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Western Media Representations, Iran, and Orientalist Stereotypes

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The image of Iran is almost always negative in the western media. Whether it is the *BBC*, *CNN*, *The New York Times*, the *International Herald Tribune*, *Time Magazine*, or *Newsweek*, Iran is regularly described as a land of abnormalities. One could argue that their representations of the country are often stereotypical and at times even dishonest. The media recurrently constructs caricatures of the country, where a reality in the country is exaggerated by means of often preposterous distortion. When confronted by media representations of Iran, one is regularly reminded of orientalism and the debates surrounding its critique.

Orientalism describes the various schools of thought and methods of investigation through which Europe came to know 'the East.' According to scholars such as Edward Said, it was and still is through this discourse and its construction of knowledge that the West has been able to legitimize and maintain its hold over the uncivilized 'Other.' A major and repeated feature of Oriental analysis in all its various forms is that it constantly confirms the thesis that the Orient is primitive, mysterious, exotic, and incapable of self-government. However, orientalism should not be looked upon as just the rationalization of colonial rule. Far more important, it seems, is how it knowingly or unknowingly justifies imperialism and colonialism even in

advance of their actual manifestation.

Orientalism can be “viewed in Foucauldian terms as a discourse: a manifestation of power/knowledge.”¹ This is because, as Foucault sees it, discourse is a severely bounded area of social knowledge or “heavily policed cognitive systems which control and delimit both the mode and the means of representation in a given society.”² It is a series of statements, through which the world can be known, as it is not recognized by simply analyzing objective data. Its recognition is brought into being through discourse, which is ideologically loaded, but independent of individual will and judgment. According to Said, discourse is the system of thought by which dominant powers establish spheres of ‘knowledge’ and ‘truth’, and it is through such discursive practices that religions, races, cultures, and classes are represented. Discursive practices are interwoven with social and power relations, while history itself is indivisible from discursive formations.

The idea of representation is usually based upon a notion of being faithful to the original. However, representation is largely interwoven with many other things besides ‘truth’. It is defined not just by inherent common subject matter, but also by a common history, tradition, and universe of discourse that exists within a particular field.³ Representation is a phenomenon created by writers, intellectuals, artists, commentators, reporters, travelers, politicians, as well as others working within similar discursive formations.

This Foucauldian perspective permits Said to consider numerous ‘Western’ texts, from apparently separate intellectual disciplines such as politics, media, history, linguistics, and literature, among others, as belonging to a single discourse called Orientalism. What brings these texts together is the common culture and ideology intrinsic to the discursive practices through which they produce knowledge about the Orient. These discursive “practices make it difficult for individuals to think outside them – hence they are also seen as exercises of power and control”.⁴ However, it should be kept in mind that this does not mean that a discourse is either static or cannot admit internal contradictions.

It is often the case that orientalist modes of thought and representation are actually able to survive contact with the reality on the ground with which it often seems to be at odds with. One reason for this may be that the need for creating an overall consistency in discourse may constantly prevent the realization of objective analysis as well as commitment to ‘truth’. The stronger the discourse becomes the longer it lives, and the better it is able to bring about consistency within its borders. This is helped through the continued repetition and adaptation of its motifs. Another explanation for the persistent Orientalist mode of representation is Said’s concept of latent and manifest Orientalism. Manifest Orientalism is basically comprised of openly stated ideas about Eastern civilization, history, government, or literature produced at different historical junctures. Latent Orientalism, however, is an “almost unconscious and certainly an untouchable

positivity”⁵ that:

[...] contains the basic ‘truths’ of the Orient, so that while, for example historians might disagree about particular interpretations of the history of the Orient, underlying assumptions of oriental backwardness would remain unquestioned. As such latent Orientalism has strong affinities with certain concepts of ideology, particularly the ‘negative’ version of ideology as false consciousness, and the durability of ideological formations, especially when allied to strong institutions such as Orientalism, would also help to explain the survival of Orientalist attitudes.⁶

An important aspect of Said’s *Orientalism* is that it explains the methods through which ‘the Other’ was constructed by the West as its barbaric, irrational, despotic, and inferior opposite or alter ego. It is a type of surrogate and underground version of the West or the ‘self’.⁷ What may be even more significant is that through its position of domination, the West is even able to tell the ‘truth’ to non-Western cultures, in this case the Orient, about their past and present condition, as they are capable of representing the Orient more authentically than the Orient can itself. Such a ‘truthful’ representation not only aids the colonizer or imperialist in justifying their actions, but it also serves to weaken the resistance of ‘the Other’ as it changes the way in which ‘the Other’ views itself.

Many western experts, historians, reporters, and analysts may not necessarily construct an intentionally misleading or dishonest image of the

Other (though some do). Many may not even omit facts, which by doing so might lead readers or viewers to unacceptable conclusions (though many do). What often happens is that the truth is quickly mentioned and then the analyst focuses on other issues. In other words, facts are sometimes stated and then buried in a mass of other information, and at times misinformation. The issue at stake here is not about simplification or emphasis, which are both inevitable for reporters and experts alike.

The subsequent distortions are perhaps at times necessary in order for a wider audience to understand the topic under discussion. The form of distortion that is of concern here is an ideological one rather than a technical one, where intentionally or otherwise, any chosen emphasis effectively backs some kind of interest. The distortion may not be intentional, because the expert or analyst, whether western or a westernized oriental, has been trained under the illusion that knowledge and education are essentially neutral and are not tools that can be used for contending centers of power, nations, or races. Hence, by emphasizing certain elements and deemphasizing others (if they are at all presented), at times major crimes and even mass murder can be justified.

This can easily be seen in the discourse of the mainstream media in the 'West' regarding western support for Saddam Hussain's brutal regime as well as its use of weapons of mass destruction against Iranian and Iraqi civilians and combatants. The same can be said about the western media's relative silence and indifference towards the Zionist regime's barbaric siege

of the Gaza Strip. Such crimes against humanity are regularly accepted as appalling, yet somehow necessary in order to protect the interests of the so-called Free World.

The media's treatment of western governments, politicians, and other western or westernized figures of influence in comparison to that of their victims or antagonists, whether they are Iranian politicians, Afghani villagers, or hungry Palestinian children, is regularly influenced by 'national interests' and the interests of the 'free world'. In other words, the mainstream media takes for granted that western actions are a necessary evil to ward off a greater evil. Hence, history and the present is told from the point of view of western governments, conquerors, and diplomats, because they deserve universal acceptance in the face of the uncivilized Other. Regardless of the morality of such a Eurocentric approach to world affairs, scholars like Howard Zinn question its very meaningfulness:

The pretence is that there really is such a thing as "the United States," subject to occasional conflicts and quarrels, but fundamentally a community of people with common interests. It is as if there really is a "national interest" represented by the U.S. Constitution, in territorial expansion, in the laws passed by U.S. Congress, the decisions of the courts, the development of capitalism, the culture of education and the mass media... Nations are not communities and never have been. The history of any country, presented as the history of a family, conceals fierce conflicts of interest (sometimes exploding, most often repressed) between conquerors and conquered,

masters and slaves, capitalists and workers, dominators and dominated in race and sex. And in such a world of conflict, a world of victims and executioners, it is the job of thinking people, as Albert Camus suggested, not to be on the side of the executioner.⁸

The role that the media in a capitalist system plays in all of this has been discussed in detail by thinkers like Noam Chomsky in works such as *Manufacturing Consent* as well as *Necessary Illusions*. As Norman Fairclough states in *Language and Power*, “Mass-media discourse is interesting because the nature of the power relations enacted in it is often not clear, and there are reasons for seeing it as involving hidden relations of power”.⁹ Therefore, the problem does not lie with any particular media representation of an event, which can be resolved merely through an alternative representation. According to Fairclough:

The hidden power of media discourse and the capacity of the capitalist class and other power-holders to exercise this power depends on systematic tendencies in news reporting and other media activities. A single text on its own is quite insignificant: the effects of media power are cumulative, working through the repetition of particular ways of handling causality and agency, particular ways of positioning the reader, and so forth.¹⁰

Therefore, the objective of this article will be to show just a few examples of how the media is heavily involved in the process of indoctrination.

Again, in the words of Fairclough: “If one becomes aware that a particular aspect of common sense is sustaining power inequalities at one’s own expense, it ceases to *be* common sense, and may cease to have the capacity to sustain power inequalities, i.e. to function ideologically.”¹¹

In *The Economist* one can find numerous examples that would help one to better understand the mechanisms and practiced of indoctrination.

However, just two examples will be referred to here. The subtitle of the journal’s leading article (November 1st-7th 2008) on page 15 reads,

“America should take a chance and make Barack Obama the next leader of the free world”. This, of course, divides the world into two parts, one part that is free and another that is not. Regardless of questions surrounding freedom in the western world and how a single attack in the United States on September 11, 2001 has allowed the federal government to drastically curtail civil liberties for American citizens as well to legalize torture against those accused of being terror suspects, the statement reinforces the idea of the backward and inferior Other. Beyond that, the statement contains an irresolvable paradox in that on the one hand the free world is free, but on the other, the US president is its unelected leader.

In another article in the same issue on page 64 titled ‘A Puzzling Raid’ the American attack on Syrian territory is discussed. Here certain elements are emphasized and others deemphasized, the significance of aggression and the murder of civilians is played down and the attack is effectively justified. The story states that: The Syrian government said that eight civilians had

been killed, including a woman and three children. The Americans suggested that the target of the incursion was a leading al-Qaeda man but were reluctant to confirm whether he was dead or alive. Some reports said that at least one body had been airlifted out.

The first two sentences help make the article appear objective, as it seemingly keeps the same distance from both sides (The Syrians said...the Americans suggested). However, the second and third sentence combined, effectively confirm the idea that the Americans were after 'legitimate' targets. *The Economist* does this without giving a shred of evidence and through using phrases like "Some reports" the idea is reinforced. The reader is told that the nameless "Americans were reluctant to confirm" that the al-Qaeda member had been killed. This not only moves the reader closer to the conclusion that the Americans actually had a military target, but also that they may have actually found their supposed target. The clincher, however, is the mysterious "Some reports", because the reader is led to conclude that the Americans were looking for a specific target and that they had found it. By the end of the article, the murder of civilians and aggression against Syrian sovereignty is almost completely forgotten, when *The Economist*, uses more nameless sources and makes the extraordinary claim that:

Some Syria-watchers have surmised that the American attack was carried out with the complicity of the Syrian authorities, even though it was incumbent on them to complain after the event.

What has happened is that the piece, which initially raised a number of

disturbing questions, effectively neutralizes their effect by implying that the Syrians actually approve of American aggression against their territory.

Even in reports that are supposedly non-political, language is still very regularly used as a political tool. In an article in *Time* magazine (Vol. 172, No. 16, 2008) titled 'The Right Stuff. Breaking the gender barrier, women are taking the wheel of Iran's taxis', Mindy Kay Bricker begins the piece with the sentence: Parvaneh Soltani shifts her car into third gear near the notorious Evin Prison and descends from the dusty foothills of the Elburz Mountains into smog filled Tehran.

In reality what the apparently innocent article does first is to reinforce the highly misleading discourse of an oppressive Iran whose supposedly "notorious" prisons loom ominously alongside smog over the city's population. While the author writes about the increasing number of women taxi drivers who provide services specifically for women, she does not see this as a sign of 'progressiveness' despite the fact that the Iranian government has provided this job opportunity for women. Indeed, the author oddly implies that this job opportunity was actually provided in order to reinforce the role of women in the home.

The point is to enforce the segregation of the sexes and to promote the "moral" womanhood of upstanding mothers and wives. The irony is that this very segregation is allowing Tehran's female taxi drivers to achieve financial emancipation from men.

In other words, according to the author, the state intended to segregate the sexes, not to promote the morality of men and women, but to promote the morality of women. The article implies that in Iran women (not men) are seen as a threat to morality. In addition, what is even more extraordinary is the claim that by providing these new jobs for women, the government has unintentionally (or ironically) helped these women gain financial independence. According to this bizarre argument, the government actually provided these jobs in order to prevent women from gaining any form of financial independence.

When it comes to the Iranian nuclear program, however, the western media becomes even more explicitly one sided and antagonistic. In a disturbing article in the *USA Today* (September 14, 2008) titled 'U.S. arsenal is adding more bunker busters, Tom Vanden Brook effectively dehumanizes Iranians in order to help justify any act of aggression by the American regime against the country's sovereignty and its civilian population. In the article, he states that Iran's production of "enriched uranium, the key ingredient in nuclear weapons" in Natanz is part of a suspected program "to make weapons of mass destruction". The fact that the International Atomic Energy Agency has at no point made such a claim seems to be irrelevant. He then goes on to say that: The Pentagon's Defense Threat Reduction Agency, which leads efforts against weapons of mass destruction, has almost doubled its spending on research into how to counter such weapons...

This sentence is interesting, because it directs the reader to the idea that the United States is sincerely trying to reduce or even eradicate a specific threat to the well being of all human beings. The fact that they carry out “research” implies scientific objectivity and honesty and their “efforts against weapons of mass destruction” remind the reader of efforts to eradicate Polio or Malaria. It is understandable if the reader forgets that the United States has the world’s largest stockpile of WMDs, that Israel the world’s only remaining apartheid state and its key ally in the Middle East has such weapons, and that the United States just a few years ago helped Saddam Hussein acquire and use WMDs against Iranian and Iraqi civilians.

In any case, the story leaves the impression that through objective and honest research one can conclude that Iran’s nuclear program is a threat. This allows Brook to end his article with two sentences that one would expect would create outrage and disgust among ordinary American readers (apparently there was none). After explaining Angel Fire technology and how the American military could use it, he states: That would allow them to target workers when they are congregated in one spot, such as a housing complex. Killing those workers could set back their program for years.

According to *USA Today*, the intentional murder of hundreds if not thousands of innocent Iranian civilians in housing complexes is legitimate and can be a central objective of US military planning. Presumably, this is not a problem in the eyes of most American readers, otherwise there would have been a strong response to such a barbaric view of the ‘Other’. Through

effectively presenting Iran as a global threat that is comparable to a dangerous disease, Brook has helped prepare public opinion with a justification for mass murder.

The Iranian nuclear program is one example where all mainstream British and American news outlets report an issue almost identically. On September 12, 2008 *Reuters* released a piece by Mark Heinrich with the title 'IAEA probe stalls, Iran slowly boosts atom enrichment'. Regardless of the generally biased nature of the report, one sentence in the story is particularly interesting as it is repeated almost word for word in many other news reports.

Iran says it is enriching uranium not to yield atom bomb fuel, as Western powers suspect, but only to run nuclear power stations...

The two key words are "says" and "suspect", which are sometimes replaced by "states" or "claims" for the Iranian side and "concern" and "fear" on the western side. In such sentences the balance is definitely tilted in favor of the Europeans and Americans. In contrast to Iran's statements or claims, which cannot be judged or verified according to such reports, western government officials who "suspect" or are "concerned" are depicted as sincere. Western powers and politicians are presented as genuine in their distrust towards the Iranians and their intentions and as a result the reader is much more likely to accept the western account of the conflict. A similar sentence can be seen in a provocative *New York Times* piece (November 20, 2008) with a very misleading title 'Iran said to have

Nuclear Fuel for one weapon'. Here again one reads: Iran insists that it wants only to fuel reactors for nuclear power. But many Western nations, led by the United States, suspect that its real goal is to gain the ability to make nuclear weapons.

These stories do not dwell at all on Iranian "suspicions" or "concerns" about the American or Israeli fabrication of intelligence, such as the dubious American claim that the CIA has acquired an Iranian laptop computer which contains secret documents linked to an Iranian nuclear weapons program. According to Scott Ritter a former US military intelligence officer and UN weapons inspector who questions the sources of the computer the CIA and the MEK (an anti Iranian terrorist organization) as well as its veracity:

Give it [the computer] the UNSCOM treatment. Assemble a team of CIA, FBI and Defense Department forensic computer analysts and probe the computer, byte by byte. Construct a chronological record of how and when the data on the computer were assembled. Check the logic of the "data", making sure everything fits together in a manner consistent with the computer's stated function and use. Tell us when the computer was turned on and logged into and how it was used. Then, with this complex usage template constructed, overlay the various themes which have been derived from the computer's contents, pertaining to projects, studies and other activities of interest. One should be able to rapidly ascertain whether or not the computer is truly a key piece of intelligence pertaining to Iran's nuclear programs.

The fact that this computer is acknowledged as coming from the MEK and the fact that a proper forensic investigation would probably demonstrate the fabricated nature of the data contained are why the U.S. government will never agree to such an investigation being done.¹²

From the Iranian perspective, western intentions are suspect to say the least. However, as the media is Eurocentric the Iranians like almost all other non-western countries, which have legitimate grievances against oppressive western powers, are antagonized by the western media. The titles of various news reports are themselves quite revealing. ‘Iran pushed for nuclear answers’ (*BBC News*, September 22, 2008), ‘IAEA shows photos alleging Iran nuclear missile work’ (*Reuters*, September 17, 2008), ‘EU warns Iran close to nuclear arms capacity’ (*Associated Press*, September 24, 2008), and ‘Iran tests precision missile able to reach Europe’ (*Associated Press*, November 12, 2008)...are just a few such headlines.

In an *Associated Press* report (September 24) the reader learns that while “Iran insists its atomic activities are peaceful”, the European Union has “warned” that the country is “nearing the ability to arm a nuclear warhead”. In fact, the article goes even further than Israeli, EU, and American claims: Israel says the Islamic Republic could have enough nuclear material to make its first bomb within a year. The U.S. estimates Iran is at least two years away from that stage, and some experts say the country could reach that stage in as little as 6 months through uranium

enrichment.

The claims made by unnamed “experts” are reinforced by a series of explanations from the head of the “Washington-based Institute for Science and International Security” that increase “fears” about Iran. Significantly, according to the *Associated Press* report, this Institute “closely tracks suspect nuclear proliferators”. Hence, like the November 20 New York Times piece the story is completely one sided, as it merely reinforces the position of the American government as well as the dominant discursive practices in western countries regarding Iran as a threat to peace and security.

Apparently, Iran cannot be trusted even when it states that it has captured an Iranian national that had spied for Israel. After his trial and execution, the *BBC* (November 22, 2008) uses the headline ‘Israel spy’ put to death in Iran’. In other words, the *BBC* uses scare quotes to express doubt about Iran’s counterintelligence capability or its honesty in reporting such an event.

One of the problems of having a sensible discussion about relations between the ‘West’ and Iran, as well as developments inside the country, is that western journalism is far from sensible. Iranian society is regularly depicted as abnormal and irrational, which itself helps reinforce the claim that Iran is a threat that cannot be dealt with through dialogue and reason. Recently, for example, Hugh Sykes of the *BBC* offered the report ‘Iranian women battle the system’ (*BBC News* September 5, 2008). Amidst the

misleading statements he makes, which makes the report look like a propaganda piece, one is particularly notable. Not only is it completely untrue, but Sykes tries to convert that falsehood into a “fact” accepted throughout Iran. This is Sykes’ text:

There is little protection against so-called ‘honour killings’ for women who are raped; a husband - or a father – who kills the rape victim may face only a short jail sentence.

“This is inhuman,” a law professor at Teheran University, Rosa Gharachorloo, told me.

Most of the people I have spoken to here agree: they believe rape victims should be comforted, not killed.

First, the University of Tehran does not have a law professor whose name is Rosa Gharachorloo. More important, however, is the fact that everyone, not *almost* everyone, that I know believes rape victims should be comforted, not killed and that is why such an ‘honour killings’ culture does not exist in Iran. Indeed, those who commit such a crime in Iran can expect to face capital punishment, while their victims can expect state support. Unfortunately, for Sykes, there is no known law in Iran that allows leniency for the murder of rape victims.

Hence, it is no wonder to see how in the often upside down world of the western media, one can read the *BBC* headline ‘Israel agrees to free two killers’ (BBC NEWS, August 18, 2008). While the Israeli armed forces

carry our regular attacks on Palestinian and Lebanese civilian and military targets alike, killing thousands of people as a result, Muhammad Abu Ali who killed an Israeli army reservist and was jailed for 28 years is labeled a killer by the *BBC*. The *BBC* does not view the Israeli regime's daily acts of terror through air strikes, assassinations, torture, the long term imprisonment of women and children, the imposition of hunger through the siege of civilian populations, and the indiscriminate use of weapons like cluster bombs, as terrorism. However, if a Palestinian kills an Israeli soldier he is a murderer.

Hence, it seems clear that policy making and media circles in many Western countries regularly demonstrate belligerent hostility and manufacture exaggerated stereotypes, which even critics of Orientalism, such as Edward Said and Noam Chomsky, sometimes fail to recognize. This dominant strategy of discourse and power does not merely produce 'West' or 'East', rather 'the Other' becomes the millions of people whose lives are not only reduced to caricatures and prejudices through this approach, but are often destroyed as a result. While there are certainly issues of politics, class, ethnicity, and gender within the 'East' (like the 'West') as well as between 'East' and 'West', these issues are rarely objectively considered and are regularly distorted by media presentations in both the past and present. This phenomenon dominates discursive practices relating to the Muslim East and is something that must be addressed by critics with a sense of urgency. It seems that in order to bring about a more balanced and

judicious atmosphere for a comprehensive and productive dialogue among civilizations and nations, these issues must be dealt with.

Endnotes

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