

Notes on the English Character by E.M. Forster: A Critical Perspective

by

Muqaddas Inayat,

Lecturer English, NUML, Islamabad.

E mail: muqaddasinayat@yahoo.com

Abstract

The Occident and the Orient are not new terms used to differentiate the perfect West and the imperfect East. In fact, the world is divided on such a yard stick that it does not need terms to identify the differences rather it has become so obvious that everybody knows the powerful and the powerless. The story of superior and inferior is prevalent in every society but it has divided the world into two halves as well. Many studies have done before to drag out the true picture, that not only show Western supremacy but Eastern inferiority too, that is portrayed falsely in front of the world. This study is carried out to work on the same paradigm but with a new angle. For this reason, Edward Said theories about the Orient and the Occident, and contrapuntal reading is used as a theoretical framework to look at how E.M. Forster has depicted Western and Eastern identity in order to justify the supremacy of Western character. The result shows that Forster has tried to kill two birds with one stone. On one hand he is justifying the Western character and on the other hand he is taking examples from East to draw the picture of developed West and undeveloped East. In a nut shell, the findings reveal that the essay is written to white wash the negative stereotypes about the West and to show the East fit for those stereotypes because they are weak and need a lot of hard work to come in front of the world.

Keywords: Orientalism, Occidentalism, Identity Crisis, Binary Oppositions

Introduction:

Everywhere in the world we have seen divisions, the world itself is divided into two halves the Occident and the Orient. The Occident refers to West and the Orient refers to East. This division has not only divided the territories but hearts as well. Many techniques have been used to achieve this purpose. Before 1970, Orient was misportrayed in books, dramas or journals but after 1970 when America had a direct connect with Orient so they started using T.V, media, news, drama, film and cartoons to create a division between Orient and Occident. Print media and the electronic media are the clear examples in front of us. The concept of us/ them flourishes right after the colonization. Colonizers come to some country, destroy the self-esteem of natives and through representation they make themselves superior and others inferior. Columbus journals (a good representation of a territory), Heart of Darkness (ugly representation), A Passage to India are the best examples that show how West has divided the world by portraying the mental picture of a colonized culture, by creating binary oppositions and by doing all this they make them inferior. They make them feel that they are inferior and they belong to III world. It is called identity crisis feeling yourself strong and others week. Text is a very easy way to control the distant territories. It is seen in their writings that they feel it a white man's burden to civilize the uncivilized. By religious theories they have proved that they are superior. While talking about Africans they say that they are in the process of evolution,

the only way to teach them is through punishment. They are incapable of governing themselves and Europeans go there to help them so they should be grateful to them.

Many scholars have worked a lot to present the true reality. One of them is Edward Said who gave the idea of contrapuntal reading and he was the one who started analysing the texts differently. In Orientalism, he defines the term as “I shall be calling Orientation a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient’s special place in European Western experience. The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe’s greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience. Yet none of this Orient is merely imaginative. The Orient is an integral of European material civilization and culture. Orientalism expresses and represents that part culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles”(Said ,1977,p.1&2).

The purpose of creating binary oppositions is just to show the concept of superior and inferior. In their books they have misportrayed the colonized people. Narrative is one of the best examples to create the division of us/them. This paper would analyse a clear depiction of dividing West and East in E.M. Forster’s essay “Notes on the English Characters”. In his essay, he has used one stone to kill two birds, one to make themselves perfect or developed and to make the Orient as weak or undeveloped.

Statement of Problem:

The research is designed to critically analyse E.M. Forster’s essay “Notes on the English character”, how has he depicted Western and Eastern identity in order to justify the supremacy of Western character?

Research Questions:

1. How E.M. Forster has established the Western identity in his essay “Notes on the English character”.
2. How has he used various examples that are helpful in establishing his point of view?

Research Objectives:

1. To determine the making of Western identity in E.M. Forster’s essay “Notes on the English character”.
2. To analyse various examples that helped him in establishing his point of view.

Significance of the study:

Many researches have done many researches that focused on the binary oppositions or the division of East and West. This study is new in a sense that the researcher has keenly observed the essay and found that Forster has used a new strategy in creating the binary opposition. He has killed two birds with one stone. He gives the justification of English character and in making them exemplary he uses various examples from the East. So, side by side he makes West as perfect or flawless and on the other hand, East as undeveloped that needs a lot of hard work to come in front of them.

Delimitation of the study:

A lot of work has already been done on many novels, advertisements, journals. So, the researcher has delimited his study by focusing on the essay and critically analysed it from a new perspective.

Literature Review:

A lot of work has been carried out by the scholars and some are still working to highlight the issues regarding identity crisis with the help of which West has created binary oppositions. Edward Said is one of them who worked a lot to focus on the contrapuntal reading that gives us a vision to drag the hidden motifs from the narratives. The main agenda of creating stereotypes in the narratives is to present a false conscious about a new state. Let's suppose Bangladeshi do not know us, so when people read about an unknown country they would make images of that country with the help of that reading. People would start seeing the world according to author's point of view. Home K Bhaba, Chinua Achebe and Derek Walcott are the examples in front us that worked a lot to show the real picture of their society. They answered back and did not white wash any negative point. So this paper would follow Edward Said concepts of contrapuntal reading and the division of East and West into Orient and Occident that will help us look at how Forster in his essay "Notes on English Character" shows the West as superior and East as inferior.

Edward Said is not a new name for us, in his books he pointed out the detailed analysis of why they have created such binary oppositions. Many researchers have already followed his points to support their research because with the help of his points, the researcher starts reading between the lines and easily drags out the hidden agendas.

Said in his book Covering Islam writes "The general basis of Orientalist thought is an imaginative and yet drastically polarized geography dividing the world into two unequal parts, the larger, 'different' one called the Orient, the other, also known as 'our' world, called the Occident or the West. Such divisions always come about when one society or culture thinks about another one, different from it; but it is interesting that even when the Orient has uniformly been considered an inferior part of the world, it has always been endowed both with greater size and with a greater potential for power (usually destructive) than the West" (Said, 2008, p. 4).

Yoko Harada carried out a research "Floating Between the Orient and the Occident: Japan, Australia and their inferiority complex" in 2009. The research was carried out "to find the reason Why Japan and Australia, which are generally believed to be very different countries, appear similarly ambiguous in the context of Asia"(Harada,2009,p.273).The results of his research showed that "Japan and Australia are both caught in an ambiguous situation. They have not been freed from colonial beliefs and rhetoric. This situation is reflected in the international arena, particularly in relation to their behaviour towards Asia. They are yet to perceive Asian countries as their equal partners and they are continually having trouble creating relationships that are free of friction. This is a product of Japan's and Australia's arrogance toward countries in the region. In order to create an equal and serene relationship with neighbouring Asian countries, it is necessary for the two countries to 'decolonise' themselves and search for a new rhetoric in understanding the world" (Harada, 2009, p. 276).

On the basis of his findings, he suggested that these two countries should "decolonize" themselves and should come out of their inferiority complexes. If they accept their position in the present situation, they would remove their complexes and can easily move to establish a respectable position.

In 2014 Bharatender Sheoran, a scholar from Maharshi Dayanand University Rohtak, carried out a research "A dilemma of Caribbean Populace: Post-Colonial conflicts and Identity crisis in Derek Walcott's Plays." The aim of the study was to focus on the identity crisis faced by West Indian in postcolonial era specifically in Derek Walcott plays. With the help of his

plays, the researcher has successfully shown that Walcott does talk about stereotyped Afro images presented in front of the world. Africans are marginalized and treated as others or weak. In his plays there is a detailed focus on the false conscious created against these Africans. Identity crisis are not restricted to one nation like East and West rather it is present everywhere. The one who is superior or having the power starts ruling and uses his power.

Louis Kriesberg in 2003 writes in his essay " 'Us' versus 'Them' " that " Israelis and Palestinians, India and Pakistan, governments and insurgents, Protestants and Catholics, whites and blacks, labour and management...these are all examples of *identities* that have at some times and some places resulted in intractable conflicts. For an inter-group (e.g., racial, ethnic, or religious) conflict to occur, the opponents must have a sense of collective identity about themselves and about their adversary, each side believing the fight is between "us" and "them." Some of those conflicts become intractable, persisting destructively for a very long time, despite efforts to resolve them. In some such conflicts the antagonists seem to be fighting each other about the identities that they hold about themselves and those they attribute to the other side. Such conflicts are sometimes called identity-based conflicts and regarded as particularly prone to becoming intractable" (Kriesberg, 2003).

Georges Corm in 2007 writes an article "The West versus the Arab world: Deconstructing the divide". In this article he highlighted the main factor that is responsible of the divide of Arab world and the West. For him the division did not happen because of cultural or religious differences between the two worlds rather it emerged because of historical traumas faced by these two worlds. He accused media that was responsible of making this division strong. In the conclusion he writes "There will be no way to reduce the divide between the West and the Arab East without media restraint in coverage of Middle Eastern and Arab affairs and without a much needed diversification of academic research to analyse the complexities of Arab societies and report the lively debate taking place in the intellectual and political circles of these societies. There should also be more awareness that the American geo-political agenda should not become the agenda for dialogue between the two parties. Rather, such an agenda should discuss the real issues that we have attempted to identify here as a basis for reducing tensions. Only by so doing may we attain a better understanding of what really divides East and West and set aside inadequate anthropological and religious conceptualizations that are of little help for conflict resolution in our time" (Corm, 2007, pg. 210-220).

Mouloud Siber in 2012 writes a research paper "Rudyard Kipling, Edward Morgan, William Somerset Maugham and Joseph Conrad: The British Imperial Tradition and the Individual Talent". In his research paper he deeply studied the works of these four writers in the light of Edward Said orientalism that helped him in studying their point of views. For all these four writers only the Westerns are the civilized one. They are the torch bearers and responsibility lies on them to civilize the uncivilized. In their writings they portrayed native as poor, weak and blood thirsty mobs etc. After the analyses of his research he writes "the extrapolation has made the Orient look like the 'New Poorhouses' wherein the 'lazy' natives are put back at work; it also looks like an asylum where mad people, the native, need to be interned; it looks like a school in open air wherein the natives must be educated in order to grow civilised and so on. Just like marginal at home, the Orientals abroad need to be studied in order to be better controlled...Each of the four writers has foregrounded, in his own manner, the disempowerment of the Orientals, a disempowerment legitimated on the grounds of despotic nature of Oriental rulers and the lack of a rational traditional exercise of power in the Orient" (Siber, 2012, pg. 350).

Methodology:

This research paper is carried out to analyse the binary oppositions made by E.M. Forster in his essay "Notes on the English Character". The concept of contrapuntal reading and

the division of East and West by Edward Said is used as a theoretical framework to read between the lines. This research is based on pure qualitative analysis as it deals with the text not with the numeral data.

Data collection and Analyses:

“Notes on the English Character”, an essay, written by E.M. Forster. He is a simple writer as compared to others. He visited India in 1927 (pre-partition). By writing this essay he tried to present why English people are misrepresented in the world. For this reason his essay includes certain notes in which he has drawn a comparison between English man and an Indian man. When we read the whole essay it becomes evident that this essay gives a clear distinction of powerful and powerless, superior and inferior, Occident and Orient etc. In short, this essays revolves around the issue of identity. Let’s find the binary oppositions created by Forster in his notes.

His first note says “the character of the English is essentially middle class” (Forster, 1926, pg. 1) because they ruled the state (England) for one hundred and fifty years. For him the basic character of English people is middle people who got power after Industrial Revolution and 1832 Reform Bill. 17th and 18th centuries are crucial centuries because middle class got empowerment. It was Industrial Revolution who gave them power, wealth and political independence. Literature was written for them. “Solidity, caution, integrity, efficiency, lack of imagination, hypocrisy” (Forster, 1926, pg. 1), these terms define truly the middle class. All these words used by Forster show that they think themselves like that, in short they represent that they are as pure as crystal and as strong as a horse.

It is common for the English people that they have cold heart because they do not have feelings as they do not feel other’s pain. This concept is made clear by Forster who explains in his second note that they have “an undeveloped heart—not a cold one” (Forster, 1926, pg. 2). He gives the justification by saying that they have well developed body, fairly developed minds but they are not cold/cruel rather have undeveloped heart. He explains that English man is strong enough to control his emotions. They have learnt from their public school that “feeling is bad form”. In his second note, he compared an English man with an Indian, an Oriental and Occidental view is presented. He explained that people misunderstand English people because they do not have the habit of showing emotions. They are not like Indians who do not calculate things rather do what they feel like doing. He writes “For it is not that the English can’t feel—it is that he is afraid to feel. He has been taught at his public school that feeling is bad form. He must not express great joy or sorrow, or even open his mouth too wide when he talks—his pipe might fall out if he did. He must bottle up his emotions or let them out only on a very special occasion” (Forster, 1926, pg. 2). He explains that English people also value emotions but use them in a different way. For him Orientals think that their emotions are endless and use them inappropriately. When he gives the justification about their “cold heart”, he clarifies that English people think about the consequence that is why they are not emotional. They show emotions but on special occasions not always like Indian. So, we can say that the whole note depicts that Forster has made the division of us/them. He has exaggerated the true feelings of Indians by pointing out that they do not think before doing anything so they have undeveloped minds. On the other hand, English people plan for their future. Here we find that Forster is obsessed with the identity of English man. Hence exaggerating it in his note quite obviously.

The next note talks about “the slowness of English character” (Forster, 1926, pg. 3). Just because his obsession with the identity he again finds a way to highlight the same idea. In his note he writes “the English man appears to be cold and unemotional because he is really slow. When an event happens, they may understand it quickly enough with his mind, but he takes quite a while to feel it” (Forster, 1926, pg. 3). The writer gives emphasis about the character of English man that they understand the situation quickly but take a little to feel and

do not react immediately rather they try to make the solution instead of wasting time in their feeling. They move towards intellectual side instead of emotional. When a disaster comes, they start planning or calculating it and postpone the feelings as long as possible. That is why they are splendid in emergency situation. They are brave also as they can control their emotions or nerves and take a practical decision. The whole note again shows how he is giving justifications about the English character by making them perfect in every field of life.

People condemned them that they have cold heart. The writer tries to deny this fact and argues that if they are cold, how they have been able to create great Romantic poetry. So, it is a misconception about them, in reality they are very poetical.

It is very famous about East that it is mysterious because of its different cultures, religions and languages, so he presents another character of West by saying that “People talk of the mysterious East, but the West also is mysterious” (Forster, 1926, pg. 4). It is not easy to understand English people. They appear to be simple but are very complicated/ mysterious. Their character is just like “sea” (a metaphor used for the character of English people). He writes that “the English nature is not at all easy to understand...That sea is the English character--apparently imperturbable and even. These depths and the colours are the English romanticism and the English sensitiveness—we do not expect to find such things, but they exist. And -- to continue my metaphor--the fish are the English emotions, which are always trying to get up to the surface, but don't quite know how” (Forster, 1926, pg. 4). With the help of this metaphor, Forster tries to assert that fish are the English emotions, which try to get up but do not know how. On the other hand, English literature (flying fish) is beautiful because it succeeds to come out.

In the next note the writer talks about the “The English attitude towards criticism” (Forster, 1926, pg.4). He posits that English man is annoyed by the criticism rather whenever someone criticizes them, they control their nerves and listen to them. They think that things are always right, self-satisfied and this can cause problem. Here he criticizes Orientals by saying that they think too much about the criticism and doubt their abilities that they are not perfect. At times they get angry but later on they take it on their heart and sometimes improve themselves. Again we find a clear division of Orient and Occident. The writer side by side is criticizing East and trying to give sound justifications about their character.

His next note again is a justification. He raises a point that people think about West as materialistic and East as spiritual. He denies it and claims a misunderstanding regarding the nature of English man. He writes “The West also is spiritual. Only it expresses its belief, not in fasting and visions, not in prophetic rapture, but in the daily round, the common task” (Forster, 1926, pg. 5). He criticizes East by saying that for East religion is fast, believing in books not practising it in their routine life. On the other hand, West practices religion in their day to day life. He argues that if we do not have prophet, it does not mean that we do not have rich history like Arabs rather we are spiritual as well because we practise things in our daily life. West is “not a cold or an unspiritual one. But undeveloped, incomplete” (Forster, 1926, pg.6). Again a division line is seen between spiritual East and materialistic West.

The last note by Forster talks about the concept of hypocrisy. About Occident people think that we have gun in our pocket and in front we brutal and have white man's burden. He gives a rationale behind the story of hypocrisy that if hypocrisy is deceiving someone then we do not consciously or independently do harm with others rather we are confused. In our heart we have good intentions, we want to make them good human beings that is why we teach them.

In all these notes Forster tries to give a justification about the character of English people and side by side criticizing the East as well.

Findings and Conclusion:

All these notes written by Forster actually are an attempt to justify the charges that are about West but the important point is that there is a hidden point that made him to answer all these charges. He wants people to come and understand them because they are famous as brutal masters who do not care others. He cleverly takes all these examples that they are famous as unspiritual, cold-hearted, materialistic, hypocrite, do not care about criticism etc. The hidden motif behind these notes is to draw a clear line of distinction about East and West because in clarifying his notes he gives different examples and use metaphors that show a comparison between the Occident and the Orient. In every point he makes his identity clear that we are perfect in every sphere of life and cleverly criticizes East in every point. If we think keenly about Said's contrapuntal reading, we find it as another strategy used by Forster. A strategy in which the writer kills two birds with one stone. The first point is to manifest the perfect and flawless character of English people as there are some famous misconceptions about them. The second point is to construct a line of division which exhibits that East and West are the two different worlds, one is perfect (i.e. West) and the other is weak and inferior, still working hard (i.e. East). Hence we can say that Westerners have this agenda, to make the East inferior and it is also reflected in their writings as well. Forster is not new in this field, there are many who worked and who are still working. There are still other rooms for the new researcher to work on binary oppositions or the division of East and West like *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding, Columbus journals, different T.V advertisements, essays and Naipaul's travelogues, etc.

References:

- Corm, G. (2007). *The West Versus the Arab World: Deconstructing the Divide*. In H. K. Anheier, & Y. R. Isar, *Cultures and Globalization: Conflicts and Tensions* (pp. 210-220). London: Sage.
- Harada, Y. (2009). *Floating Between the Orient and the Occident: Japan, Australia and their inferiority complex*.
- Kriesberg, Louis. "Identity Issues." *Beyond Intractability*. Eds. Guy Burgess and Heidi Burgess. Conflict Information Consortium, University of Colorado, Boulder. Posted: July 2003 <<http://www.beyondintractability.org/essay/identity-issues>>.
- Said, E. W. (2008). *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (Fully Revised Edition) (revised ed.). Random House.
- Sheoran, B. (2014, February). A dilemma of Caribbean Populace: Post-Colonial conflicts and Identity crisis in Derek Walcott's Plays. *International Journal of English Language, Literature and Humanities*, 1(v), 1-7.
- Siber, M. (2012, October). Rudyard Kipling, Edward Morgan, William Somerset Maugham and Joseph Conrad: The British Imperial Tradition and the Individual Talent.
- W., S. E. (1977). *Orientalism*. New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.