HENRY DAVID THOREAU’S ORIENTALISM: A RE-EXAMINATION

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DEDICATION

To my beloved family for their everlasting support and patience. To everyone who stood by my side and never lost faith in me. To all friends who never ceased to encourage me.
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I gratefully acknowledge my indebtedness with all respect to the ones who helped me and encouraged me through this thesis.

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Orientalism claims to reflect the image of the Orient in the West, but for several reasons this image was mispresented. One can feel and see that Westerners misunderstand many aspects of the Arabic culture and Islamic religion. This is due to many factors that range from simple ignorance to willful distortion, including unintentional errors and lack of knowledge of Islam.

Some authors, however, have dealt with Islam more deeply. Islam, despite some distortions, has affected their thoughts and ideas. One of these authors is Thoreau, who is influenced by the Orient, including the Arab-Islamic Orient. Thoreau was familiar through library sources and through other authors, such as Emerson and Goethe, with the Orient, especially the Arab-Islamic Orient. In his works he employs sayings by Prophet Mohammad, and anecdotes about Muslims and Muslim personalities.

This study attempts to examine the image of Islam objectively through studying and analyzing Thoreau’s selected works *Walden* (1854) and *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849).
By analyzing Henry David Thoreau’s selected works, this study aims at exploring the extent to which he is influenced by the Orient and how his works reflect the image of the Orient. Many critics have addressed Thoreau’s transcendentalism. Some have dealt with his relation to the Orient in general, but very few studies have examined Thoreau's relation with the Arab-Islamic Orient and here lies the significance of this study.
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

ORIENTALISM

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the word orientalism was, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1971), generally used to refer to "the work of the orientalist, a scholar versed in the languages and literatures of the orient, and in the world of the arts to identify a character, style or quality, commonly associated with the Eastern nations" (qtd. in Macfie, 2000: 2). The meaning of the word orientalism, as given in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, remained more or less unchanged until the period of decolonization that followed the end of the Second World War (1939-45). Then, in little more than twenty years, it came to mean not only "the work of the orientalist and a character, style or quality associated with the Eastern nations," (Ibid) but also "an institution, designed for dealing with the orient, a partial view of Islam, an instrument of Western imperialism, a style of thought, based on an ontological and epistemological distinction between the orient and the occident" (Said, 1978:2).

Edward Said, a renowned Arab- American scholar and author of several books exposing the shortcomings and flaws of the Orientalist approach, defines "Orientalism" as follows:

By Orientalism I mean several things, all of them, in my opinion, interdependent. The most readily accepted designation of Orientalism is an academic one, and indeed, the label still serves in a number of academic institutions. Anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient and this applies whether the person is an anthropologist, sociologist,
Although Henry David Thoreau does not fit in Said's quoted definition of an Orientalist, writers and critics classify him as an orientalist because of his writings about and recurring references to the Orient.

Said says, "Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed 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" (Ibid:3) in short, as a Western style for dominating and having authority over the Orient.

The field of Orientalist Studies is criticized and called into question by many writers. The criticism is mainly that orientalists have misunderstood the Orient, and in particular the Muslim Orient, out of prejudice or because they have tried to interpret it in terms of the wrong categories; and that their work is too closely linked with the political interests of their countries.

People who first encounter the term "orientalism" are often confused by the fact that it primarily refers to the Islamic world and South Asia, and secondarily to the Far East. The confusion is caused by the fact that today "the Orient" calls forward images of Japan and China. One can trace the development of how the Orient, and in particular the Near Orient, became known in the West as its great opposite since antiquity. Many factors came into play: the Bible and the rise of Christianity; the travellers, information and manuscripts brought back by travellers and traders were used by scholars, then
there were the conquering Eastern movements, principally Islam, of course; and there were the Crusaders. Altogether a vast amount of knowledge and an archive are built up from the literature that belongs to these experiences. These are the lenses through which the Orient is experienced, and they shape the form of the encounter between East and West. (Ibid: 58)

From the beginning of the nineteenth century until the end of World War II, France and Britain dominated the Orient and Orientalism; since World War II America has dominated the Orient and approaches it as France and Britain once did. This special relationship has given rise to a large body of texts called Orientalist texts. Orientalism took various shapes and forms during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. There was a vast literature about the Orient inherited from the European past. Edward Said assumes that modern Orientalism began in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. What is distinctive about this period is that, in the words of Edgar Quinet, an "Oriental renaissance" (Clarke, 1997: 23) took place. Suddenly, it seemed to a great number of thinkers that a new awareness of the Orient had arisen. This awareness was partly the result of newly discovered and translated Oriental texts in languages like Sanskrit, Zend, and Arabic; it was also the result of a newly perceived relationship between the Orient and the West (Macfie, 2000: 10).

According to Said, "a very large mass of writers, among whom are poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators, have accepted the basic distinction between East and
West"(1978:7) as the starting point for accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, mind, destiny, and so on. "The phenomenon of Orientalism deals with the internal consistency of Orientalism and its ideas about the Orient” (Ibid:10).

Europe and the Orient have had many cultural, material, and intellectual relations. These relations have gone through several phases. Yet in general it was the West that moved upon the East, not vice versa.

On the one hand, according to Voltaire, the East is the civilization “to which the West owes everything,”(qtd. in Clarke, 1997: 56) and for Arnold Toynbee the West's encounter with the East is one of the most significant world events of our time. Others have been less enthusiastic: C.S. Pierce spoke of “the monstrous mysticism of the East”(Ibid) and Arthur Koestler described its religions as “a web of solemn absurdities”(Ibid). For some like Goethe, the relationship is deep and significant, and, according to Joseph Needham, there has been "a dialogue going on for three thousand years between the two ends of the Old World"(Ibid) in which East and West have greatly influenced each other.

Western minds were strongly fascinated by the Orient which entered into Western cultural and intellectual life. There appeared a new kind of curiosity, a desire to study the world of the Orient. The West has been long enchanted by the East. This enchantment can be summed up in the word "romanticisation" (Tomlin, 1963:12). In the mind of western people, the Orient
was a place of romance, the place of Scheherazade and the Thousand Nights. A place full of exotic beings, fairies, haunting memories and landscapes (13).

The Europeans in general, mostly the British and French, unlike the Americans, have had a long tradition of Orientalism. This tradition was "a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience" (Said, 1978:4).

France and England had a long colonial history which the Americans never had. The result of that, according to Said (177), is that the Americans' awareness and perception of Islam are very different. France and England had the advantage of working directly with the people of the great Muslim lands through colonial interaction. An important fact that sometimes tends to be forgotten is that these two countries had large colonial dominion over large parts of the Muslim world and that many Arab and Muslim countries gained their independence well into the twentieth century. England and France, unlike the Americans, had a long tradition of direct experience with the Islamic world. The Americans had neither a colonial past nor a longstanding cultural interaction with Islam. In this light, it is really surprising how the Americans became interested in the Arab and Muslim world in particular, and the East in general. The Americans had no comparable "Oriental renaissance" (Clarke, 1997: 23) that characterized the European interest in Islam in the modern period.

American contacts with Islam, in the beginning, were few. These contacts were merely through occasional travellers like Mark Twain and
Herman Melville. Some missionaries were first sent from Boston to Syria at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and there were some military expeditions to North Africa (Said, 1978:178). American universities had no formal discipline called "Oriental studies" or "Islamic studies". Whatever work done by academic experts in these fields was done quietly and privately in the studies of these scholars (Ibid:178-9).

Said points out that insofar as Islam has always been seen as belonging to the Orient, it has been looked at with great hostility and fear. He argues that the literature of the West has served to define and enhance this hostile relationship throughout. He says that there are, of course, many religious, psychological and political reasons for this, but all of these reasons derive from a sense that so far as the West is concerned, Islam represents not only a formidable competitor but also a late coming challenge to Christianity (40).

When Edward Said published his critique of Oriental studies (Orientalism, 1978) he argued that many of the writers on the Middle East had found it difficult to avoid regarding the area and its people as "other" from the point of view of the West, and that they included colonialist points of view in their writings. Frequently, he points to the negative stereotypes which Western scholars used when describing the people and practices of the region, and he suggests that these have their basis in the unequal power relations which existed at that time, and indeed continue to exist today, between the West and the Middle East. (Daniel, 2000: 12).

For if it is true that no production of knowledge in the human sciences can ever
ignore or disclaim its author's involvement as a human subject in his own circumstances, then it must also be true that for a European or American studying the Orient there can be no disclaiming the main circumstances of his actuality: that he comes up against the Orient as a European or American first, as an individual second. And to be a European or an American in such a situation is by no means an inert fact. It meant and means being aware, however dimly, that one belongs to a power with definite interests in the Orient, and more important, that one belongs to a part of the earth with a definite history of involvement in the Orient almost since the time of Homer (Said, 1978:16).

Said showed how difficult it was to come up with an objective treatment of the Middle East, and he argued that if an accurate picture is to be portrayed it must "involve an awareness by the writers themselves of the position from which they are writing." (18). Orientalism, according to Said, does not describe the Orient's truth. He argues that the Orient is considered as an example of what a writer shows the Western world what he or she thinks is Oriental. This does not mean that it would be impossible to write objectively on the Middle East.

Unfortunately, Said has cast the shadow of his own skepticism over the possibility that some writers who have a positive attitude towards the East and the Orient may be born out of a society that has been defined as imperial. Moreover, some critics have been tempted to judge authors as products of their own cultural and social surroundings, while somewhat ignoring the personal side of these authors (Mackenzie, 1995: 24). Their individuality, particular
philosophy, and personality must have been the reason for their interest in other cultures.

Orientalism, however, was not a bad phenomenon all over. Studies show that Europe’s initial prejudices had been overcome, to some extent, within serious scholarship by the end of the eighteenth century when the study of Islam was established as an academic subject worthy of attention and respect. The Muslims were no longer seen purely as hostile tribes, but as the carriers of a distinctive religion and civilization; their prophet was no longer an impostor but the founder of an independent and historically significant religious community.

In other words, rather than being necessarily racist, Oriental Studies, as one of the first fields within European scholarship, did help to overcome such prejudices and to open the Western mind to the whole of humanity. The East and West have had a very long encounter since antiquity, an encounter that was characterized by curiosity, ignorance, and various interests. The roots of the modern conflicts, seen in this light, go back a long way indeed, and it is not easy to overcome the force of history when we want to seek understanding and knowledge.

And however much hostility there was between Europe and Islam, there was also direct experience, and in the case of poets, novelists, and scholars like Thoreau, Goethe, Gerard de Nerval, Richard Burton, Flaubert, and Louis Massignon, there was imagination and refinement (Rubin, 2000:43). It was George Bernard Shaw who wrote: I have always held the religion of


Khurshid, Ahmad, (1999). *Basic Characteristics of Islamic Ideology*. The Islamic Foundation, United Kingdom.


