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Meyda Yegenoglu

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Introduction

This book explores the discursive dynamics that secure a sovereign subject status for the West. It is about the cultural representation of the West to *itself* by way of a detour through the other. With the proliferation of post-colonial studies, we are witnessing a number of studies investigating the operating principles of Orientalism. Moreover, studies that explicate the articulation of gender with Orientalism are also flourishing. Part of the reason that motivates me to write this book is to provide an analysis of Orientalism that does not relegate the question of sexual difference to a sub-field in the analysis of colonial discourse and this study focuses on the unique articulation of sexual and cultural difference as they are produced and signified in the discourse of Orientalism. I have found that investigations into the question of gender in Orientalism often fall short in recognizing how representations of cultural and sexual difference are constitutive of each other and thus risk reproducing the categorical distinction between the two that feminist theory attempts to combat. With a few exceptions, questions of sexual difference in the discourse of Orientalism are either ignored or, if recognized, understood as an issue which belongs to a different field, namely gender or feminist studies. My decision to explore this question came with an awareness that the critiques of Orientalism and colonial discourse manifest a persistent reluctance to examine the unique nature of the articulation of cultural and sexual difference in the case of Orientalism. Hence the writing of this book grew out of a concern that the gendered categories of Orientalism warrant a more complicated analysis than what is available; it requires a reformulation of the nature of Orientalist discourse itself. By intervening in such debates, my aim is to call into question the usefulness of simply adding the gender “variable” to the accounts of Orientalism. It is the contention of this book that if we are to engage the complex significations that constitute

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Orientalism we need to examine closely how the discursive constitution of Otherness is achieved simultaneously through sexual as well as cultural modes of differentiation. A more sexualized reading of Orientalism reveals that representations of sexual difference cannot be treated as its sub-domain; it is of fundamental importance in the formation of a colonial subject position.

Understanding the sexualized nature of Orientalism requires an examination of its unconscious structure. It has been demonstrated time and again that colonialism was and is an economic as well as a political and cultural phenomenon. That colonialism is also structured by unconscious processes, however, is rarely discussed. In addressing the question of sexual difference, it needs to be recognized that fantasy and desire, as unconscious processes, play a fundamental role in the colonial relation that is established with the colonized. In introducing the concepts of fantasy and desire I am fully aware of the risk of psychologizing structural processes by reducing them to individual psychological motivations. I use these concepts to refer to a historically specific construction and to a collective process. In other words, by colonial or Orientalist fantasy I refer not to biologically or psychologically innate individual characteristics, but to a set of discursive effects that constitute the subject.

This book engages with otherness but it is not an ethnography of the other. Although the necessity of recognizing the self's indebtedness to the other and the need to establish a non-dominating relation with the other are always in between the lines of this study, I remain convinced that such a relation can be established only when the hegemonic position of the Western subject is deconstructed. Therefore, an inquiry into Orientalism cannot afford to ignore the constitution of the Western subject. As I am aware of the metaphysical, ontological, and essentialist connotations of the term "Western subject," I feel the need to make some cautionary remarks about the way in which I use the term in this book.

The Western subject should not be thought of as an essence. There are many lines of fractures, rifts, discontinuities, and divisions that crisscross the Western subject. The use of such a term carries the risk of disregarding its diversity and the variety of class, gendered, national, ethnic, and other differences that permeate and impregnate it. It is true that there has never been *one* Western subject; it covers a great variety of differences. The process of *becoming-a-Western-subject* is not a process that simply homogenizes and makes uniform but that also *differentiates*. Hence it implies neither an essential unity nor homogeneity. This subject is working class, English, female, male, French, upper class and so on. The intricate processes at work that influence this differentiation require a sophisticated

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analysis beyond the scope and aim of this book. Although the word covers a great variety of other determinants, the traces and effects of the location I call “Western” nevertheless wait to be accounted for. Despite the difficulties in attributing unity to this subject (as the differentiations are great and there are contradictory, discordant, and disharmonious positions), it is nevertheless not easy to claim that there is no validity or justified ground in the usage of such a term. The task that awaits us is to affirm the validity of the term “Western subject” while at the same time complicating and revisiting the modernist, humanist, and metaphysical bind in which such a term is caught up; we should be wary of the risk of “re-introducing precisely what is in question.”¹ Should I be using the term Western subject without problematizing this humanist bind, I would be betraying the whole mission upon which this book is based. The critique of the fundamental categories of humanism and metaphysics is of central importance for post-colonial criticism as these categories (especially the illusory self-certainty and the Western bind apparent in Enlightenment notions of the human and the individual) are constitutive of Western modernity and colonialism. Thus, my use of the term does not imply returning to the humanist notion of subjectivity or assuming it is present to itself. On the contrary, a critique of the Western subject implies critiquing its self-certainty, authority, and value. Such a critique, in other words, relies on deconstructing the very metaphysical gesture upon which it is based, yet it is far from indicating the dissolution or annihilation of the subject. The well-celebrated gesture of the “death of the subject” or the “decentering of the subject” does not imply its final annihilation. The presumptions that celebrate this dissolution are themselves part of the metaphysical gesture that such a celebration aims to criticize.²

Accordingly, in this work the category Western subject does not refer to an essence or uniformity nor to a metaphysical self-presence. The connotation is not essence but the process of constitution of identity; it thus refers to a position or positioning, to a place, or placing, that is, to a specific inhabiting of a place. It refers to a process of generation, to a process of coming into being, of invention and of fashioning of a place called “Western”. The peculiarity of a colonial discourse such as Orientalism may be said to reside precisely in the Westernizing (as well as Orientalizing) operation itself. This is a process by which members are instituted as Western subjects. The operation I call “Westernizing” consists in the fashioning of a historically specific *fantasy* whereby members imagine themselves as Western. This engendering and fashioning of the Western subject thus has a fictive character. But the fictive character of this position does not mean that it is not *real*; on the contrary, it produces material effects by

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constituting the very bodies of the subjects that it subjects. It refers to the historical inscription of a particular identity. To put it in different terms, the process of “becoming” a Western subject refers to its members becoming ontologized.³ One is not a Western subject because there exists a pre-given structure called the Western culture which imposes itself upon its members. The transformation of individuals into Western subjects is not accomplished by issuing Western identity cards.⁴ One “becomes” and is made Western by being subjected to a process called Westernizing and by imagining oneself in the fantasy frame of belonging to a specific culture called the “West.” This imaginary, however, is not a private or an individual undertaking. It is a process that exists externally and objectively. The Lacanian formulation of fantasy and the desire that induces it is central to my discussion of the Orientalist discourse in the following pages, but my use of the psychoanalytic notion of “fantasy” and the associated term “object petit a” should not be considered as an individual matter, but rather something conditioned by objective and structural processes.

However, the process that constitutes subjects as Western is not identical in each individual instance; it is subject to differential articulation at every specific historical moment and in different cases. Therefore, I do not claim that the analysis I offer here is valid for every specific instance of Orientalist discourse. What I do here is to chart the unconscious of Orientalism that needs to be rethought and reconfigured at every different instance. The specific instance I address in this book is veiling.

The modern subject

This modern idea of the subject has been severely criticized in the last two decades. Indeed, as these criticisms and deconstructions have pointed out, the subject itself is a modern idea that came with Enlightenment and humanism. The thinking and conscious “subject” finds its most elaborate articulation in Descartes’ well-known philosophical statement, “I think therefore I am.” Epistemologically the subject is constructed as a knowing subject, in opposition to or before an “object” that is to be known and controlled. The subject is also considered to be a causal and responsible agent, the “ego” or “self” that is supposed to be the center and source of the world and his/her actions. Post-structuralist and post-modern criticism has declared that the end of the subject signifies the end or perhaps the closure of the modern era, and the end of the category “Man,” taken as a neutral term synonymous with the subject in this humanist discourse. Hence the attraction of post-structuralist criticism or deconstruction of the subject for feminist and post-colonial theory, because the social reference of the

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philosophical category of “Man” has been the European white male subject constructed as hegemonic by these discourses. But such deconstruction has also generated the feeling of unease and hesitancy because it also seems to undermine philosophically the notion of agency that is implied in the concept of subject and that political discourses require. The challenges and criticisms directed to the category of subject by recent deconstruction and psychoanalysis expose the subject as a historical construction – European, male, and bourgeois. One can not develop an ethical, political, and theoretical position on the subject without questioning the often abstract – though historical – and complicated mechanisms which produce it. However, a deconstruction of the subject is not sufficient if it is merely limited to exposing it as a “Western white male.” The abstract moment which constitutes this historical subject as “sovereign” and “universal” should not be missed. A different sense of subjectivity, especially from the point of view of the notion of agency that an ethical position requires, can only be developed if we take the notion of otherness as constitutive.

What underlies this modern idea of subject? Emerging out of the religious symbolic and ideological universe of the feudal Middle Ages, the modern notion of the subject is the result of a fundamental reversal and dislocation. It does not simply replace the notion of God, but signifies a transformation of the very coordinates which organized the symbolic universe of European societies for centuries. Such a transformation, closely related with the transformation in the structure of production relations, has produced the secular notion of an individual “I” as an abstract and universal consciousness free of all embodiment and locality. At once a legal, philosophical, and psychic conceptual unity, the ego or subject finds its full meaning in this assumption of *autonomy*. It is the assumption of autonomy which gives the subject a universal status. Such a universal status is produced in a complex discursive strategy. The construction of the subject requires another term or condition from which the subject distinguishes itself. This “other” term remains repressed, and its “forgotten” or repressed presence is the very condition of the autonomy and universality of the subject. This is why a critique of the subject can only be conducted from the point of view of this other term.

For instance, from the point of view of feminist discourse, modern humanism appears to be a mode of patriarchal discourse (or patriarchy to be a mode of humanist discourse). How is “human” signified in the grammar of Western metaphysics? We might read humanism as a discourse which marks *woman* rather than man. The place of the subject is emptied out by marking the other – woman – as different (emotional, weak, irrational, dependent, etc.). “Man” thus becomes the universal norm

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occupying that “empty” place and constituting the universal being of the “human” – from which woman is a “natural” deviation. In this structure, that which is marked as other is attributed the opposite characteristics of the subject. Thus, on the one hand, the other is made an element of comparison with the subject; on the other hand, she is and remains radically different from the subject. In this humanist trial in which the judge is also the prosecutor, the “other” is born accused: she is made lacking what the subject has and yet is threatening to the stable world of the subject by her radical difference. This structure of the subject is equally valid for colonial or imperial discourse. For instance, Edward Said defines Orientalism as an “epistemological and ontological distinction between the West and East.” This distinction is achieved by marking the East as lacking “civil society,” “individuality” or “secondary structures” – all the sociological and anthropological properties that the West is naturally assumed to have. By a rhetorical strategy, the Oriental or non-Western societies are pushed back in time and constructed as primitive or backward. The Western subject thus constitutes the universal norm by occupying that empty, abstract place reached by a “natural” and “normal” evolution. The subject is thus produced by a linguistic/discursive strategy in which the denial of dependence on the other guarantees an illusion of autonomy and freedom.

Hegelian philosophy can be seen as the main theoretical text that constituted the fiction of autonomy and sovereignty of the subject. The modern philosopher *par excellence*, Hegel, provided the highest articulation of this dialectic of subject in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*.⁵ In the Hegelian text, the subject is constructed by a mediation through the other. The subject represents itself to itself through the other and constitutes itself as universal, abstract subject (the I or ego) by signifying the other as a categorical opposite, a radical denial or negation of itself. In this operation of *aufhebung*, the different loses its difference, its incommensurability and its singularity and becomes the subject’s other – a moment of identity. The problem with this account is that, by conceiving difference in the form of a contradiction that will be resolved in a higher synthesis, the Hegelian text produces the effect of a final closure. While negativity is regarded as essential in the movement which produces the subject, such negativity is always turned into an internal moment of the dialectic of the subject. This is then a denial of difference; all difference is turned into sameness; the production of the subject as abstract and universal consciousness is this very movement of transforming difference into sameness. The Hegelian assumption is that *the other shares the same universe with the subject*. Hegel’s text can be read therefore as the subject’s necessary forgetting of its dependence on the other, who is different, elsewhere, as its very sign. This Hegelian dialectical

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economy of subject-constitution cannot accept that the other is differently constituted. The other's difference can only be recognized comparatively, that is to say, in terms of the same. While the other is necessary to the subject's constitution, the subject can constitute itself only on the basis of a denial of the other's difference.

Deconstructing the subject

Hegelian subjectivity has been deconstructed by discourses of psychoanalysis and post-structuralism. Lacan traces the presence of the other in the absences and lacunae of the discourse of the subject, and splits the subject between his conscious and unconscious discourses while showing his dependency on language on the basis of a model of the primacy of the signifier. In the Lacanian approach, the subject is not seen as identical to self-consciousness as in Hegel, but as an effect of language, of the movement of the signifier. In his deconstruction of Western metaphysics, Derrida identifies what he calls a *binary structure* that characterizes the discourse of metaphysics. This is indeed the very structure that I have described above, but Derrida provides us with an argument that recognizes the other as different. According to him, a binary structure constructs an "other" as a privileged term, against which the latter can distinguish itself. One term is taken out of a system of terms and is given a positive value, which thus constructs an "other" or negative of itself which signifies everything that it does not accept. There can be no third term in a binary structure, and no mediation between the two terms. One of them is given a logical priority and a positive value, while the other is characterized as the absence of the positive attributes of the first. The second term is thus denied an existence of its own; it is merely a negation of the first term. Derrida proposes a two-step strategy to deconstruct the binary structure. The first moment is to reverse the hierarchy by re-valuing the de-valued or subordinate "other" term. However, this is not sufficient, because reversal in itself does not come to terms with the domination of the first term and it leaves the binary structure unquestioned. A second step is necessary to break the structure apart: this is the procedure of displacement. Displacement is the operation of locating the subordinate term into the heart of the dominant one. It is through displacement that the dependence of the subject on the other is made explicit.

Post-structuralism and psychoanalysis thus expose the subject as a Western and male constitution. However, what is at stake is not merely an unveiling of the subject's abstract universal pretensions, but also a demonstration of the fact that its illusory self-production is a denial of

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relationality, complexity and dependence on the other. As I have noted above, theoretical discourses of post-structuralism and psychoanalysis are often criticized for leaving no space for a concept of agency. The implicit argument here is that when the subject is deconstructed, there is no ground left for action, and therefore no possibility of changing the existing order of things. By deconstructing the subject but offering no alternative in its place, post-structuralism is considered to be somehow complicit with the existing order of things. I would like to argue that this widespread criticism misses the point, not so much because it insists on the necessity of agency but rather because it risks leaving the very structure of the subject intact. The dangerous result of this attitude is to reverse the structure and to enact the same subject, to repeat the same desire for a sovereign, autonomous position on the side of the subordinate, hegemonized, second term. The very structure of the production of subject implies that the subordinate term can not be a subject in the way that the dominant term is. How do we account for this different sense of the subject where embodiment, relationality, difference, and otherness are not denied but are turned into a productive moment?

Obviously this is not simply a question of giving a subject his or her right. How could one (who?) give his or her right to the oppressed subject while his/her subjectivity/subject-ness carries a sense and a force that always remains different? How could the oppressed be the same as or equal to the subject whose presence and rationality always requires an "other"? Derrida's strategy of deconstruction is essential here. To many, deconstruction seems to be an overly theoretical reading of texts or an obsessive calculation of minute details. But this too-careful reading, "an analysis of all possible givens in a situation," in Derrida's words, which so often bores his readers and frustrates his political critics, is *not* without an aim. The fact that deconstruction is a two-step "operation" or strategy of reversal *and displacement* puts it in a different position *vis-à-vis* the question of the subject. Rather than continuing a certain economy of the subject, deconstruction interrupts it. Such an interruption would be a merely negative operation if it were limited to demonstrating the presence of a hegemonic structure. The genuine aim of deconstruction is *not yet* realized by this demonstration which implies a reversal of terms. The aim of shaking the structure itself is possible only when the other and otherness is located in the heart of the subject. In other words, displacement is the move by which the desire for a sovereign, possessive, and unitary position is itself interrupted. The binary structure is the very structure which produces the *desire for sovereign subjectivity*, i.e. the economy of the subject. The sovereign subject is based on the fiction of an absolute limit by which he

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excludes others and recognizes himself as autonomous. A reversal of terms is not sufficient precisely because it maintains the economy by which the same absolute limit is sustained, whereas the whole point of deconstruction is to turn that limit into a passage (hence its difference from relativism). If the Hegelian economy works by making the subject recognize himself in the other, Derridean deconstruction makes the subject recognize the other in himself or herself.

Such a recognition implies a different concept of the subject, one that is not fixed but open and changing. An identity politics based on reversal is limited to changing the cultural or subjective contents of identity. The identity of the subject changes in such politics, but the subject continues to be constituted in the same essentialist form. Therefore it does not actually make the subject an agent, but reproduces the same form of the subject as fixed and fixing. The constitution of the oppressed or subordinate subject implies the “in-between” or “passage” to which I have referred above. It implies a subjectivity where embodiment and relationality are not denied but become the constitutive moment of subjectivity, challenging and subverting the Western form of sovereign subject. Luce Irigaray’s feminist deconstruction of Western phallocentrism shows how woman can not be a subject in the sense Man is. Irigaray’s effort to construct an imaginary for women is rooted in the embodiment of women: a kind of subjectivity in which the other is recognized rather than denied, in which “the two lips communicate with each other.” Homi Bhabha’s critique of colonial and racist discourse also evokes a sense of the subject as “in-between” or “passage” especially in his concept of the colonized as “mimic men.”⁶ The mimicry of the colonized is not a repetition of the same but the opening of *difference and otherness within* the subject, making a return to the self-same impossible.

Although these arguments share a common thread, I do not claim that they can be brought together in an easy way. A new sense of the subject cannot be produced by a simple addition of different arguments, but by keeping the difference and tension between them alive. Only such an approach can develop a notion of agency as an active and transformative principle. This sense of agency is not active in the sense of dominating and controlling the others and the world as nature; but it is active in the sense of a receptivity and openness to others and otherness. The “other” is not what the subject distinguishes itself from, nor the beyond of an absolute limit which the subject cannot pass, but the necessary possibility that makes the subject possible, again and again, each time anew. Unless this sense of otherness and limitlessness is conceived as a condition of subject, we are bound to repeat the same dominating and possessive form of subjectivity.

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Chapter 1 offers a discussion of the issues and concerns that Edward Said's *Orientalism* opens up. Throughout the project I acknowledge his major theoretical achievement: establishing a field of study which has today come to be called "colonial discourse studies" and which has become one of the most contested fields in cultural studies. Focusing on the epistemological dualism Said sets between the "real" Orient versus its representation, I suggest that although Said refutes an appeal to a notion of "real" or "true" Orient as preceding its discursive constitution, his analysis is nevertheless bound to remain dualistic as he does not go beyond conceptualizing discourse as a linguistic activity. Said's important proposition regarding the "Orientalization of the Orient" can be further deepened by acknowledging the involuted relationship of the referent with discourse or textuality. To be able to overcome this epistemological dualism, the Orient needs to be conceptualized as a material effect of Orientalist signification. Rather than simply giving up the referentiality of the Orient, I suggest that it be seen as an embodiment of a certain discursive production. Although I follow in many ways the path Said has opened up, I critically engage with his relegation of the questions of gender and of sexuality to a sub-domain of Orientalism. I suggest that the distinction Said makes between the *manifest* and *latent* content of Orientalism can be utilized as a useful guide for this purpose and can enable us to formulate the articulation of sexuality with Orientalism. I then turn to Homi Bhabha's psychoanalytic theory of colonial discourse and acknowledge his attempt to integrate the question of sexual difference with the theories of colonial discourse. However, the psychoanalytic formula of fetishism that Bhabha employs for this purpose is fraught with difficulties as it is formulated to understand the representation of sexual difference and therefore cannot be easily translated to comprehend the specificity of the representation of cultural difference. Criticisms directed at the usefulness of the concept of colonial discourse as a unified category are the subject of the last section of this chapter. Focusing on criticisms about undoing colonial discourse as a homogenizing category, I suggest that the totalizing notion of colonialism cannot be called into question by focusing on particularity or by an uncritical celebration of colonialisms instead of colonialism. I do advocate retaining the general category of colonial discourse without seeing its unity as a simple harmonious totality, but by recognizing the complexity within such a unity.

In chapter 2, I examine the homology between the structures of patriarchal/sexist and colonial/imperial discourses. For instance, in the case of Orientalism, the discourses of cultural and sexual difference are powerfully mapped onto each other. Following the critique I develop in chapter 1