Racist Narratives and the Construction of the Identity of the Other in Edward Said

Dr. Chouini Ali *
May 8, 1945 – Guelma Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Department of Philosophy
chouiniali21061987@gmail.com
Bedda Fawzia
University of 8 May 1945 – Guelma Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
Department of Philosophy
beddafouzia@gmail.com

Received: 23/09/2025 Accepted: 21/11/2025

Abstract:

Numerous elements have played a role in shaping identities throughout history, with literary narrative standing out as one of the most influential. The West utilized this narrative not only to construct its own identity but also to define and shape that of the Eastern Other. Western literary works—particularly novels—have significantly contributed to the formation of collective identities. In Orientalism, Edward Said intertwines literature with philosophy, analyzing various literary texts to expose the racial and ethnic biases and ideological agendas that supported Western imperialism. These novels often served as instruments to portray the culturally different Other, allowing literature to mask the West's ambitions for domination and authority over the East. Thus, literature became a foundational element in both constructing Western identity and crafting an image of the Eastern Other.

This research seeks to explore Edward Said's perspective on the interplay between literature and identity. It also aims to uncover the underlying racism present in literary narratives and to examine how novels, as cultural products, contribute to the construction of the Eastern Other's image.

Keywords: *Literature; Narrative;, Novel ; Orientalism; Other; Identity.*

* Corresponding Author

Introduction

The overlap between literature and philosophy cannot be canceled or overlooked. The history of philosophy and literature confirms the intersection and intermingling of the two fields in many areas. Today, the researcher no longer concerns himself with the classical approach to the relationship between literature and philosophy, but is instead interested in uncovering the meanings and ideas that texts carry, regardless of whether these texts are literary or philosophical. However, with the emergence of a new field known as postcolonial cultural studies, philosophers' interest in literature increased significantly, aiming to uncover the ideological policies embedded in literature that have greatly influenced intercultural relations and subsequently the creation and shaping of the identity of peoples.

Edward Said is considered among the thinkers and writers who showed great interest in cultural studies. He is one of the founders of this new field of knowledge. Through it, he undertook the study of European literature, including novels and stories, to uncover another aspect of literature — the side that authoritative powers tried to hide in order for literature to remain in the service of political agendas. Literature is not devoid of ideology nor of political purposes, which it still serves to this day. This is what Edward Said demonstrated in *Orientalism*, which relied on literature and novels to draw the image of the Eastern Other and shape their identity. Thus, in Edward Said's position on Western Orientalism, literature and philosophy converged, as he philosophized Western literature to reveal its inherent will to dominate and control the Other by creating their identity, which represents both their existence and that of others.

Based on this, what is Edward Said's position on literary narrative in the colonial era? How were novels employed in shaping and spreading Western racism within Eastern societies? And how did literature and novels contribute to shaping the identity of the Eastern individual?

1- First: Literary Discourse in Edward Said's Thought

Literature is among the mechanisms that humans have used to express their thoughts through the use of metaphors and resonant phrases, which led some to affirm that literary discourse has characteristics distinguishing it from other forms of discourse, whether scientific or philosophical. This is because "the main thing in literature — unlike philosophy — is art, as we seek pleasure in it rather than truth, and we aim for aesthetic enjoyment rather than intellectual instruction. The writer presents us with an

artistic work that we enjoy and immerse ourselves in. If he tries to fill his artistic work with logical arguments or philosophical doctrines, he may thereby ruin all the literary taste in his work.[1]"

This perception was especially common in Greek civilization among some of its philosophers, some of whom saw literature as dependent on imagination and excessively focused on emotions that corrupt the mind and man as a being existing in society and the world. This is clearly evident in Plato, known for his criticism of literature, especially poetry and myth, "because they both use the same rhetorical means and have the same goals. The myth was also presented in a poetic style."[2]

Thus, it plays with the truth through the use of literary expressions that enchant the mind and prevent it from focusing on meanings.

On the other hand, some considered that literary language helps express thoughts in the mind and transmit them using symbols that prompt the reader to search for their meanings. This is found in the philosophy of Heraclitus, where "some thinkers believe that Heraclitus's text sought the optimal form to express his propositions and meanings. They noted that this discourse uses figurative expression more than conceptual language, and poetic style with its imagery and metaphors more than abstract expression, while also employing ambiguous words or those with double meanings[3]." For this reason, his philosophy was literary, and he relied on literature to express his philosophical ideas.

The attempt to blend and separate literature and philosophy did not stop with the Greeks but continued through other eras, especially in contemporary philosophical thought, where many philosophers leaned toward literature. Conversely, some tried to philosophize literature and uncover the ideas and ideologies it contains that aim to direct modern humans. This can be seen in the works of many philosophers, such as Derrida, who "leans toward an aesthetic nature capable of clarifying meaning starting from language and its expressions[4]," which led Habermas to later revolt against him for turning philosophy into literary writing, as well as Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Nietzsche, Sartre, and Camus, "who formulated their philosophical ideas in the form of novels and plays, increasing the popularity of their philosophies and spreading them further than they would have if they had been written in traditional academic form, like most philosophical texts[5]."

This is especially true for philosophers of cultural studies that emerged in the early 20th century, which viewed literature as a means to create cultures and direct history.

Among these thinkers is Edward Said, who dedicated himself to the study of literature to uncover its hidden meanings, thus founding a postcolonial literary theory.

Literature is the field in which the thought of the Palestinian philosopher Edward Said developed, and it was the path he took to express his ideas. Literature was strongly present in his Arab philosophy. However, it can be said that Edward Said practiced literature before entering the world of philosophy — that is, he was a writer before he was a philosopher. His focus and studies were centered on literature and emerged from it, making them fundamentally literary. He worked in literature and was influenced by Western literary figures, especially the French literary theory that drew his attention and dominated his interest in its early stage as it moved to America and fascinated American writers.

However, Edward Said quickly turned away from it "because he saw that it did not consider historical experiences as tools for interpreting texts, but excluded them and replaced them with the textual world. Literary theory reduced the world to text, and textuality became the new ideology that helped remove critics from the real world."[6] European literary theory, which emerged specifically in France, was an extension of comparative literature that flourished during the imperial era. While theory was supposed to represent openness to the world and other cultures, Western imperialism called for separating literary reading from real-world contexts to keep literature operating covertly in the service of political power.

This met with strong opposition from Edward Said, who rejected the idea of literature serving politics. He said: "I do not advocate — in fact, I strongly oppose — teaching literature as a form of politics. I believe there is a distinction between publications and novels. I do not think the classroom should become a place to promote political ideas[7]."

Edward Said viewed comparative literature, which originated and flourished in Europe, as subservient to empire, just like other sciences, because "literature viewed exclusively from a European perspective shares features with the imperial system in that it subordinates the margin to the center and dominates the non-European world.[8]"

Thus, literature was not innocent of imperialism. This is because "comparative literature coincided with the idea of European superiority and, ultimately, with the institutionalization of the marginalization of the margin.[9]"

European literature played a major role in directing and shaping European relations. Comparative literature, which outwardly called for openness to the Other, was nothing but a tool in the hands of power. A critical reading of Western literature reveals this interweaving between literature and imperialism. Therefore, "his methodology aims to focus on individual works, which are initially read as creative fictional productions, and then analyzed to uncover the relationship between culture and imperialism."

This literary study cannot succeed unless the novel is returned to the frameworks in which it was produced, because this enables an understanding of the imperialist content embedded within it. In this regard, Edward Said said:

"I believe that if you lived during the colonial conflict period, you could return to these texts and read them sensitively to those exact points that are usually ignored. And if, on the other hand, you feel that literature is just literature and has nothing to do with anything else, then your job becomes to separate literature from the world, and in a sense, I believe this distorts it and cuts it off from those aspects that make it more interesting, more worldly, and more a part of the conflict that existed."[10]

The imperial Western policy tried to direct readers' attention toward marginal literary matters in order to prevent them from discovering that literature carries an imperial message that serves the will of colonial domination. We also cannot deny that many writers played a prominent role in directing the colonial Western tide toward the East. Therefore, Western literature must be studied critically to transcend the literary theory that "produced a technical language that treats literary discourses with excessive technical rigor, distancing them from political, social, and moral questions that concern society[11]." Thus, the aim of criticism is to steer literature toward reality, where there is interaction between literature and reality, and literature becomes an effective tool in transforming it.

2-Second: Racist Narratives in Western Literature

Western literary narrative is not devoid of racism, which the West established long ago and which literature, especially novels, worked to instill in the hearts of peoples. The Western individual's view of the different Other became one governed by racism, clearly manifested in the novels used by the West to establish a colonial, superior European identity. This leads us to say that Western novels are not innocent of racism and did not carry the true message of literature. Thus, Edward Said calls for a reevaluation of Western literature, especially the novel, because "the novel plays an exceptionally important role in helping to create imperial attitudes toward the rest of

the world,[12]" by shaping the Western imagination that fuels enthusiasm to tame and dominate the East. Said sees the Western empire as a creation of the novel, which has always served racism and promoted it. This is evident in the works of many writers and novelists "such as Fredric Jameson, Paul Ricoeur, and Tzvetan Todorov, who explored the formal features of narrative within broader social and philosophical frameworks than those used by White, showing at the same time the degree and significance of narrative in social life itself. Narrative has shifted from being a pattern or formal mode to an activity that brings together politics, heritage, history, and interpretation."[13]

Edward Said calls for reading Western literature, including novels, with a critical historical approach to uncover the meaning behind the novel. There is no Western novel that does not carry within it an ideology stemming from the author's environment. If we return, for example, to modern novels, we find that they promote Western identity at the expense of other identities. For instance, the novels of Albert Camus were largely marked by racism because they did not lack that contemptuous view of the Other — specifically the Algerian individual. Since Camus lived in Algeria, his novels reflected his position on the Algerian cause. A critical reading of Camus's novels reveals that "he was not a neutral observer. He was a committed opponent of the National Liberation Front,[14]" and he sought for his novels to serve his homeland. The strange thing in Camus's narratives is the portrayal of the Other as someone unrelated to civilization or progress, a backward person who seeks bloodshed. Yet, he does not admit in his novel that the stranger is the French colonialist living in a land that is not his own, and that the real stranger is the landowner who suffered all kinds of oppression and injustice in his own home. This is also what Conrad affirmed, believing that colonial racism was necessary, and he insisted that Western novels are not devoid of racism because, in his view, all the writer "does in his novels is to re-summarize the imperial adventure. His novels revolve around characters who travel to remote regions — often to the heart of darkness in the case of Africa or to Latin America in *Nostromo*."[15] That is, the novel depicts the West as the bringer of light to places where darkness prevails. Western countries are bearers of civilization and progress, as seen also in *Robinson Crusoe* by Daniel Defoe.

3- Third: The Novel and the Representation of the Other

Edward Said's literature is not devoid of philosophy. In his later writings, it became difficult to separate literary discourse from philosophical discourse. Literature turned into a tool for expressing his philosophical ideas, which led him to delve into philosophy and address many issues such as freedom and liberation, Orientalism, the self and the Other, cultural resistance, and the intellectual — all philosophical issues that Edward Said addressed critically as pressing concerns of modern humanity. He believed these issues must be reexamined to uncover their underlying complexities, relying on many methods borrowed from other philosophers.

Literature contributed to shaping the Western vision of the East, as revealed by Edward Said through his critical study of Orientalism, which exposed the lies and falsifications it contained. Orientalist studies of the East were not free from subjectivity, which is enough to question the scientific foundations the West claimed to rely on in its study of the East. Edward Said turned to European Western novels, especially those written about the East, linking "the fictional texts produced by the West during the colonial period to the political conditions characterized by the will to power, ownership, and domination of the West over the East — i.e., the connection between Western novels and power.[16]"

He analyzed them using various linguistic methods such as structuralism and deconstruction, as well as critical epistemological study, concluding that Western novels are not innocent of those political and ideological agendas.

The novel, in a seemingly indirect way, contributed to nourishing European imperialism toward the East. It also helped paint the image of the East in the Western and Eastern imagination, making this image appear real to the Western mind, even though it does not accurately represent the Eastern person. Rather, it is a fabrication of the Western novelist or writer. Therefore, the Eastern identity presented in Western novels is a forged identity, lacking truth and far removed from the actual identity of the East. The West aimed to create the identity of the Easterner in order to impose its existence upon him, for in doing so it not only creates the identity of the Other but also constructs its own identity, which can only be realized through the existence of the Eastern Other. Hence, "this identity invention of the East involves canceling the element of becoming, movement, and cultural interaction, and treats it as a cultural block similar to Plato's fixed essences … that is, it is represented, defined, and portrayed using specifications that do not reflect the reality of the East as much as they reflect the reality of the imperial Western self."[17]

Western novels witnessed astonishing development during the colonial era due to the role the novel plays in creating the image of the Eastern Other. “The metaphorical images created by Orientalist narrative, for example, stereotype the African mind by depicting it as savage and backward, marketing colonial expansion under the notion of delivering civilization to these peoples.”[18]

Thus, the novel was behind the image crafted by the Western self about the Eastern Other. Through narrative, it tried to construct the identity of the Eastern person — something Edward Said exposed by subjecting Western novels to contrapuntal reading to highlight the deep relationship between imperialism and Western literature.

Western colonialism did not settle for the geographical occupation of the Eastern individual; it also represented this person, spoke on his behalf, and wrote his history — which is a significant part of identity formation. It also shaped this identity through a literary style governed by metaphor and imagination. The image of the Eastern Other was depicted in a despotic way, far from realism and objectivity, and in a manner that reveals the condescending view of the Eastern Other in order to justify domination. Consequently, the Eastern person was turned into a subject of the Western novel, studied and employed according to the whims of Western authority. As Edward Said states:

“The European authorial self is granted the right to hold onto a region overseas, draw benefit from it, depend on it, and ultimately refuse to acknowledge its right to independence or separate existence.”[19]

Edward Said was interested in reading many Western novels that carried a contemptuous and inferior view of the Eastern Other. Among these novels is *Mansfield Park* by Austen, which describes the imperial struggle between Britain and France over control of the Antigua region. Thus, “the novel hints at the need to strongly reinforce control over imperial possessions. It also reveals the historical conflict between France and Britain over the sugar plantations in the Antigua region.”[20]

In his book *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said presented multiple examples of Western novels that contain conceptions reflecting the Western individual’s desire to create an image of the Eastern human. Western novels are not free from the aggression the Westerner harbors toward the Other as a being who shares existence and upon whom he wishes to impose himself in order to satisfy his obsession with possession and control. The presence of the Eastern Other represents a nightmare for the Western

man, and the only way to get rid of this nightmare is to subjugate and control him. Thus, the novel was one of the means relied upon and is therefore classified as an ally of colonialism and Western imperialism. For this reason, it drew the attention of researchers in the postcolonial era as a cultural product that must be questioned and reconsidered in order to dismantle the foundations on which it was built.

Conclusion

Western literature, with its narratives and novels, is not free from racism. Placing the novel within its historical and spatial context reveals the racism embedded within Western literature and how the West sought to employ narrative to form both its own identity and that of other peoples. Hence, most Western novels, especially in the colonial period, express the binary opposition between the self and the Other, which at its core is an identity problem that necessitated the involvement of racism for the West to build its identity in the presence of the different Other. This identity would have no meaning without the presence of the Other. Therefore, Western identity — with its racist tendencies — was the result of the political use of the novel in its construction. In this way, the novel became a tool in the hands of political power in an indirect manner that cannot be revealed except by bringing the novel back into the world and reading it with critical and worldly analysis — for in the end, it is nothing but the impressions of the writer, programmed by politics to serve its interests.

bibliography

[1] **Khadra Hamraoui**, *Between Literary Discourse and Philosophical Discourse – A Study in Specificity*, Journal of the Faculty of Letters and Languages, Biskra, June 2017, p. 359.

[2] **Ibid.**, p. 360.

[3] **Ibid.**, p. 361

[4] **Mohamed Jadidi**, *Philosophy and Literature: Is Philosophy a Type of Literary Writing?*, Mu'minoun Bila Hudoud, May 25, 2016.

[5] Ibid.

[6] **Lounis Ben Ali**, *Edward Said: From Critiquing the Discourse of Orientalism to Critiquing the Colonial Novel (How to Establish Critical Awareness) – A Critical Study*, Mim Publishing House, Algeria, 1st Edition, 2018.

[7] **Edward Said**, *The Pen and the Sword*, p. 69.

[8] **Yves Clavaron**, *Edward Said: The Cultural Intifada*, Translated by: Mohamed Al-Jarti, Safahat for Studies, Publishing and Distribution, Damascus, 1st Edition, 2017, p. 110.

[9] **Ibid.**, p. 110.

[10] **Edward Said**, *The Pen and the Sword*, p. 69.

[11] **Ben Qarneh Makhtariya**, *The Presence of Anglo-Saxon Philosophy in Arab Thought: Edward Said as a Model*, a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment for the Master's degree, Department of Philosophy, University of Oran, 2014/2015,p.65

[12]**Edward Said**, *The Pen and the Sword*, p. 58.
[13] **Edward Said**, *The Pen and the Sword*, p. 88.
[14] **Edward Said**, *The Pen and the Sword*, p. 67.
[15] **Edward Said**, *The Pen and the Sword*, p. 63.

[16] **Farid Bouchi**, *Edward Said: The Radical Humanist at the Dawn of Postcolonial Thought*, Safahat for Studies, Publishing and Distribution, Damascus, 1st Edition, 2018, p. 96

[17] **Farid Bouchi**, *Edward Said: The Radical Humanist at the Dawn of Postcolonial Thought*, p. 88.
[18] **Farid Bouchi**, *Edward Said: The Radical Humanist at the Dawn of Postcolonial Thought*, pp. 97–98.
[19] **Farid Bouchi**, *Edward Said: The Radical Humanist at the Dawn of Postcolonial Thought*, p. 89.
[20] **Ben Qarneh Makhtariya**, *The Presence of Anglo-Saxon Philosophy in Arab Thought: Edward Said as a Model*, p. 80.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1- Ben Qarneh Makhtariya, *The Presence of Anglo-Saxon Philosophy in Arab Thought: Edward Said as a Model*, a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment for the Master's degree, Department of Philosophy, University of Oran, 2014/2015,p.65
2-Ben Qarneh Makhtariya, *The Presence of Anglo-Saxon Philosophy in Arab Thought: Edward Said as a Model*, p. 80.
3-Farid Bouchi, *Edward Said: The Radical Humanist at the Dawn of Postcolonial Thought*, Safahat for Studies, Publishing and Distribution, Damascus, 1st Edition, 2018, p. 96
4-Khadra Hamraoui, *Between Literary Discourse and Philosophical Discourse – A Study in Specificity*, Journal of the Faculty of Letters and Languages, Biskra, June 2017, p. 359.
5-Lounis Ben Ali, *Edward Said: From Critiquing the Discourse of Orientalism to Critiquing the Colonial Novel (How to Establish Critical Awareness) – A Critical Study*, Mim Publishing House, Algeria, 1st Edition, 2018.
6-Mohamed Jadidi, *Philosophy and Literature: Is Philosophy a Type of Literary Writing?*, Mu'minoun Bila Hudoud, May 25, 2016.
7-Yves Clavaron, *Edward Said: The Cultural Intifada*, Translated by: Mohamed Al-Jarti, Safahat for Studies, Publishing and Distribution, Damascus, 1st Edition, 2017, p. 110.