CHAPTER 8

Let the Oriental Perform: A Critical Approach to Neo-Orientalism at Work in Turkish Politics

Merve Kavakci

Statement of the Problem

The community of knowers who hold power in creating, shaping, and disseminating the information to do so in their own perspective, construing realities in particular ways to serve their own goal(s) divulging what is deemed important, undermining what is rendered trivial, unimportant, or worthy of dismissal. This, at the end, serves to create a reality different than that of the ‘factual’ or real. This chapter attempts to depict the ways through which Turkish political agency, at times, was represented by parameters accounted for the closest to the reality, if not by the ‘reality’ itself by the American academics, while at other times was misrepresented, hence rendered misinforming, based on its particularities, demarcated space, and time. The criterion that entailed a change within itself was a nebulous one, predicated upon the changes in day-to-day politics of all parties involved. This shift speaks to the vulnerability of the process of production of knowledge and the neo-Orientalist nature thereof.

Theoretical Perspective

Orientalism reads the world from the verge of Occidental and Oriental divide. The Orientalist, who is a member of the Occident (West), dwells into a research about the Orient (East) and its belongings. According to the Orientalist literature, the value attributed to the process of production of knowledge is intrinsic and pertinent to the Occidental community of knowers. That is to say, knowledge becomes of value if and when it is procured by agencies that represent a particular racial, ethnic, cultural, and sociopolitical stature. This process was engrained to be legitimized, starting with the European expedition that gave way to the colonial experience. With that, the dichotomized binaries of the two enterprises, namely Occidental and Oriental, entailed a hegemonic contextualization in oppositional standing with no room for scrutiny (Cox, 1992). The tumultuous pertinence between the West and the East or the North
and the South was set off right then (Spivak, 1999). Here, the departure point in knowledge production processes was justified by racially white, culturally secular, ethnically European, predominantly male demography. As a result of a discursive process carried out by this group across the globe, the normative, invariably ascribed to the Occidental “self,” was posited against the concocted reality of the “other” (Bhabha, 2004, p. 29). The former held ontological superiority over the latter, hence positioned itself equipped with certain systems of representation that divulged the hierarchy of power in every facet of life as opposed to the disadvantage of the latter (Said, 1978). This included a chasmic distinction between intellectual capacities as well, where the latter was subordinate to the former (Said, 1978). Biological incapacitation is no exception either, which in turn helps the process of de-humanization of the latter (Fanon, 2004). In this context, the Oriental ‘other’ carried generic particularities shared by all affiliated inhabitants of the assigned demographic demarcations (Said, 1978). The generalized ‘one’ transformed itself into uncontested man-made realities that serve as leverage for creating the quasi-facts of the former (Foucault, 1970). Parochial observations, rumination undertaken by the former, limited by personal attributions and ascribing processes, at the end of a repetitious continuum, are treated as unadulterated factuality deemed the absolute truth. The subjectivities defined by the Orientalist purport to concrete embodiments of the Orient not open to discussion.

Rooted in Marxist theory, postcolonialism argues that the Oriental, at a distance, becomes the subject matter under investigation only to be discerned, unpacked, deconstructed, and reconstructed anew in tandem, ready to perform for the disposal of the Orientalist. Here the former is made to speak (Spivak, 1998). The inequitable nature of the relationship between the two refers to the hierarchical structure of power that exudes in quotidian human activities shaping them time and again (Young, 2001). Among these is also the production of knowledge. The community of knowers in the Occident articulates the Oriental human agency and beyond thus the ‘other’ in the way he or she finds it fit. Needless to say, the monopoly over the production processes of knowledge renders the former the only viable source and disseminator of information entailing the close net relationship between knowledge and power (Said, 1978). Inextricable from all aspects of human experience, hegemonic stance over knowledge enterprise enables the Occidental community of knowers to shape the pertinent discourses ubiquitously from politics, culture, or economics to societal and theological sphere. Perceptions and perspectives that would serve the benefit of the Occident are prioritized through the hand of the Orientalist. Manipulating the vicissitudes on the Oriental ground, twisting the realities by divulging certain parts while concealing others, puts the circular motion of