

# Aula 5

## POST-COLONIAL LITERATURE: CONTRIBUTIONS OF EDWARD SAID

### **META**

Present Orientalism and one of its main theorists

### **OBJETIVO**

Ao final desta aula, você deverá ser capaz de:

Introduce students to Edward Said and his important book Orientalism (1978)

Provide a concise definition of Orientalism as system of representations

List some cinematographic productions that vilify "Orientals"

### **PRERREQUISITO**

Notions about the historicity of the concept of literature;

Notions of the process of formation and institutionalization of Literary History and literary theory as disciplines that have in Literature its object of study.

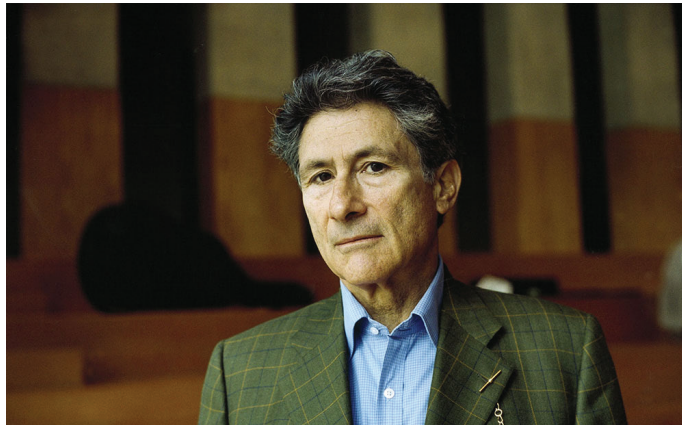
Notions of the relationship between Literary History and literature teaching.

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### INTRODUCTION

In the previous lesson, you had the opportunity to read something about the founding father of African literature, and get a taste of some of the themes explored in his literary production. Presently, you will be introduced to yet another important figure in post-colonial literature, as he has been credited with the foundation of the academic field of postcolonial studies. His name is Edward Wadie Said. He was an American Palestine, originally born in Jerusalem in 1935, then part of British-governed Mandatory Palestine. After joining the American Expeditionary Forces, he earned American citizenship. An interesting fact about his early years was that he grew up torn between two worlds, Cairo and Jerusalem. Living in the midst of so much syncretism and cultural diversity would play a relevant role not only in his education but also in his understanding of colonialism. One would not exaggerate if they said that Said was a product of different cultures; a man who belonged to two worlds, without feeling at home in neither, as he suggests in one of his publications himself:

With an unexceptionally Arab family name like “Saïd”, connected to an improbably British first name (my mother much admired Edward VIII the Prince of Wales in 1935, the year of my birth) I was an uncomfortably anomalous student all through my early years: a Palestinian going to school in Egypt, with an English first name, an American passport, and no certain identity, at all. To make matters worse, Arabic, my native language, and English, my school language, were inextricably mixed: I have never known which was my first language, and have felt fully at home in neither, although I dream in both. Every time I speak an English sentence, I find myself echoing it in Arabic, and vice versa (SAID: 2002, pp. 556-57).



He was a professor of literature at Columbia University, a public intellectual, and a founder of the academic field of postcolonial studies.

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward\\_Said](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edward_Said)

Despite spending a significant part of his adolescence in the East, he attended British and American schools, where he was educated in the Western canon. His diverse cultural perspective would be later used to try and understand the conflicts between the West and the East, particularly between Palestine and Israel. Some of the institutions he studied were destined to the formation of an Anglicized post-colonial elite who would become the new administration. Such was the case of Victoria College, in Alexandria, Egypt, amongst whose alumni were King Hussein of Jordan, and the Egyptian, Syrian, Jordanian and Saudi Arabian boys who would become ministers, prime ministers and executives in their respective countries. The education offered therein was very strict yet its most defining trace was the fact that students were supposed to speak English only otherwise they would be sanctioned, as Said himself puts it:

The moment one became a student at Victoria College, one was given the student handbook, a series of regulations governing every aspect of school life—the kind of uniform we were to wear, what equipment was needed for sports, the dates of school holidays, bus schedules, and so on. But the school's first rule, emblazoned on the opening page of the handbook, read: "English is the language of the school; students caught speaking any other language will be punished." Yet, there were no native speakers of English among the students. Whereas the masters were all British, we were a motley crew of Arabs of various kinds, Armenians, Greeks, Italians, Jews, and Turks, each of whom had a native language that the school had explicitly outlawed. Yet all, or nearly all, of us spoke Arabic—many spoke Arabic and French—and so we were able to take refuge in a common language, in defiance of what we perceived as an unjust colonial structure (SAID: 2002, pp. 556–57).

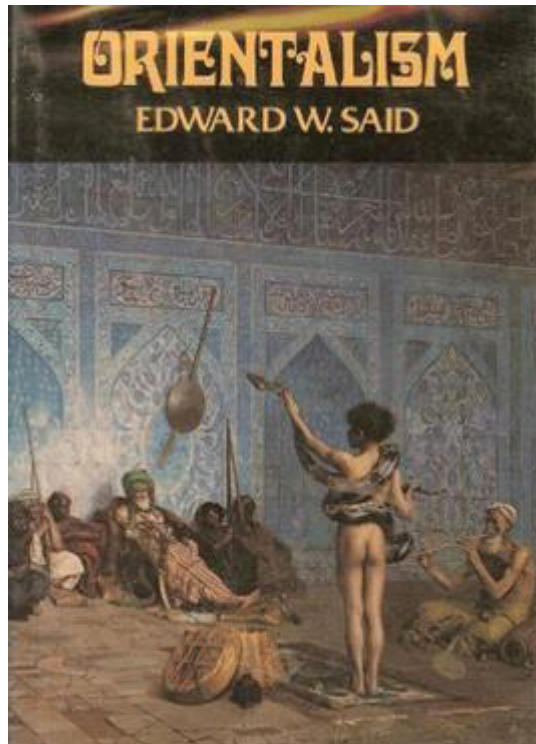
Eventually he was expelled from Victoria College for being too troublesome. Afterwards, he attended other schools and managed to become a model student. At the end of his school trajectory, he had become a polyglot intellectual (fluent in English, French, and Arabic), a Bachelor of Arts at Princeton University, a Master of Arts (1960) and a Doctor of Philosophy (1964) in English Literature from Harvard University.

## DESENVOLVIMENTO

Orientalism (1978)

This is probably Said's most important book. However, before making some comments on it, we should lay out a definition for the term that gives

name to it. According to its author, to put it roughly, orientalism consists of the narratives – academic studies, literary works, cultural artefacts whose object is the East - of how the West sees the East. It signifies a system of representations framed by political forces that brought the Orient into Western learning, Western consciousness, and Western empire. The Orient exists for the West, and is constructed by and in relation to the West. It is a mirror image of what is inferior and alien (“Other”) to the West.



*Orientalism* is a 1978 book by Edward W. Said, in which the author discusses Orientalism, defined as the West's patronizing representations of “The East”—the societies and peoples who inhabit the places of Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East.

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orientalism\\_\(book\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orientalism_(book))

Therefore, Said's *Orientalism* (1978) is a critique of the cultural representations that are the bases of Orientalism – how the Western world perceives the Orient. Therein, he calls into question the supposed difference between East and West, and illustrates how European colonization (which provided Europe's contact with the “lesser developed” regions in the World) gave origin to a “science of orientalism”, or the study of the Orientals or the people from these so-called “exotic” places. Europe divided the world into two parts, namely, the Orient (or east) labelled as uncivilized, barbaric, obscurantist, feminine and godless, and the Occident (or west) portrayed as the bastion of civilization, masculinity, Christian values and true science.

During such a contact, Europe defined herself as a superior entity in relation to the Orient (or the rest of the world). She came up with a supremacist ideology in which she was the illuminating center. Such an ideology made it possible for the fabrication of a moral justification for colonization and all sorts of aggressions. Europe, as the superior entity, had been allegedly given a mission to civilize the “lesser races”. To Said, such a belief pervaded almost all works (both academic and nonacademic) whose objective was to say something about the Orient. Literature, painting, architecture and other art forms were no exception. They were all centered on a supposedly essential difference (which could be described as the presumption of Western superiority) between the West and the East and made use of clichéd analytical models for perceiving the Oriental world.

One of the thesis advanced in Orientalism is that “the Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity ‘a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences’” (p. 9). By making such a statement, Said is not denying the existence of a factual orient, but he is asserting that the representations put in circulation by all sorts of publications for a long time (travelogues, anthropological essays, personal letters, military reports, paintings, poems and alike) about the Orient were purposefully made. They are not a “natural” fact. Quite the contrary, they were fabricated in response to a number of interests and needs.

The need for a more or less fixed identity, for example. “... the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience. Yet none of this Orient is merely imaginative” (p. 10), says Said. Therefore, the representations of the orient, were “created” to be Europe’s negative, or everything from which Europe wanted to distinguish herself. In this sense, it is safe to say that the very idea of Europe only came into being after her contact with the “Other”, of whom the Orient has been the most consistent embodiment.

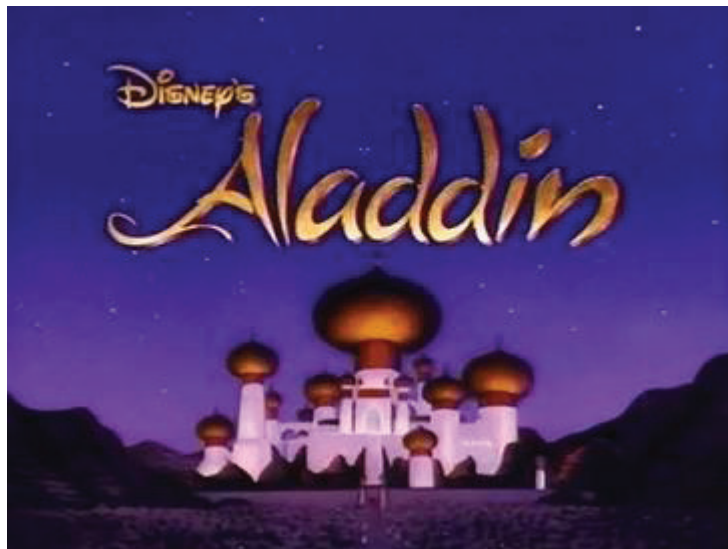
According to Said, orientalism as a system of representation has been around for some time. However, ever since Europe officially ventured herself on expansionist enterprises, it has become more organized. As a result, it has been able to represent the Orient culturally and ideologically as a mode of discourse, which had at its disposal a number of institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles. Orientalism also has its promoters, namely, “anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient”, which includes anthropologists, sociologists, historians, or philologists, whom Said called orientalists. Even though the term Orientalist (or Orientalism) is less employed currently, “Orientalism lives on academically through its doctrines and theses about the Orient and the Oriental” (p. 10).

Another way of looking at orientalism is by taking it as

the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient, dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating restructuring, and having authority over the Orient (SAID: 1978, p. 11).

From this perspective, Orientalism achieved so authoritative a position that Said believed that no writing, thinking, or acting on the Orient could do so without taking account of the limitations on thought and action imposed by Orientalism. In brief, because of Orientalism the Orient was not (and is not) a free subject of thought or action. This is not to say that Orientalism unilaterally determines what can be said about the Orient, but that it is the-whole network of interests inevitably brought to bear on (and therefore always involved) any occasion when that peculiar entity “the Orient” is in question.

### ORIENTALISM IN THE BIG SCREEN



Aladdin is an American animated television series produced by Walt Disney Television Animation which aired from February 6, 1994, to November 25, 1995, based on the original 1992 Disney film of the same name. Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aladdin\\_\(animated\\_TV\\_series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aladdin_(animated_TV_series))

Orientalism as a system of representations is still around on TV as well as the big screen to mention only two instances. A trivial example can be found in a Walt Disney cartoon most children born after 1995 have probably seen at least once during their childhood, entitled Aladdin. In the original lyrics of its theme song composed by Howard Elliott Ashman and Alan Menken, the Orient is described as it follows:

Oh I come from a land, from a far away place, where the caravan  
camels roam / where they cut off your ear if they don't like your face  
(original lyrics) / It's barbaric, but hey, it's home

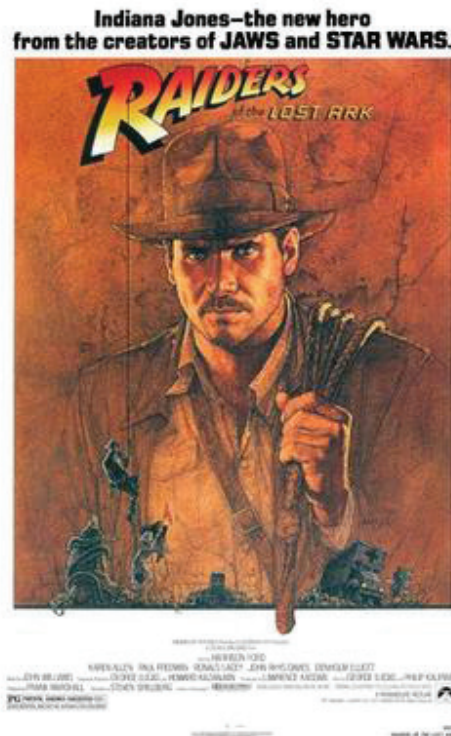
[...]

Arabian nights, like Arabian days/More often than not/Are hotter  
than hot/In a lot of good ways

[...]

Arabian nights/'Neath Arabian moons/A fool off his guard  
Could fall and fall hard/Out there on the dunes (emphasis added  
throughout)

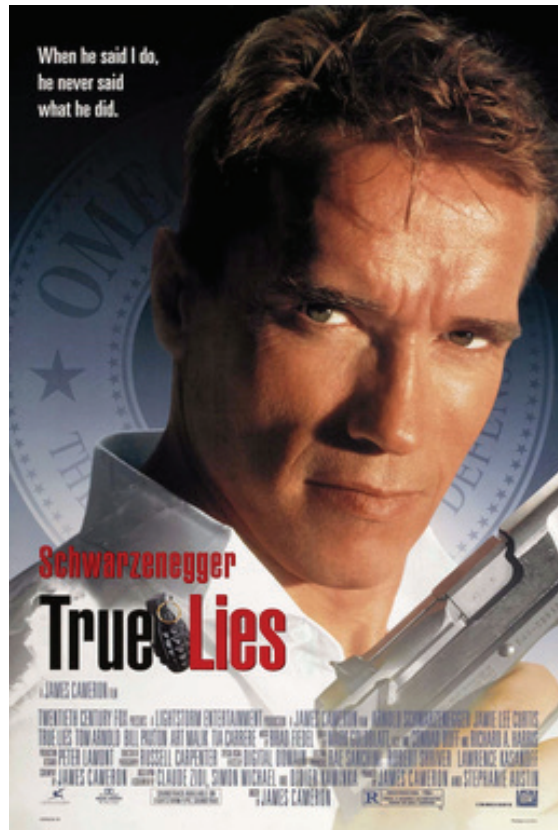
In the song, the Orient – represented by the Arabian deserts – is portrayed as a hostile, barbaric place, where one must be always on guard lest they be killed. Therein one is constantly at risk. It is also a product of a stereotypical view of the orient the way women are represented in the cartoon. They usually have oversexualized bodies and are fond of belly dancing. There are also the mystical atmosphere (flying carpets, geniuses), the cruelty of the Arab man and his aggressive approach in dealing with others.



Raiders of the Lost Ark (later marketed as Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark) is a 1981 American action adventure film directed by Steven Spielberg, written by Lawrence Kasdan from a story by George Lucas and Philip Kaufman. Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raiders\\_of\\_the\\_Lost\\_Ark](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Raiders_of_the_Lost_Ark)

When it comes to Hollywood movies, stereotypes about the Orient are as frequent as we may think at first. In fact, there are scholars who claim that Hollywood has vilified the Arabs as a people for quite some time. One can hardly find a movie in which Arabs make an appearance without being demonized, made fun of or scorned at. The image of the Arab has been that of the terrorist, the embodiment of evil, a threat to all that which the West represents. Arabs are often portrayed as violent, angry, and obsessed with destroying the West, or as if Arabs were merely cold money hungry oil sheiks or inept villainous terrorists that seek to destroy Western society.

Another common place is that Hollywood portrays the Orient as if it had stopped in time. It is backward region, untouched by technological development or intellectual advancement. That can be seen in “Raiders of the Lost Ark” (1981), directed by Steven Spielberg, in which Arabs are portrayed as unchanging oddities.



True Lies is a 1994 American action comedy film written, directed and co-produced by James Cameron.

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/True\\_Lies](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/True_Lies)



True Lies (1994), in turn, directed by James Cameron, and starred by Arnold Schwarzenegger, shows the Arabs not only as dangerous, but also incompetent. The image of the Arab as a buffoon is explored in Cannonball Run 2, starred by Jamie Farr. Another pattern is the lecherous Arab as one can see in the Jewel of the Nile (1985). Sheik Omar tricks Kathleen Turner by convincing her to come with him to Arab land then he imprisons her. In the Bond film Never Say Never Again (1983), Kim Basinger is abused by the most sleazy-looking Arabs imaginable, drawing on the stereotype of the lusty, oversexualized Arab.



Cannonball Run II is a 1984 American–Hong Kong comedy film starring Burt Reynolds and an all-star cast, released by Warner Bros. and Golden Harvest. Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cannonball\\_Run\\_II](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cannonball_Run_II)

The list goes on. As follows are some of the anti-Arab Hollywood movies for you to check out when you get a chance:

### MOVIES

- “The Wind and the Lion” (1975)
- “Under Siege” (1986)
- “Wanted: dead or alive” (1987)
- “True Lies” (1994)
- “Homeland” (2011-2013)
- “World War Z” (2013)
- “Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles” (2014)
- “American Sniper” (2014)

### CONCLUSÃO

All those insights on the way Arabs are portrayed, to a great extent, inform themselves on Said’s work. In fact, it would be accurate to say that the greatest intellectual impact of *Orientalism* (1978) was upon the fields of literary theory, cultural studies (within which movies, soap operas and other cultural products are scrutinized from different theoretical perspectives), and human geography, by way of which originated the field of Post-colonial studies. Edward Said’s method stemmed from the analytic techniques of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault mostly. That said, we hope to have made it evident how relevant Said and his work are for the analysis and eventually deconstruction of the cultural representations of “Orientals”, “The Orient”, and “The Eastern world” as presented in the mass communications media of the Western world as well as in literature, paintings and other art forms available for the general public.



### RESUMO

In this lesson, you will be introduced to Edward Wadie Said, sometimes Edward William Said, (born November 1, 1935, Jerusalem—died September 25, 2003, New York, New York, U.S.), a Palestinian American academic, political activist, and literary critic who examined literature in light of social and cultural politics and was an outspoken proponent of the political rights of the Palestinian people and the creation of an independent Palestinian state. He was also the founder of post-colonial studies, which was inaugurated by his most famous book *Orientalism*, published in 1978. In the second part of the lesson, you will see a few examples of cinematographic productions that are pervaded by stereotypes concerning the Orient in general and the Orientals in particular.



Write a short text (at most two pages) trying to explain what orientalism is and provide examples for some of the stereotypes it has nourished.

### ACTIVITY COMMENT

This activity aims at building a text-synthesis one of the main points addressed in this lesson. It will also allow the student to develop his/her text-making skill as well as better assimilate what was discussed throughout the lesson.



### PRÓXIMA AULA

Oral narrative

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