



Orientalism and Unfavourable Positioning in Shakespeare's 'Antony and Cleopatra'

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Abstract:

With the rise of multiculturalism, of racial, ethnic, cultural, and national awareness in literary and historical criticism, literary and historical research on attitudes towards multiculturalism, non-English or non-European characters in literary works and their moral, ethnic, religious, cultural and national values, also gained a critical momentum. More than any other playwright it is Shakespearean texts that have got their share of such a critical point of view. Historical and cultural approaches to Shakespeare's plays make this relatively new critical perspective crucial because race, ethnicity and oppression are said to be some of the central themes to almost all of his plays. Considering the role of discourse theory which suggests that language and language use not only communicate people's social, cultural and mental realities but also create them, the study deals with the concepts of Orientalism and positioning in *Antony and Cleopatra*. The study argues that through an oriental discourse and unfavourable positioning Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* contains racial and cultural profiles, and perceptions created by these profiles and manipulation of these perceptions.

Key Words: Shakespeare, Antony and Cleopatra, Orientalism, positioning.

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This study deals with the rereading of Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra with a focus on the Orientalism and the ethnic, racial and cultural positioning. The study borrowed the term and concept of positioning from Harre and Moghaddam, and Harre and Langenhove and the term Orientalism from Edward Said. The term positioning has its variegated meanings in different branches of study. The use of the term in cultural studies and politics is similar to the one used in marketing: it is to make a brand occupy a distinct and special place in the minds of its potential customers, which is in essence a process of creating an image of a good or product. Similarly, ethnic, racial, cultural and moral positioning is to make a person occupy culturally, racially, ethnically and morally distinct and special place in the minds of others. It is one's ethnic, racial, cultural and moral identification by others. Harre and Moghaddam argue that the "attribution of negative mental, characterological, and moral traits is indirect or presumptive positioning" (6). Positioning is also closely associated with the concept of the Self and the Other since those who unfavourably position others may think that they establish and occupy a moral, ethnic, cultural and racial high ground or superiority for themselves (Harre and Moghaddam). Positioning may have a wide area of practice ranging from individual level to group and national level and can be a deliberate process or in line with a policy followed by some authority (Harre and Moghaddam).

Edward Said defines Orientalism as "a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience" (1). This special place is often a culturally, racially and ethnically positioned one. Said also argues that "Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction between the Orient and (most of the time) the Occident"(2). Thus, orientalism turns out to be "a sense of confrontation felt by Westerners dealing with the East ... the varying degrees of projected inferiority ... the kinds of characteristic features ascribed to the Orient" (201), which



represents a constructed and fabricated image of the other and the alien and which is a different version of unfavourable positioning. Said recognizes two types of orientalist outlook: latent orientalism and manifest orientalism. Latent orientalism refers to the western mindset or the collective unconscious and can be conjectured as what the westerners keep in their minds as unconscious perceptions of the East (Said). According to Said, these notions include exoticism, femininity, separateness, eccentricity, backwardness, sensuality, which are secretly and subjectively considered to be parts of the eastern culture. With such a classification, Said reshapes and reformulates the very nature of the concept of Orientalist discourse in that latent orientalism reveals what is hidden in the unconscious sphere of the Western mind a dreams, images, fantasies and fears leading to the production of systematic knowledge about the Orient (Yeegenoglu). In a sense, Latent Orientalism constitutes Orientalism's "doctrinal and doxological character, its everydayness and naturalness, its taken-for-granted authority" (Yeegenoglu 23). As regards "manifest orientalism", it is when the unconscious images of the latent orientalism are, as the name suggests, manifested (Said, 1978). Said argues that each era brings its own perspective of manifest orientalism, which means manifest orientalism may change from time to time and from person to person. The study will show how biased and prejudiced images of the orient are expressed or represented in Antony and Cleopatra, which epitomizes how the words and actions can influence the discourse about the imagined Orient.

Though scholarly studies and researchers go as far back as to the 18th century to discuss the subject of cultural, racial and ethnic positioning and orientalism, it is a well-known fact that numerous literary works written in Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, those by Marlowe, Webster, Ford, Dekker, Marston, Greene, and Kyd revealed a widespread interest in the 'Other' in England with the rise of economic relationships with the eastern countries. *Tamburlaine* and *The Jew of Malta* by Christopher Marlowe, *Soliman and Perseda*



by Thomas Kyd, *Selimus* by Robert Greene are some examples. Thus, they, with a revived interest in the identity of the 'Others' and with 'the Oriental', led to a tradition in drama and literature, which is called 'Literary Orientalism', which stands for the embodiment, the representation and the description and positioning of the East in Western literary texts (Kidwai). In terms of moral portrait, the Orient was a place full of passionate people, and the fact that these plays were mainly revenge tragedies shaped the very nature of the literary orientalism and positioning: more than exoticism and fascination with the east, it was a matter of culture, religion and politics. Shakespeare seems to be interested in what was oriental in his time from a historical and cultural perspective in his *Antony and Cleopatra*. By making Cleopatra as one of its main figures and creating her counter-parts in the west, Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* can be read as a play creating stereotype figures associated with the Orient, and thus a play that can be reread from the point of view of positioning theory.

Orientalism and positioning others in terms of their race, ethnicity and culture is deep-rooted and it dates back to pre-Islamic era for the term Orient was indiscriminately used for all of the Asian civilizations encountered by Europeans in their eastward imperial and colonial expansion. In *Romans and Aliens*, Baldson deals with how Romans regarded other peoples, focusing on the themes of Graco-Roman sociology; the Roman image in the eyes of others, dislike of Greek morals and Romans' attitudes towards peoples they called 'barbarians'. The book reveals how western image or the image of the Self is both implicitly and explicitly idealized over the Other and concerned with the concepts of top people and others in Roman era. Similarly, Paul A. Cartledge emphasizes how Greeks conceptualized themselves and their culture in opposition to the Other. His book implies parallelism between the Greek era and the modern one in that people who call themselves as the members of a superior culture see the world in mere black and white, and thus create the concepts of 'Us' and 'Them' or 'the Self' and 'the Other'. All these support the notion that Romans idealized their own self-perception



in opposition to the others. The Others were Egyptians, Phoenicians, Ethiopians, Gauls, Turks and other foreigners. In this regard, Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, wherein the west and the east politically, culturally, emotionally, racially and militaristically meet, is deeply grounded in what Said called 'orientalism' and in what Harre and Moghaddam referred to as positioning. The way he depicts the characters from the Orient, and the false assumptions he seeds in the play about the Orient make this play a prelude to Western Orientalist discourse. This idea is very well backed by O'Toole: "Shakespeare was a powerful tool of empire, with the doctrine of European cultural superiority... Universal Shakespeare was both a beacon of the greatness of European civilization and a gateway into that greatness".

It is apparent at the very beginning of *Antony and Cleopatra* how easily Shakespeare lends himself to manifest orientalist discourse and positioning:

Philo:

Nay, but this dot age of our general's
O'er flows the measure: those his goodly eyes,
That o'er the files and musters of the war
Have glow'd like plated Mars, now bend, now turn,
The office and devotion of their view
Upon a tawny front: his captain's heart,
Which in the scuffles of great fights hath burst
buckles on his breast, reneges all temper,
And is become the bellows and the fan
To cool a gipsy's lust (1.1. 1-10).

Since she represents the Orient, Philo thinks that Anthony's relationship with Cleopatra is corruptive, for it is a submissive one: 'the Orient corrupts', which is the manifestation of "latent orientalism" (Said). Not only Cleopatra but also Antony himself are positioned



unfavourably by Philo. Here, “tawny front” represents racial positioning and refers to the dominant skin-colour in the east, and “gipsy’s lust” represents the cultural and emotional positioning and refers to the eastern lifestyle. Philo also implies that Antony is controlled by his heart, meaning that he is the slave of his emotions and feelings, which keeps him away from his responsibilities as a commander and politician. This is also a revelation of western patriarchal society of Rome. Antony, contrary to western image of masculinity which is expected from him, adopts feminine qualities like passion, emotion and love, which undermines his western qualities. Here, the study takes on Foucauldian perspective which is based on the complicity of discourse that is a manifestation of power, superiority and hegemony, in which masculinity is seen as means of hegemonic power (Foucault). This also represents criticism, depiction and understanding of the East through the dominating frameworks of the West. By creating the East as the “other”, orientalist discourse and positioning also tries to define the west/occident.

To better view the portrait of Cleopatra in Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* from in terms of orientalism and positioning, one must refer to Cleopatra as a historical figure and identify the differences. Although Cleopatra was a pharaoh of Ancient Egypt, equal to Octavius Caesar, the Roman Emperor of her time, in terms of political status, although she was a member of the Ptolemaic dynasty, a family of Greek origin that ruled Ptolemaic Egypt after the death Alexander the Great during the Hellenistic period (Burstein), Shakespeare allows his Roman characters to use the word ‘strumpet’ for Cleopatra. This is moral positioning. Shakespeare uses the word several times in his other plays. One is in *King Henry VI*, Part I. He uses the word for Joan La Pucelle, aka Joan of Arc, his first villain, a national hero to the French, but less revered in England. She represents the Other for Shakespeare since England and France were rivals and for the English in 1590s, France geographically belonged to the Orient. Similarly, in *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare puts the word ‘strumpet’



in Titus' mouth to humiliate Tamora, the Queen of the Goths, mother of Chiron and Demetrius. Tamora's barbarism, savagery, and lasciviousness are other positions that are what make her the Other. Shakespeare portrays her as opposite in every respect to Lavinia, the archetypal victim and the daughter of Titus Andronicus. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, he does the same. He contrasts Octavia and Fulvia with Cleopatra. They are opposite in every aspect. Octavia is the archetypal Roman woman as wife of man: an archetype of beauty, wisdom, and modesty.

Maecenas:

If beauty, wisdom, modesty, can settle

The heart of Antony, Octavia is

A blessed lottery to him (2.2.246-248).

Oriental woman lacks wisdom, and modesty, and thus beauty. These qualities are specific to the western woman. Many years after Shakespeare wrote the play, Gustave Flaubert created another stereotype oriental woman that can be associated with Cleopatra: Kuchuk Hanem.

Gustave Flaubert mentioned Kuchuk Hanem in his accounts of travel to Egypt as a famed beauty and dancer. Steegmuller (115-116) writes how Kuchuk Hanem became a key figure and symbol in Flaubert's Orientalist accounts of the East:

Kuchuk Hanem and Bambeh begin to dance. Kuchuk's dance is brutal. She squeezes her bare breasts together with her jacket. She puts on her girdle fashioned from a brown shawl with gold stripes, with three tassels hanging on ribbons. She rises first on one foot, then on the other--marvelous movement, when one foot is on the ground, the other moves up and across in front of the shin bone. The whole thing done with a light bound. I have seen this dance on old Greek vases. Bambeh prefers a dance on a straight line; she moves with a lowering and raising of one hip only, a kind of limping of great character. Bambeh has henna on her hands. She seems to be a devoted servant



to Kuchuk...All in all, their dancing, except Kuchuk's step mentioned above, is far less good than that of Hassan el-Belbeissi, the male dancer in Cairo. Joseph's opinion is that all beautiful women dance badly.

This proves that unfavourably positioned oriental images and perceptions are deep rooted. Rowse admits Shakespeare's positioning of Cleopatra: "Shakespeare evidently saw Cleopatra as a gypsy, exerting a spell over her man by her contrariness, her changing moods, her tempestuous temperament, her feminine cunning, and her passions" (467). Shakespeare is said to have got his story in *Antony and Cleopatra* from Plutarch's *Lives* (Mabillard). Though, Plutarch refers to Cleopatra's political intelligence, her western-rooted ambition, her ability to use language effectively and impressively, none of these qualities Shakespeare attributes to his Cleopatra in the play. Plutarch also refers to Cleopatra's sexual qualities as a means that helps her hold political power. But, in the play *Antony and Cleopatra*, she is controlled by her sexual desires and she uses sex only to keep Antony under her control.

Said (296) is critical of the nineteenth-century writers' perceptions and ideas about the Orient claiming that:

... the differences in the ideas about the Orient can be characterized as exclusively manifest differences, differences in form and personal style, rarely in basic content. Everyone of them kept intact these parateness of the Orient, its eccentricity, its backwardness, its silent indifference, its feminine penetrability, its supine malleability.

In terms of feminine penetrability, or sexual positioning, the following lines are of great significance. Enobarbus talks about how Cleopatra and Egypt inspired and enthralled Antony referring to Cleopatra's femininity and lust:

Maecenas:

She's a most triumphant lady, if report be square to her.

Enobarbus:



When she first met Mark Antony, she pursed up
his heart, upon the river of Cydnus.

Agrippa

There she appeared indeed, or my reporter devised well for her.

Enobarbus

I will tell you.

The barge she sat in, like a burnished throne,
Burned on the water. The poop was beaten gold,
Purple the sails, and so perfumèd that
The winds were lovesick with them. The oars were silver,
Which to the tune of flutes kept stroke, and made
The water which they beat to follow faster,
As amorous of their strokes. For her own person,
It beggared all description: she did lie
In her pavilion—cloth-of-gold, of tissue—
O'erpicturing that Venus where we see
The fancy outwork nature. On each side her
Stood pretty dimpled boys, like smiling Cupids,
With divers-colored fans, whose wind did seem
To glow the delicate cheeks which they did cool,
And what they undid did.(2.2.190-209)

This femininity and lust that Shakespeare attributes to Cleopatra is just opposite of what western eyes would like to see in a woman in Shakespeare's England: purity and obedience to patriarchal power and authority. In the play Shakespeare delivers to his characters their identities through either their discourses. Hegemony in the play shows itself as a practice of



power and it is created through discourse (Bethan and Stokoe). Orientalist discourse tries to find reasons or arguments to position people in the Orient outside the universality of progress and civilization. Ignorance of duties and uninterrupted idyllic life are presented as the characteristics of the Orient (Said). Shakespeare refers to such extravagant, luxurious, indifferent and lustrous lifestyle. He very successfully blends orientalism with exoticism, associated with colonialism and imperialism, and pursues the discovery, perception and understanding of ‘the self’ with reference to extraordinary differences from ‘the other’:

Enobarbus:

Her gentlewomen, like the Nereides,
So many mermaids, tended her i’ the eyes,
And made their bends adornings: at the helm
A seeming mermaid steers: the silken tackle
Swell with the touches of those flower-soft hands,
That yarely frame the office. From the barge
A strange invisible perfume hits the sense
Of the adjacent wharfs. The city cast
Her people out upon her; and Antony,
Enthroned i’ the market-place, did sit alone,
Whistling to the air; which, but for vacancy,
Had gone to gaze on Cleopatra too,
And made a gap in nature (2.2.211-223).

Shakespeare is said to have borrowed these lines from Plutarch’s *Life of Antony*. In his translation of Plutarch’s *Lives*, Thomas North depicts an exotic atmosphere in which all Egyptians enjoy their time regardless of their duties and governmental affairs. Since Mark Antony imprisons himself into such an oriental and exotic lifestyle, he is considered to be



ignorant of his duties and responsibilities as a triumvir. As for Cleopatra, she is portrayed as a representative and a product of such a lustrous life style, nothing of her cultural or national values is mentioned in the play. Never in the play is Cleopatra seen talking about world or governmental affairs even though she is the queen of a country. On the contrary, she is far away from such serious and noble duties and responsibilities, which is why she is corruptive and poisonous:

Cleopatra:

Give me some music; music, moody food
Of us that trade in love.

Attendant:

The music, ho!

Cleopatra:

Let it alone; let's to billiards: come, Charmian.

Charmian:

My arm is sore; best play with Mardian.

Cleopatra:

As well a woman with an eunuch play'd
As with a woman. Come, you'll play with me, sir?

Mardian:

As well as I can, madam. (2.5.1-8)

It is not only oriental women but oriental men as well who are unfavourably positioned. 'The Oriental male was considered in isolation from the total community in which he lived and which many Orientalists have viewed with something resembling contempt and fear', says Said (207) and adds that:



Orientalism itself, furthermore, was an exclusively male province; like so many professional guilds during the modern period, it viewed itself and its subject matter with sexist blinders. This is especially evident in the writing of travellers and novelists: women are usually the creatures of a male power-fantasy. They express unlimited sensuality, they are more or less stupid, and above all they are willing.

There is no significant oriental male figure in the play. Instead, at the very beginning of the play, Antony appears to be an orientally positioned-male figure:

Philo:

Look, where they come:

Take but good note, and you shall see in him.

The triple pillar of the world transform'd

Into a strumpet's fool: behold and see (1.1.11-14).

With reference to Northrop Frye's definition of fictional modes: "... the hero is a leader. He has authority, passions, and powers of expression far greater than [other people], but what he does is subject both to social criticism and to the order of nature" (34), this study argues that Antony's tragic flaw is his self-orientalization and self-positioning coupled with a positioning through an occidental point of view, which leads to his failure in making reconciliation between love and duty. The crystallization of orientalization in Antony Caesar is expressed as follows: "... he fishes, drinks and wastes / The lamps of night in revel is not more manlike / Than Cleopatra; nor the queen of Ptolemy / More womanly than he; hardly gave audience, or / Vouchsafed to think he had partners. You shall find there / A man who is the abstract of all faults that all men follow" (1.4.4-9). Shakespeare makes Antony aware of this self-orientalization at the beginning of the play:

Mark Antony:

Forbear me.



There's a great spirit gone! Thus did I desire it:
What our contempt doth often hurl from us,
We wish it ours again; the present pleasure,
By revolution lowering, does become
The opposite of itself: she's good, being gone;
The hand could pluck her back that shoved her on.
I must from this enchanting queen break off:
Ten thousand harms, more than the ills I know,
My idleness doth hatch. How now! Enobarbus! (1.2.25-34)

He sees unlimited sensuality in Cleopatra, and marginalizes her: "She is cunning past man's thought" (1.2.49) . He thinks he does not belong to the East, and says "I must be gone" (1.2.40). However, he cannot keep himself away from his obsession with Cleopatra. His ambivalence, being trapped between the will of staying in Egypt and of escaping it, gives him a confusing, and perplexed identity, not a man of the real world but of an oriental one. Shakespeare portrays this world as a ceremonial one. Whenever and whatever he speaks, whatever he does and why, one cannot understand whether he tells the truth or not or whether he does the right thing or not for he is a deluded lover. As a deluded lover, Shakespeare makes him see the reality (Oates): "I am so lated in the world that I/ Have lost my way for ever" (3. 9. 3). He lost his way in the Orient.

The play reveals two models of identity through positioning. In terms of Cleopatra's identity, it is the "mere effect of discourse and ideology" (Benwell and Stokoe 31) mixed with race and culture that creates the first model. The second one is Antony's identity which is created by his actions, behaviours and attitudes. Racial profiles, and perceptions created by these profiles and manipulation of these perceptions according to ideology and politics have long been a topic in social, political and cultural studies. Especially after 9/11, "Racial



profiling has become a form of discrimination” says Kinsley (54). Kinsley also argues that this discrimination assumes that a person’s race shows whether s/he has a tendency towards the violation of law. Suspicions of the violation of law are not the only problem with racial profiling. It also leads to political, social, cultural and economic discriminations, which constitute the basis of the orientalist idea.



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