it intelligible to know about the individuals like who is a mad man, or a criminal, who appeared to the society as objects of knowledge. Foucault says these categories of individuals are constructed historically by the application of discourses. Thus, discourses constituted meaning to the objects knowable to us. Discourses are

embodied into various institutions, technical practices, forms of behaviour. It is through these social institutions that discourses are articulated into concrete form in the society.

Foucault is not interested to explore whether knowledge is understood as subjective or objective but how knowledge is constructed through historical contexts. Rather he is much interested to enquire what the processes are by following which objects are made known to us. What is the power tactics applied to form the objects as what they are and what are the power effects on the objects? The focus is on the disciplinary practices that how it operates to create objects and power effects. He cited disciplinary practices undertaken in social institutions like prison, asylums in his text *Discipline and Punish*. These practices are undertaken in enclosed institution and as centres of observation throughout society. Most important technique is surveillance. To perpetuate surveillance micro-technique like gaze is applied. By applying this technique the head of the institution monitors the activities of the prisoners. These techniques are applied to discipline them and as a result of power effects on their everyday lives they appeared as mere docile bodies subjected to exercise of power and they behave as how the prisoners should.

Edward Said’s Orientalism

Edward Said, found it useful to employ Foucault’s notion of discourse in order to explain his work on ‘Orientalism’. He is much inspired by Foucault’s work on discourse in his texts *The Archaeology of Knowledge* and *Discipline and Punish*. Said says:

My contention is that without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European Culture was able to manage-and even produce- the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period. (Said, p 3)

By Orientalist, he meant the person whether an anthropologist, sociologists, historian, philologist, who undertakes researches or teaches about the Orient understood as the 'East' and the kind of work the Orientalists produces about the East is called 'Orientalism'. By the 18th century, understanding of Orient is discovered through the Western authority of knowing the Orient, how the Orient has been reconstructed, how Orient has been ruled when it was a colony of Europe under Britain or France. He thus, tried to emphasise upon how the interpretation of the Orient is made by the dominant discourse of the West through Foucault's notion of discourse. Without examining Orientalism as a discourse it is difficult to understand that how Europe has managed to organise and produce the 'Other' as the Orient i.e. - the East. By 19th century, Orientalism derive its meaning through experiences of colonialism under the colonial rule of Britain and France and how such political and economic dominance of colonialism categorised the East as the 'Orient' and inferior 'Other' and thereby, made a distinction between the East and the West.

In Orientalism, he focussed on the Middle East and how Arabs were categorised as the 'Other' different from the West in terms of civilisation, geography, language. His methodology deals in historical exploration of how the notion of Orient is constructed different from Occident i.e. the West.

Foucault's Knowledge-Power relation and Critique of Edward Said's Orientalism

Although, Edward Said has tried to interpret Orientalism and the construction of Orient through Foucault's notion of discourse yet it can be said that he has not elaborated much upon the Foucaultian perspective of knowing colonialism through knowledge-power relation which actually applies Foucault's ideology to understand colonialism better. For Foucault, power is relational. As because power is relational, it is not associated with a particular kind of institution but on the other hand, it is associated with the practices, procedures, and techniques by which power is applied at all levels and hence, the application of power is multidimensional in nature.

Foucault's essay on Governmentality would prove fruitful in understanding colonialism. In this essay, he talked about the techniques used in the management of population. Government is not only meant as a political institution but also a form of activity which aims at shaping the lives of the people and to guide the conduct of people. It depends upon particular ways of knowing people. Hence, it requires programmes to supervise and administer over people and how techniques to be applied to render something knowable and at the same time to carry on

with the process of governing people. This kind of analyses can be made through Foucault's work while trying to interpret colonialism in terms of what are the power techniques, procedures applied during colonial period and the ways colonised are governed. Perhaps, trying to analyse colonialism through notion of knowledge-power relation would give us a broader aspect of knowing the East and the West.

Discourse cannot give us broader analyses of knowing colonialism. Even though Edward Said tried to explain Orientalism and project of colonialism through discourse he has not accurately described the way as Foucault has described it. Foucault distinguished between discourse and canonical tradition and emphasised on discourse as related to modern forms of government, objectified economic productions, forms of state planning. He meant that every discourse has a particular boundary to proliferate and cannot cross its own boundary and inter mix with another discourse. Whereas, Edward Said's discourse on Orientalism has a reflection of canonical discourses like what he talked about the ideology of modern imperialist Eurocentricism as already displayed in the ritual theatres of Greeks and how Dante's Christian judgements on Muhammad is forecasted in American television is opposite to Foucault's application of discourse.

David Scott, too, is inspired by Foucault's perspective on knowledge-power and to his notion of 'Governmentality'. Scott's work on "Colonial Governmentality" would be perhaps more closer to Foucault's interpretation of knowledge-power relation

in terms of understanding colonialism. Because David Scott, too, like Foucault tried to analyse the period of colonialism in India through the application of power techniques, strategies and procedures of knowing the objects of knowledge i.e. how the colonised people are subjected to the technique of surveillance which actually monitor and control their activities and guide the conduct of life. He too explored the ways like the disciplinary practices conducted to discipline the mind and body of the colonised Indians to suppress any kind of violence act against the colonial power. Application of such practices produces effects on the everyday lives of the colonised people and they became subjects of power which actually draws our attention to look at how Foucault's notion of knowledge-power relation is applicable to understand colonialism.

Edward Said's work on colonialism, could be defined as more influenced by the writings of the scholars, historians, and researchers who mainly dealt with how the discourse of 'Orient' is constructed by the West and categorised as the inferior 'Other' in terms of race, civilisation, language, education, rationality, geography. Said's work is based on hermeneutical understanding of texts and research works done by the travellers and historians. His methodology of knowing the 'Orient' i.e. - East is thus, different from Foucault.

He has not correctly applied Foucault's understanding of how techniques are used to collect information about the object to be known or the object of study and once the object is known, power tactics are applied on the object, it becomes subjected to the

exercise of power and then power produces effects on the objects of known is the matter of interest. This ideology of Foucault hence, can be very well applied to trace the different strategies made used by the colonialists to know the colonised objects like how they took up census procedures and classified people, how the tributary extracting colonial power later in the late 19th century transformed itself into a sovereign political power in the name of introducing the idea of modern state in the European sense, by applying power tactics to sustain their motives of knowing people and governing them and continue to proliferate both economic and political dominance simultaneously.

In Edward Said's work on Orientalism, it can be traced that the vocabulary of Orientalism is transformed to that of colonialism. In fact, the understanding of both these terms is same because he also tried to look at the arrival of colonialism through the discourse of Orientalism. For Foucault, discourse meant a certain way of speaking or a verbal trait constructed in a particular time and place in history needs to be understood through mechanisms of power which produces such discourses.

The practice of Sati in colonial India can be elaborated through understanding of knowledge-power relation. The prevalence of Sati practices was much highlighted during the colonial period. The British colonial power had acquired knowledge that Sati practices were inscribed in as laws in ancient Hindu texts i.e. - the Shastras and Brahmin scholars had inculcated the idea of self-immolation of widows. It was found difficult to introduce a uniform legal code to

regulate the practice of Sati. The missionary people had criticised such act of burning widows as an inhuman task to perform. The colonial power expressed that it was difficult to abandon because the Sati practice was laid down in the Shastras and so they have to carry on with the task while ruling over the colonised people.

Since 1812, the government of Bengal had sought to regulate the practice of Sati in accordance with the Shastras. The practice of Sati was rendered knowable through application of surveillance in the funeral pyre of the dead husbands of the widows who are then to perform the Sati rites. The British government deployed police officers at the site of performing Sati rites to collect information whether the act of self-immolation was a voluntary practice committed by the widow or some forces were behind which actually compelled her to do so. Many of the reports noted that the act of performing Sati was involuntary just to protect family honour. Women had no independent opinion and were persuaded to commit Sati rites.

In terms of understanding Caste too, Foucault's notion of knowledge-power relation can be applied. Nicolas Dirks in his work "The Castes of Mind" discussed in detail how the caste was understood in pre-colonial times in traditional Indian Society and how did caste had being the political identity of colonised Indians during the colonial rule. In pre-colonial India, caste was understood on grounds of religion and not as a political principle. It was understood in terms of hierarchy among groups of people on grounds of knowledge, occupation, pure and pollute characteristics

of being. Dumont in his work “Homo Hierarchies” talks about caste on hierarchical lines. He described the Brahmins possessed the higher rank belongs to the pure Hindu religion followed by the other ranks of Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. Brahmins were considered as superior knowledgeable Hindus. The political head like Kings also seek advice from Brahmins to conduct the administration and respect them as religious heads. The traditional Indian society thus, had not witnessed caste in terms of a political identity of the pre-colonial Indians. In order, to carry out the administrative functions it was necessary for the colonial government to obtain knowledge about the terrain on which the colonial governance would be functioning.

The British Government derived knowledge by conducting surveillance on how the traditional Indian society functions, gathered knowledge from the ancient Hindu texts called Shastras and Brahminical vocabularies for it would be easy then to politically rule over the known colonised terrain. Orientalists like Alexander Dow relied on Brahminical texts to understand the caste structure of traditional Indian Society. Elphinstone also collected knowledge from translated version of Hindu texts of Manu by William Jones and Elphinstone’s work was based on four Varnas of Indian caste system. He also accumulated knowledge from Mackenzie’s work on Deccan in terms of knowing the kingdoms, temple structures, polities, local zaminders, and revenue collection.

Nicolas Dirks, noted that Mackenzie’s work was based on statistical and cartographic

collections. In his statistical tables, population of districts were categorised on the basis of castes, families, villages represented by the local officers. His ethnographic drawings depicted different groups of people in Northern Deccan and labelled that costumes were signs of ethnographic difference. He made portraits of ancient kings of Vijayanagara, the court servants, local chiefs to display the types of caste and groups existed in Deccan.

During the later phase of the British colonial rule, caste appeared as a political identity and groups of people were recognised on caste lines and electoral rolls census data were collected on the basis of caste identities. The operationalisation of caste identities led to the creation of enumerated communities different from the early fuzzy communities which was not based on a particular identity based on caste but individual belonging to families, and villages. Thus, the new identity on caste lines led to the emergence of knowledge as to what the people were then being recognised and called. At the same time, colonised people also felt the power of governing effects of the colonial power in their day to day lives. Thus, it is important to acknowledge the knowledge-power relations which led to the emergence of discourses and have to understand that discourse is not a pre-given entity and have to understand the processes and techniques applied through which discourse is formulated and practised which perhaps, Edward Said has forgotten to look at while drawing insights from Foucault’s interpretation on discourse.

In his later work “Culture and Imperialism”, Edward Said talks about the occurrence of Anti-colonial movements in the Third World Countries like-Algeria, Ireland, Indonesia. He stated that in his text *Culture and Imperialism*, a sequel to his early work on *Orientalism* and here he had emphasised upon the colonised resistance to the colonial rule. Looking, through the various novels and authors explanations he tried to focus on the historical experiences of the colonised people. He had focussed on the narrations made on the history of colonial rule and its impact on the colonised people who by the later phase, of the colonial rule revolted against it. He tried to look at the anti-colonial resistance movement through perspective of crisis of cultural identity. He also tried to put it in discourse as a cultural resistance against the colonial power. He defined culture in two ways- one way culture depicts sense of aesthetic pleasure and other way culture could be understand as a practice as how it is represented and how it maintains a relative autonomy role along with the political, social and economic sphere. He talks about the work of Conrad that how he had failed to look at the non-westerners perspective of acknowledging the West. Conrad could only trace the dominance of the West over the entire world in terms of imperialism and culture.

Colonial rule is understood as a civilising mission conducted to deprive the non-west people of the ignorance, superstitious beliefs, to enlighten the colonised people and did not pay attention to the culture and aspirations of the colonised people. Edward Said, also get inspired from works of A.P Thornton’s “The Imperial Idea and its

Enemies”, Bernard Porter’s “Critics of Empire” which attacked Imperialism and also looked at work of Ideologist Ranajit Guha and trace the dominant colonial history of the East. Although, Edward Said talks about historical experiences and discourse of culture and imperialism yet he could not relate much with the Foucaultian perspective of knowledge-power relation. Foucault, described there is nothing to be gained from describing this autonomous layer of discourse unless one can relate it to other layers of practices, institutions, social relations, political relation and power effects. Foucault, believed that resistance is co-extensive with power. As soon as, there is power relation there is the possibility of resistance no matter how oppressive the regime is. From such a perspective, it can be said that colonialism is more appropriate to understand from Foucaultian perspective of knowledge-power relation.

Critique of Edward Said’s Orientalism by Nicolas Dirks and Aijaj Ahmad

Nicolas Dirks, in his work on “Castes of mind” talks about Said’s *Orientalism* in some portions where he made a critique on Said’s understanding of Orientalism in terms of a discourse. He emphasised upon texts written by the Orientalists but failed to explain how did or in what ways discourse came into existence. Nicolas Dirks, also critique Said for limiting the understanding of Orientalism to histories of colonialism and emergence of Nationalism without talking in terms of governing practices and power effects on the colonised people. He directly quoted Orientalism as a discourse without understanding that discourse is not a pre-given entity.

Aijaj Ahmad, too, in his work on “Anthropological Knowledge of India” contradicted Said for dealing with Orientalism from an inter-disciplinary approach rather than through Foucaultian insights as how he had claimed. In fact, Said collected knowledge from historical texts, archives, traveller’s accounts, disciplines of study. Moreover, he borrowed this idea of Orientalism from works of Sartre on “Being and Nothingness”, and Derrida’s work on “Identity and Difference”, to explain how the West has constructed the identity of the East as the ‘Orient’ or the inferior ‘Other’ in terms of civilisation, language, geography as compared to the West and thereby constituted its own identity as the superior Occident i.e. - West.

Aijaj Ahmad, also critique that it is difficult to predict that during which period of time use of discourse came into existence. So, to say, discourse formulated at the post-enlightenment period or at the rise of colonialism is contestable. Said failed to look into the perspectives of Hindu scholars and Muslim scholars who also made distinctions between East and the West. Said has reduced and limited Foucault’s work only to terminologies like-discourse, representations without elaborations of such terms meanings and by what practices such discourses appeared. Instead, Foucault was interested to know about the effects of discourse. Aijaj Ahmad, further, argued that Said’s *Orientalism* appears to be the ideological corollary of colonialism. It

seems to be constructed transhistorically of what he calls the European imagination and hence, Orientalism appeared as a product of it. Indeed, it is also not wrong to say that colonialism is inherent in Orientalism. Hence, Said has been criticised of playing with terminologies and its exchange of uses.

Concluding Remarks

To understand colonialism in a broader perspective, it would be fruitful, if one can look at it from the Foucaultian perspective of knowledge-power relation which one can relate with to understand the various practices and strategies applied by the colonial power to govern the colonised subjects and to know about the governing effects on their lives in many ways, whether it is the introduction of western education, development of infrastructure, caste formation, abandonment of social evils in different phases of the colonial rule to fulfil its target of enhancing political and economic dominance, simultaneously, which made the colonised subjects knowable of the various changes brought into their lives. The colonial power also accumulated knowledge through surveillance of the entire traditional Indian society to produce its colonial power effects because to produce power effects colonialists needs a terrain or the zone to proliferate governing effects. So, Foucault’s notion of knowledge-power relation is applicable to make us understand colonialism and its sustenance in a productive manner.

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