Orientalism in the Postmodern Context - Other to Us

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Abstract

This paper sheds light on identity recognition in light of Orientalism in the postmodern context mainly based on the texts related to Oriental studies. In the process of globalization, Western culture, especially the long-standing self-centered culture, has been greatly affected. Orientalism in the postmodern context has a big difference from ontology and epistemology in Western culture in terms of ways of thinking. The study of Orientalism in the postmodern context allows for a better and more complete grasp of the idea of the world process. Only by shifting our perspective to identity recognition can we better facilitate Eastern and Western cultural exchange so as to make the study of Orientalism more valuable and meaningful.

Keywords: postmodern context, orientalism, other, identity recognition

1. Introduction

Since the early 21st century, the world pattern has undergone tremendous changes. China has made great progress in economic, social, cultural, and scientific development. Besides, Western researchers are conducting a deeper analysis of China. In the post-modern context, Orientalism mainly studies the society, culture, language, and literature of the Orient. In this process, with the global expansion of colonialism and imperialism, the West tries to highlight its superiority through the analysis of Eastern culture, with the aim of controlling the Orient and enslaving the Easterners through ideology and culture. The "postmodern context" is a common term used in academic theory, which has its own application advantages over the traditional context. The traditional context tends to use grand themes and heroes in history as the main object and idea of research, whereas the "postmodern context" aims not at making grand narratives but tends to focus on local discourse and textual manipulation[1]. Through the cultural exchange, Eastern and Western cultures have influenced and constrained each other, which has had a great impact on the social, cultural, and language development of both. Therefore, the traditional research theory can no longer keep pace with the current research theory and method of Orientalism.

2. Overview of Orientalism

2.1 Basic Interpretations of Orientalism

Orientalism, or Orientalist studies, generally refers to the discipline that studies the history, literature, and culture of the Orient. The study of Orientalism started from the Palestinian-American scholar, Edward Said, which plays a pivotal role in the current study of Orientalism. Traditional Orientalism is centered on Western society and culture in research. By comparing society, culture, customs, and language of the Orient with that of the West, it highlights the advancement and superiority of Western culture. Generally, it focuses on the study of society, culture, literature, history, and other disciplines in the Orient with a Western-centered perspective. However, this kind of research can no longer adapt the development of current research in the postmodern context, as the differences between Eastern and Western culture are becoming less apparent, and the integration of Eastern and Western culture is getting more and more profound. In the process of researching Orientalism, Western scholars and mainstream media have begun to change their perspectives from "other" to "us", though they still take the Western counterparts as references in a West-centered view. In studying the Orient and rapidly developing Eastern countries, scholars should no longer treat the study of Orientalism as a way to form a prejudiced thinking or cognitive system about Eastern culture, as such research is meaningless[2].

2.2 Main characteristics of Orientalism

Traditional Orientalism is mainly characterized by hostility and exoticism. In studying Orientalism, Westerners tend to take a West-centered view to understand the Eastern world. They have a strong prejudice against Eastern culture. As such, in the process of studying Eastern culture and Orientalism, the Westerners would take the West as a reference. They objectified, essentialized, and stereotyped the life of Western countries. Moreover, as they compare the development of Eastern and Western culture, they would emphasize the advantages and superiority of their own development. In the process of development, the West holds strong hostility towards the Eastern culture. They keep an eye on the threatening of the "other". In other words, they believe that if the Orient is fully developed, it will have a significant impact on the economic, social, and cultural and other development of the West. Meanwhile, in the process of research, the West is rather keen on the exoticism in

Eastern culture. Some Eastern cultures have strongly attracted the attention of Westerners[3].

2.3 Reasons for the Popularity of Orientalism

Nowadays, the world pattern of multi-polarization is taking shape. Traditional global colonial expansion and colonialism by means of military conquest have basically ended. However, as evidenced by the current development of the West, Western countries are still trying to conquer the Third World for the exploitation of resources through ideological and cultural hegemony. In the study of Eastern culture, Westerners aim at enslaving the Eastern countries in economic, political, cultural, and ideological spheres. In doing so, the Orient can give more cognition to Western culture so that cultural colonization can be achieved. The group of new colonialists is greatly influencing the Eastern world through cultural hegemony. But in the course of the research, it has been found that the knot between Eastern and Western culture has tightened and both are greatly influenced by each other. The Western culture is integrating into the Eastern culture, while the Eastern culture is having a significant impact on the Western culture, which has gradually become an integral part of the Western culture. The integration of Eastern and Western cultures is becoming more frequent[4].

3. Rethinking Orientalism - Based on Said's Theory

3.1 "Orientalism"

In the early 1940s, Sati' al-Husri, the Syrian educationalist and influential Arab nationalist advocate, argued that Western books on "Arab" history were full of prejudices and used as a tool of imperialism, and those imperialists often used them to suppress or distort the historical consciousness of Arabs by various means for permanent domination. After that, an argument related to this was brought up in Orientalism, which was all the rage. Although the book primarily depicts the Orient as embodied in literature, it also expounds the cause in which certain Orientalists were engaged (from about 1800 onwards)[5].

3.2 Three Key Views of Orientalism

First, Orientalism tends to become "essentialism". The Orient, as represented by the Arabs (more broadly, the Muslims, although Said was mainly concerned about the people of the Near East), had essentially immutable characteristics that could be identified, described and politically controlled. Second, Orientalism, especially as practiced by British and French scholars, is politically motivated. If the "characteristics" of the Arab or Muslim society proves to be inferior to that of the West, the political

domination of the West over the Arabs and Muslims would be justified. Third, the impression that Eastern culture is inferior and is required to be taken into consideration only in the circumstances in relation to the West is totally wrong. But this false impression has been widely embraced in a complacent and biased field of study.

3.3 Said's Understanding of Orientalism

According to Said, orientalism has two main meanings. On the one hand, it refers to the difference in ontological and epistemological ways of thinking between the Orient and West. The Orient and West are geographically located in the eastern and western hemispheres of the earth, which have also been in a state of long-term antagonism in other respects with huge differences in economic, political, cultural, and linguistic terms. On the other hand, as evidenced by economic, social, and even historical development, the modern West has been in a prominent position for a long time. It has long used dominant reconstruction and discursive oppression to form control over the Orient. Resulting from this, Orientalism has become a kind of fictional Oriental myth created by Westerners' ignorant prejudice and hunting for the vast Orient or the Third World.

3.4 Said's Understanding of "Other"

Said argued that Orientalism is the discipline of scholars specialized in Eastern languages and cultures in Eurasian relations, which should be integrated with the image of the Eastern "Other" formed by Western scholars. The Western perception of the Orient is characterized on the one hand by laziness and ignorance, and on the other by a certain desirable mysteriousness. Fundamentally, the essence of Orientalism is a political doctrine used by the West in an attempt to constrain the Orient through ideology, society, and culture. As a deep-rooted Western understanding of the Orient, Orientalism acts as an ideological pillar of European and American colonialism all the time.

4. Limitations of Orientalism in the Postmodern Context

4.1 Geographic limitations

From a geographical view, Orientalism has great limitations. For in terms of geographical development, the Orient encompasses a vast region comprising Asia, Africa, and Oceania. However, in the book of Orientalism, the Near East and the Arab countries of the Middle East were treated as the geographical demarcation of the East. But the vast Southeast Asian region, such as China, India, Japan, and other important oriental countries, is rarely covered. Owing to this, there are great geographical limitations in the

traditional study of Orientalism. In the process of research, special attention shall be paid to the social, economic, cultural, and political differences between the Arab countries and the Southeast Asian countries.

4.2 Ideological and Cultural Limitations

There are ideological and sociocultural limitations to the Orient and Orientalism. What we usually refer to as the Western idea or Western culture is primarily an ideological or cultural concept based on the bourgeois standard of values prevalent in Western Europe and North America. Those that contradict this are generally referred to as the Eastern idea. Concerning the huge ideological and cultural differences, the Orient and West were at loggerheads during the Cold War following the Second World War. According to Samuel Phillips Huntington, the American political scientist, "The most important conflicts of the future will occur along the cultural fault lines separating these civilizations from one another." The principal conflicts of global politics will occur between different cultures and ethnic groups. The Muslim and Confucian culture in Eastern culture is the most dangerous. But in Said's study of Eastern cultures, he neglected the ideological and cultural factors.

4.3 Rethinking Orientalism in the Postmodern Context

Basically, Orientalism is a West-centered judgmental attitude towards Eastern societies and cultures. But in the post-modern context, the Orient should be the Orient of the Easterners in global cultural integration. It should not be shaped by Westerners, instead, be interpreted according to the true values of the Easterners along with Orientalism or Orientalist studies. As such, a comprehensive evaluation and study of Orientalism and Eastern culture can take shape. The Orient should be described and evaluated from an Oriental perspective, as Westerners value and describe the West and Western culture. Only by doing so, a correct and unbiased concept of the Orient can come into being. The world is moving towards multipolarity. In the course of globalization, the opposition between Eastern and Western culture has gradually evolved into a new way of interaction in terms of dialogue. The positive aspect of post-colonialism lies in its anti-colonial and counter-hegemonic nature, while its negative aspect lies in the re-constraining of third world countries by cultural penetration and exportation[6]. In this process, it is all the more important to develop an Oriental understanding of Orientalism and seize the opportunity to continuously understand and export the concept of "us" during the transformation of Western studies of the Orient from "other" to "us".

5. Projection of the West and Internalization of the Orient

5.1 How China Exports the Concept of "Us"

At the congress celebrating the 95th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of China, China put forward "Four Matters of Confidence", namely, confidence in the path, theory, system, and culture of socialism with Chinese characteristics. In the post-modern context, this is an effective exemplar of the Orient seizing the opportunity of a major shift in Western studies from "other" to "us" and exporting the concept of "us". "Confidence in its path" is confidence in the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics. "Confidence in its theory" is confidence in the scientific nature, truth and sound nature of the theory of socialism with Chinese characteristics, especially Marxism. "Confidence in its system" is confidence in the advanced and superior nature of the system of Chinese socialism. "Confidence in its culture" is confidence in the value of China's own culture. That is to say, in the process of research, the scholars should fully understand and promulgate the Chinese system and culture based on China's current situation. Only then can the Orient get rid of the influence of the Western context. Only when scholars study and analyze the relevant issues from the Chinese standpoint and perspective can they better contribute to the economic and social development as well as the cultural development of China as well as the Orient[7].

5.2 Development of Orientalism Studies in China

So far, the post-colonial theory cannot be directly applied to the modern knowledge system and cultural institutions in China that have been established globally so as to do a rigid introspection in terms of a genealogy of knowledge. In the global studies of Orientalism, the constant projection of the West has also promoted the assimilation and internalization of Eastern culture. The following question needs to be asked: Is there one or several similar "other" as we try to understand modern Chinese literature in which we have been immersed? For example, do the studies of modern Chinese literature, which has long been conducted by comparison with modern Western literature, contain an imagination of "other"? In the process of constructing knowledge in modern Chinese literature, is there something being lost or distorted, such as some forgotten or rewritten knowledge and ideas? Do they come from other cultures or our traditional culture? Being abandoned and rewritten is the cost of the institutionalization of modern Chinese literature, which leads to our unquestioned understanding of many things. However, can we think those things have disappeared? Do they continue to exist as our "other"? [8]

6. Conclusion

In summary, this paper mainly studies Orientalism in the postmodern context. In the process of the research, the basic explanations, main characteristics, and popular causes of Orientalism have been analyzed. In rethinking Orientalism, this paper expounds Orientalism mainly based on the relevant theories and statements in Said's "Orientalism" combined with relevant studies. However, it has geographical, ideological, and cultural limitations. In the postmodern context, it is necessary to retrospect and reconsider Orientalism, and seize the opportunity of the shift from "other" to "us" in Western studies and cultural dissemination with the aim of continuously exporting the concept of "us" and building the real Orient. In the process of re-transformation, China should fully build up confidence in its culture, system, theory and path. Meanwhile, China should properly absorb the essence of Western culture and effectively integrate the wisdom of the Orient and the West.

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