

Journey in the Orient: Flaubert's East in the Context of Orientalism

Şarktaki Gezinti: Oryantalizmin Işığında Flaubert'in Doğusu

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ABSTRACT

This study critically engages with Gustave Flaubert's *Voyage en Orient* through the lens of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), a pivotal work that redefined the understanding of Western representations of the East. Said argues that Orientalism is not merely a scholarly pursuit but a powerful ideological tool used by the West to justify its dominance over the East. By constructing the "Orient" as an exotic, backward, and fundamentally different entity, Orientalist discourse reinforces Western superiority and colonial ambitions. Applying Said's critique to Flaubert's travelogue, which chronicles his journey through Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon, and Turkey between 1849 and 1851, this paper explores how the narrative embodies Orientalist tendencies. The analysis focuses on how Flaubert's descriptions and characterizations of Eastern societies contributed to the exoticization and othering of the "Orient." This study examines the power dynamics embedded in Flaubert's portrayal of the East, questioning how these representations align with or diverge from Orientalist stereotypes. This investigation does not seek to diminish Flaubert's literary skill. However, it aims to situate his work within the broader framework of Orientalist discourse, thereby providing a deeper understanding of the complex ways Western literature has historically engaged with and constructed images of the East.

Keywords: Orientalism, Edward Said, Gustave Flaubert, Literary Criticism, Western Hegemony

ÖZ

Gustave Flaubert'in *Voyage en Orient* adlı eserindeki Oryantalist unsurları incelerken, Edward Said'in *Oryantalizm* (1978) adlı eserinde ortaya koyduğu eleştirel çerçeveyi temel almak elzemdir. Said, kitabında, Oryantalizmin yalnızca masum bir akademik alan olmadığını, Batı'nın Doğu'ya hükmetmek, onu yeniden yapılandırmak ve üzerinde otorite sahibi olmak için kullandığı karmaşık bir ideolojik yapı olduğunu savunur. Bu düşünce tarzı, Doğu ile Batı arasında yapılan ontolojik ve epistemolojik bir ayrımı dayandırır ve bu ayrım, doğal ya da kaçınılmaz bir kategorizasyon olmaktan uzak, sömürgecilik ve emperyalizmin güç dinamiklerinin bir ürünüdür. Said, Batılı anlatıların Doğu toplumları, kültürleri ve halkları hakkında çarpıtılmış bir vizyon yarattığını ve bu vizyonun Batı hegemonyasını meşrulaştırmaya hizmet ettiğini ileri sürer. Bu bağlamda, Flaubert'in 1849-1851 yılları arasında Mısır, Filistin, Lübnan ve Türkiye'ye yaptığı

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seyahatleri konu alan *Voyage en Orient* adlı eseri, Said'in eleştirel perspektifiyle incelenmelidir. Flaubert'in Doğu'yu tasvir ediş ve anlatı tercihleri üzerinden Oryantalist klişeleri nasıl güçlendirdiği araştırılmalıdır. Eserin estetik değerlerine rağmen, Doğu toplumlarının egzotikleştirilmesi ve ötekileştirilmesi gibi unsurların ne ölçüde mevcut olduğu sorgulanmalıdır. Bu inceleme, Flaubert'in eserine dair anlayışımızı, Oryantalist söylem bağlamında derinleştirmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Sonuç olarak, Said'in teorik içgörülerine dayanan bu analiz, *Voyage en Orient*'in daha derin ve eleştirel bir şekilde değerlendirilmesine katkıda bulunmayı hedeflemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Oryantalizm, Doğu, Öteki, Gustave Flaubert, Edward Said

Introduction

As conceptualized by Edward Said, *Orientalism* represents a critical framework for understanding the complex and often distorted ways in which the Western world perceives and represents the East. This concept, rooted in the binary opposition between the “Orient” and the “Occident,” posits that the East is constructed as fundamentally different, exotic, and inferior to the West. Said describes Orientalism as a set of academic disciplines and a pervasive cultural apparatus underpinning Western attitudes toward Eastern societies. This framework has profound implications because it shapes perceptions and legitimizes colonial and imperial ambitions.

The emergence of Orientalism dates back to the colonial expansion of European powers in the 18th and 19th centuries. As European empires extended their reach into Asia, the Middle East, and North Africa, they acquired vast knowledge of these regions. However, this knowledge was deeply intertwined with the power dynamics brought about by colonialism¹. Scholars, writers, and artists often depicted the East as a place of mystery, decadence, and backwardness, starkly contrasting them to the rational, progressive, and morally superior West. These representations were far from objective and served to justify Western dominance and intervention.² Edward Said’s groundbreaking work, *Orientalism*, examines how these Western discourses on the East are constructed and perpetuated. Said argued that Orientalism is a form of intellectual and cultural hegemony that creates a binary opposition between the civilized West and the barbaric East. This dichotomy is evident in Western writers, travelers, and scholars who often portray the East as a static, timeless land filled with emotion, danger, and superstition. These depictions reflect the fantasies and anxieties of the West rather than the realities of Eastern societies. French Orientalism, particularly during France’s colonial expansion into North Africa and the Middle East, exemplifies this trend. An admiration for exotic and mysterious permeated literature, art, and academia characterizes French Orientalism. This fascination was not only cultural but also deeply entangled with French imperialism’s political and economic goals. The representation of the East in French culture played a significant role in shaping public perceptions and legitimizing colonial policies.

The works of writers like Gustave Flaubert, who traveled extensively in the Middle East and North Africa, are replete with Orientalist themes. Flaubert’s vivid descriptions of exotic locales, sensual experiences, and the perceived decadence of Eastern societies exemplify the Orientalist narrative that views the East as fundamentally different and inferior to the West.³ These literary depictions mirrored and reinforced broader cultural stereotypes prevalent in French society. The visual arts also played a crucial role in disseminating Orientalist images

1 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, (New York: Random House, 1994), 8-9.

2 Ali Behdad, “Orientalism and Middle East Travel Writing,” in *Orientalism and Literature*, ed. Geoffrey P. Nash (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 196.

3 Curtis, Michael. 2009. *Orientalism and Islam: European Thinkers on Oriental Despotism in the Middle East and India*, (Cambridge University Press, 2009), 14-15.

in France. Painters like Eugène Delacroix and Jean-Léon Gérôme created works depicting the East as a land of wealth, sensuality, and mystery. Inspired by his travels in Morocco, Delacroix's paintings often portrayed dramatic scenes of Eastern life, emphasizing exotic and picturesque.⁴ Gérôme's meticulous, almost photographic representations of Eastern subjects, from bustling market scenes to harem life, captivated the French public and reinforced the notion of the East as a spectacle and a fantasy land.⁵

Orientalist academia in France, embodied by institutions like the Société Asiatique (founded in 1822) and the École des Langues Orientales (founded in 1795), also contributed to studying and representing Eastern cultures⁶. Scholars like Ernest Renan and Silvestre de Sacy produced extensive studies on Eastern languages, religions, and histories. While these scholarly efforts contributed to a better understanding of Eastern cultures, they often did so within an Orientalist paradigm that emphasized the superiority of Western knowledge and civilization.

France's colonial activities further entrenched Orientalist attitudes. The conquest and colonization of Algeria in 1830 marked the beginning of a significant French presence in North Africa that would persist into the 20th century.⁷ French colonial administrators and officers often viewed the native population through an Orientalist lens, perceiving them as primitive and in need of Western intervention and modernization. This perspective justified the imposition of French cultural and political systems, often at the expense of local traditions and autonomy.

Gustave Flaubert's travel writings offer a striking example of the practical application of Orientalism. Flaubert's descriptions of his travels in Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon, and Anatolia during the mid-19th century reveal his deep fascination with the exotic and grotesque. His letters and travel notes are filled with images of sensuality, decay, and moral ambiguity, echoing the Orientalist tropes identified by Said. Flaubert's portrayal of the East is marked by admiration and disdain, capturing the allure of ancient splendor while criticizing the perceived decline and corruption of contemporary Eastern societies. When viewed through the lens of Orientalism, Flaubert's travel writings offer a rich field for examining how Western narratives about the East are constructed and sustained. His detailed and often controversial descriptions exemplify how Orientalist discourse operates, reinforcing stereotypes and legitimizing Western superiority. Flaubert's writings are a powerful example of how Western narratives about the East reflect and perpetuate cultural biases and power dynamics.

1. Gustave Flaubert and the Voyage en Orient

Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880) was a prominent French novelist who was celebrated for his meticulous and introspective writing style. Hailing from Rouen, Normandy, Flaubert was

4 Hollis Clayson, "Henri Regnault's Wartime Orientalism," in *Orientalism's Interlocutors: Painting, Architecture, Photography*, ed. Jill Beaulieu and Mary Roberts (Duke University Press, 2002), 149.

5 Clayson, "Henri Regnault's Wartime Orientalism," 132.

6 Daniel Stolzenberg, "Les 'langues orientales' et les racines de l'orientalisme académique: une enquête préliminaire," *Dix-Septième Siècle* 3, no: 268 (2015): 422-26.

7 Christelle Teraud, "Les femmes, le genre et les sexualités dans le Maghreb colonial (1830-1962)," *Clio: Femmes, Genre, Histoire*, no: 33 (2011): 159-160.

born into a privileged family, with his father being a renowned surgeon who provided him with a comfortable upbringing and quality education. Despite briefly pursuing legal studies, Flaubert's true passion lay in literature, and he subsequently dedicated himself wholeheartedly to writing. Flaubert is most famous for his groundbreaking debut novel, "Madame Bovary" (1857), which is widely regarded as one of the most influential works in Western literature. The novel delves into the theme of romantic disillusionment and the societal constraints faced by its protagonist, Emma Bovary, showcasing Flaubert's realist approach and his keen attention to the intricacies of the human condition. In addition to "Madame Bovary," Flaubert's notable literary contributions include "Sentimental Education" (1869), a novel that portrays the disillusionment stemming from the 1848 revolution in France, and "The Temptation of Saint Anthony" (1874), an exploration of religious and philosophical themes.

Furthermore, his novel "Salammbô" (1862) is set in ancient Carthage, underscoring his fascination with both historical and exotic settings. Flaubert's writing style is distinguished by his relentless pursuit of 'le mot juste' (the right word), which he labors over his prose meticulously. His unwavering dedication to achieving stylistic perfection, coupled with his incisive critiques of bourgeois society, solidified his status as a pivotal figure in the realm of literary realism. Flaubert's visit to the Orient from 1849 to 1851, which encompassed visits to Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon, and Anatolia, profoundly influenced his literary imagination. This sojourn provided him with rich source material for his subsequent works and deepened his understanding of the cultural and historical aspects of the locales he explored.⁸

Gustave Flaubert's book *Voyage en Orient*, which means "Journey to the Orient," provides a detailed account of his travels in the Middle East between 1849 and 1851. The first edition was released seven years after Flaubert died in 1881. This travelog offers a comprehensive view of Flaubert's experiences and observations during his journey through Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon, and Anatolia.

The publication date of *Voyage en Orient* is notable due to its delayed release. Flaubert himself never saw the book published. After his death, his niece Caroline Franklin-Grout compiled and edited it from his extensive notes, letters, and manuscripts. The first edition received great acclaim, and the book has since gone through numerous editions, reflecting its enduring interest and significance in literary and travel literature circles.

Voyage en Orient has been both praised and criticized by readers and scholars. On the one hand, it is renowned for its vivid and richly detailed descriptions, which capture the essence of the places Flaubert visited with a unique blend of literary skill and keen observation. Flaubert's ability to paint a picture with words allows readers to visualize the Middle East's landscapes, people, and customs during the mid-19th century. On the other hand, the book has faced criticism, especially from a modern perspective, for its Orientalist viewpoint. Many readers

8 For more detailed information about Gustave Flaubert, please visit the academic information page: "Gustave Flaubert–Qui était Flaubert?," Université de Rouen Normandie, <https://flaubert.univ-rouen.fr/qui-%C3%A9tait-flaubert/>.

and scholars, echoing Edward Said's critiques, have pointed out that Flaubert's depictions often reflect the prejudices of his time, presenting the East through a lens of exoticism, sensuality and moral ambiguity. Critics argue that his descriptions contribute to the historically used stereotypical and reductive narratives that justified Western dominance over Eastern societies.

Despite these criticisms, *Voyage en Orient* remains a significant work that illuminates Flaubert's literary style and the broader context of Orientalist literature. The book provides valuable insights into the mindset of a 19th-century European traveler and the cultural and intellectual currents of the period. The enduring presence of the book in literary discourse underscores its importance as both a historical document and a subject of critical analysis. Numerous editions and continued interest in *Voyage en Orient* reflect its complexity and dual nature of its reception. While it represents a testament to Flaubert's skill as a writer and observer, it also serves as a reminder of the problematic ways that Western writers have portrayed the East. By examining *Voyage en Orient* through the lens of Orientalism, readers and scholars can gain a deeper understanding of these cultural dynamics and the lasting impact of these narratives on contemporary perceptions of the East.

2. Flaubert's East

Flaubert's observations of Egypt steeped in the Orientalist perspectives critiqued by Edward Said reveal a complex interplay between admiration and condescension. His detailed descriptions, ranging from the chaotic streets of Cairo to the exotic imagery of slave boats and political corruption, construct an image of the Orient that aligns with Western fantasies of the East as a place of disorder, emotionality, and moral ambiguity.

Egypt—In a letter to his mother from Alexandria, dated November 17, 1849, Flaubert vividly exemplifies the Orientalist perspective criticized by Edward Said. Flaubert recounts seeing the Orient for the first time as a light shimmering like molten silver on the sea.⁹ This romantic and mystical depiction aligns perfectly with what Said identifies as the Western tendency to view the East as a realm of fantasy and exoticism. The serene image of camels and Arabs fishing peacefully reinforces this portrayal, presenting the Orient as a picturesque, timeless landscape primarily used for Western consumption.¹⁰

Flaubert's travel notes shift toward more grotesque and sensational descriptions. He writes about a wedding where jesters tell obscene jokes: "The sick man and the doctor exchange vulgar dialog. 'Who is it?' No, I will not let anyone in. Who are you? No, who is it? Who? 'A prostitute.'" "Ah, come in."¹¹ This fascination with the crude and vulgar reflects Said's argument that the West often depicts the East in terms of its deviation from Western norms.¹²

9 Gustave Flaubert, "Voyage en Orient 1849-1851," *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert 1830-1857*, ed. Francis Steegmuller (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), 101-02.

10 Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Random House, 1979), 38.

11 Gustave Flaubert, *Voyage en Orient*, (Paris: Librairie de France, 1925), 29.

12 Said, 'Orientalism', 7.

By emphasizing such elements, Flaubert perpetuates the stereotype of the Orient as a place of moral laxity and simple humor, thereby reinforcing Western notions of cultural superiority.

The theme continues with Flaubert's encounter with a charlatan and children imitating flatulence. He describes the children in detail: "Two little girls in blue aprons, barefoot, with their pointed wool hats on the ground beside them... The boy was short, ugly, and stocky."¹³ This focus on grotesque and humorous elements aligns with Said's assertion that Orientalism often reduces Eastern cultures to a series of simplistic, sensational images. These depictions highlight cultural and moral differences between East and West, often overshadowing a more nuanced understanding of Eastern societies.¹⁴

In his notes, Flaubert also highlighted the interaction between travelers' desert attire and Parisian clothes representing their Western identity.¹⁵ This juxtaposition of traditional Eastern garments with symbols of Western modernity exemplifies the cultural clash emphasized by Said. The portrayal of Eastern attire alongside Western modernity symbols underlines the Orientalist narrative of the East as a place in need of Western influence and transformation. Said argues that such depictions legitimize colonial and cultural domination by presenting the West as the pinnacle of civilization against which the East is judged and lacking: "The Oriental is contained and represented by dominating frameworks."¹⁶

Flaubert's visit to the Kasr el-Aini hospital in Cairo provides a more explicit example of Orientalist fascination with the grotesque and diseased. He states, "In the ward of Abbas's Mamluks, there were beautiful cases of syphilis; some had the disease in their buttocks. At the doctor's signal, they all stood up in their beds, loosened their trouser belts, and with their fingers, spread their anuses to show their ulcers." This detailed and striking narration reflects the Orientalist tendency to depict the East as a place of decay and corruption. Flaubert's observations of an older man with severe physical deformities and a rickety patient suffering from skeletal deformities further highlight this narrative of the East as a realm of physical and moral degeneration. He describes an elderly man's "completely skinless genital organ" and a rickety patient's "hands with skin pulled back, nails as long as claws."¹⁷ Flaubert's letters during his travels are crucial for his understanding of his observations and thoughts about the East. In a letter with striking content dated February 3, 1850, he shares the following with his mother: "This is truly a comical country. There is a donkey in the café where we sit, and it defecates everywhere. A man urinates at the corner of the café. No one finds this situation odd or says anything. No one even turned their heads to look. Everything was so naturally accepted. Can you imagine something like this happening at the Café de Paris?"¹⁸ These observational

13 Flaubert, *Voyage en Orient*, 29.

14 Said, *Orientalism*, 103.

15 Flaubert, *Voyage en Orient*, 29.

16 Said, *Orientalism*, 34.

17 Flaubert, *Voyage en Orient*, 65.

18 "18 janvier 1850-de Gustave Flaubert à Caroline (mère) Flaubert," in "Correspondance," Université de Rouen Normandie, accessed on June 10, 2024, <https://flaubert.univ-rouen.fr/correspondance/correspondance/3->

notes and descriptions emphasize the exotic and grotesque and dehumanize their subjects, reducing them to mere curiosity. Said criticizes this dehumanization, noting that Orientalist discourse often strips the East of its complexity and humanity, instead presenting it as a series of strange and unsettling images.¹⁹

In a letter to Louis Bouilhet dated January 15, 1850, Flaubert expressed great interest in Egypt's various spectacles and experiences: "We have not yet seen any dancing girls; all have been exiled to Upper Egypt. There are no good brothels left in Cairo either."²⁰ This lamentation over the absence of expected Eastern pleasures underscores the Western desire to consume exotic and sensual. Said argues that the West often constructs the East as a realm filled with exotic pleasures and moral laxity.²¹ Flaubert's detailed accounts of male dancers offer a striking example of this Orientalist fascination. He describes the dancers as "quite ugly, but captivating with their immorality, obscene looks, and feminine movements, dressed like women, with eyes painted with antimony."²² This portrayal highlights the trope of sexual perversion and theatricality in Orientalism.

Said critiques such depictions, noting how the East is often framed through a lens that highlights perceived moral and sexual otherness, thereby reinforcing Western notions of superiority.²³ The interaction between the dancers and their pimps further exemplifies this fascination for grotesque and erotic. Flaubert notes that the pimps "surrounded the dancers, kissing them on their bellies, hips, and backs while uttering obscene words." This scene reflects the Orientalist tendency to sensationalize Eastern practices, depicting them as exhibitions of moral and sexual excess.

Edward Said points out that such portrayals strip the East of its complexity and humanity, reducing it to a series of exotic and titillating images for Western consumption. By framing the East in this way, Orientalist narratives perpetuate stereotypes and reinforce cultural hierarchies, often obscuring a more nuanced understanding of Eastern societies.²⁴

Flaubert's remark on the acceptance of pederasty in Egypt—one admits their pederasty and speaks openly about it at the table—underscores the Orientalist view of the East as a place of limitless and accepted sexual practices.²⁵ This observation serves to contrast the supposed sexual freedom of the East with that of the more restrained and moralistic West. Edward Said critiques this dichotomy, arguing that Orientalist discourse often constructs the East as a site of moral and sexual deviance, thereby reinforcing the West's cultural and moral superiority. In

https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1850-de-gustave-flaubert-%C3%A0-caroline-m%C3%A8re-flaubert/?year=1850&writing_place_id=38.

19 Said, *Orientalism*, pp. 206

20 Flaubert, "Voyage en Orient 1849-1851," 110.

21 Said, *Orientalism*, 5-20-180.

22 Flaubert, "Voyage en Orient 1849-1851," 110.

23 Said, *Orientalism*, 40.

24 Said, *Orientalism*, 207-208.

25 Flaubert, "Voyage en Orient 1849-1851," 110.

a letter to his mother dated January 5, 1850, Flaubert responds to her question about whether the East met his expectations: “Yes, it did; moreover, it goes far beyond the narrow idea in my mind. Here, I found everything blurry and depicted in my mind. Realities so perfectly replaced the assumptions that I often felt as if I were suddenly encountering forgotten old dreams.”²⁶ This statement encapsulates Orientalism’s spirit, where the East is constructed and romanticized in the Western imagination, often feeding into preconceived fantasies. Said argues that the “Orient is almost a European invention,” shaped by Western desires and imagination.²⁷

Flaubert’s writings, whether in letters or travel notes, illustrate the complex interplay of admiration, exoticism, and condescension characterizing Orientalist discourse. His depiction of Egypt as a country possessing enchanting beauty and crude spectacle reflects the dual nature of Orientalist imagery: alluring and vulgar. This narrative framework not only perpetuates stereotypes but also underscores the power dynamics critiqued by Said. The Western portrayal of the East reveals more about Western anxieties and desires than about the realities of Eastern cultures. As Said states, “Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between the Orient and (most of the time) the Occident.”²⁸

Flaubert’s notes further revealed his deep fascination with exotic and sensual. During his travels, he recalls the actions of a donkey driver toward a girl: “With his right arm he held her, with his left hand he fondled her breasts, and he could drag the body of a single girl in whatever direction he wanted. I will never forget these savage movements he made, smiling with his big white teeth.”²⁹ Flaubert frequently lists such striking examples. He describes a dervish person in Cairo walking around completely naked, except for a cap on his head. The bizarre act of women positioning themselves under the dervish’s urine in a quest for fertility adds another layer of sensationalism.

Said points out that the East is often depicted through a lens emphasizing its “eccentricity, backwardness, and silent indifference.”³⁰ By focusing on these bizarre acts, Flaubert reinforces the stereotype of the East as a place of irrational and superstitious behavior. In another observation, he recounts how a dervish in Rosetta “jumped on a woman and had sex with her in front of everyone; the women present took off their veils and tried to cover the scene.”³¹ This provocative and sensational scene aligns with Said’s critique of Orientalism’s fascination with sexual deviance and public spectacle.

Such depictions reinforce the Western perception of the East as a locus of moral laxity and deviation. This portrayal not only underscores Orientalists’ tendency to eroticize and eroticize Eastern women but also reflects their voyeuristic pleasure derived from observing what is perceived as the East’s boundless and primitive nature.³²

26 Flaubert, “Voyage en Orient 1849-1851,” 109.

27 Said, *Orientalism*, 1.

28 Said, “*Orientalism*,” 2.

29 Flaubert, *Voyage en Orient*, 47-48.

30 Said, *Orientalism*, p. 206.

31 Flaubert, *Voyage en Orient*, 40.

32 Said, *Orientalism*, 40-103-190.

Toward the end of his journey in Egypt, Flaubert had the opportunity to visit two slave trade ships and make vivid notes of his visit. In his notes, he described women on ships as “marked by tattoos.” He particularly mentions a woman with rows of tattoo marks and blisters stamped across her back, from top to bottom. These vivid images emphasize the physical pain and brutal treatment these women experience, turning them into objects of pity and curiosity. Flaubert also mentions elderly Black women who accompanied the new enslaved people, acting as comforters and interpreters. These elderly women “taught the new slaves to resign themselves to their fate and acted as interpreters between them and the traders.”³³

This depiction highlights the systemic nature of the slave trade and the various roles that individuals played in this trade. The presence of the elderly Black women, repeatedly traveling with the newly enslaved people, underscores a sense of resignation and cyclical suffering, supporting a panorama of “perpetual misery and hopelessness” in the East. Furthermore, with all its subjects, this scene vividly illustrates the complex dynamics of power and exploitation in the East. Said criticized this depiction, noting how Orientalist discourse often reduces Eastern societies to simplistic narratives of exploitation and submission, stripping individuals of their agency and humanity.³⁴

In a letter to Frédéric Baudry dated July 21, 1850, Flaubert presented a critical and profoundly Orientalist view of Egypt's socio-political situation. His observations and thoughts are imbued with a sense of Western superiority and cynicism, which aligns with Edward Said's critiques of Orientalism. Flaubert describes the prevailing economic mindset in Egypt as follows: “We eat, we waste, we think it is a pleasure.” This casual indifference reflects the perception of the East as inherently extravagant and disorderly. Edward Said points out that Orientalist discourse often frames Eastern societies as incapable of proper governance and economic management, contrasting them with the rational and efficient West.³⁵ Flaubert then critiques the political situation, asserting that “fifteen hundred men could conquer the country if no European government interfered,” emphasizing his belief in the fragility and vulnerability of Eastern societies.³⁶ This assertion aligns with Said's argument that the West often views the East as weak and requires western protection or conquest.³⁷ Flaubert's economic and military criticisms, noting the inability to improve and develop textile factories and neglected fortresses due to high costs, support the image of Egypt as inefficient and poorly managed. Flaubert concludes with a derogatory assessment of Egyptian rule, summarizing it as “the whip and baksheesh (kourbash-batches).”³⁸ This reductionist view emphasizes the perception

33 Flaubert, *Voyage en Orient*, 75.

34 Said, *Orientalism*, 96-97.

35 Said, *Orientalism*, 40.

36 Said, *Orientalism*, 206-207.

37 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, (New York: Random House, 1994), 8-11.

38 “21 juillet 1850-de Gustave Flaubert à Frédéric Baudry,” in “Correspondance,” Université de Rouen Normandie, accessed June 10, 2024, https://flaubert.univ-rouen.fr/correspondance/correspondance/21-juillet-1850-de-gustave-flaubert-%C3%A0-fr%C3%A9d%C3%A9ric-baudry/?writing_place_id=4.

of the East as ruled by cruelty and corruption, reinforcing Orientalist stereotypes of moral and administrative inferiority.

Palestine—In July 1850, Flaubert transitioned from vivid and often sensational accounts of Egypt to accounts of Palestine. He carries with him the same Orientalist lens as he observes and documents the landscapes and cultures of Palestine and Jerusalem. Moving from the ancient ruins of Egypt to the holy sites of Palestine, the continuation of this narrative reveals how deeply entrenched these perceptions were, shaping not only his writings but also his Western understanding of the East.

As Flaubert shifts his focus to the sacred sites of Palestine, Orientalists' persistence views underscores the pervasive nature of such attitudes. His descriptions continue to reflect a mixture of fascination and condescension, illustrating the enduring influence of Orientalist thought on representations of Eastern cultures. This narrative highlights the broader implications of his work, contributing to the legacy of Western perspectives that often prioritize exoticism and otherness over genuine understanding.

Flaubert's travel notes from August 11, 1850, provide further insights into the Orientalist perspective critiqued by Edward Said. During his visit to Jerusalem, Flaubert confessed his lack of religious fervor compared to his expectations. Instead, he finds the most exciting sight: A butcher's shop. "Blood and its many colors are everywhere. There's a terrible smell. The place is filled with intestines." The butcher's remark to him, "The first thing you see in the holy city is blood," emphasizes a sense of disappointment.³⁹

In a letter to Jules Cloquet dated September 7, 1850, Flaubert described his encounter with lepers in Jerusalem: "I have never seen lepers so horrific as to make my hair stand on end. The colors on their bodies resemble those of Velasquez or Ribera."⁴⁰ This depiction not only exoticizes the suffering of lepers but also places them in an esthetic context, reducing their dire situation to a mere visual spectacle.

These descriptions highlight the Orientalist tendency to view the East through a lens of grotesque fascination and aestheticism, often stripping the subjects of their humanity and complex realities. Flaubert's observations in Jerusalem, which focus on sensational and disturbing imagery, align with Said's critique of Orientalist discourse, which frequently emphasizes the exotic and the bizarre at the expense of a deeper understanding of Eastern cultures.

Flaubert's experiences in Rabatijh further revealed his Orientalist perspective. He recounts being verbally assaulted with cries of "Christian dog, may God burn and destroy you" and notes that he needed three armed guides for protection.⁴¹ This depiction emphasizes the perceived hostility and danger of the East, reinforcing stereotypes of the Orient as a place of barbarism and religious fanaticism.⁴²

39 Flaubert, *Voyage en Orient*, 147-148.

40 "7 septembre 1850-de Gustave Flaubert à Jules Cloquet," in "Correspondance," Université de Rouen Normandie, accessed on June 10, 2024, https://flaubert.univ-rouen.fr/correspondance/correspondance/7-septembre-1850-de-gustave-flaubert-%C3%A0-jules-cloquet/?person_id=152.

41 Flaubert, *Voyage en Orient*, 167.

42 Said, *Orientalism*, 57-67.

In Zafet, Flaubert describes the ambience in a local family's home filled with fleas, bedbugs, and discomfort: "The whole family sprawled together on the mattresses, the father snoring, the mother urinating, the children screaming, and the place reeking of stench."⁴³ This portrayal reduces the local inhabitants to caricatures, highlighting their perceived squalor and lack of decorum.⁴⁴ Similar to his experience in Rabatijh, this description underscores Said's critique of the tendency to view and depict Eastern societies through a lens of prejudice and disdain.

Flaubert's visit to a bathhouse in the middle of the bazaar reveals another layer of Orientalist fascination with exotic and sensual. He describes a scene in which a barren woman kisses a fellah's genitals in hopes of finding a cure, referencing the superstitious and primitive nature of Eastern practices.⁴⁵ His observations of the beauty of young men in the bazaar and his hypothetical contemplation of being a woman on a pleasure trip to Jerusalem further emphasized an erotic view of the East.⁴⁶

This admiration for the exotic and sensual reinforces the stereotypical and reductive views he encountered in Rabatijh and Zafet, presenting a consistent pattern in his depiction of the East. Flaubert's accounts illustrate a coherent model in which the Orient is portrayed as alluring and base, a place of primitive practices and sensual allure that underscores Western notions of superiority and cultural dominance.

Lebanon—During his visit to Beirut, Flaubert drew deep reflection on the changes in the East. In describing a café with a billiard table on the street leading to the tailors' bazaar, he notes the presence of Turks wearing European-style clothes. This observation leads him to long reflections on the mixture of Eastern and Western elements. In his notes, he writes, "What is happening to the East? Perhaps the East is waiting for the Bedouins to recreate it,"⁴⁷ revealing a nostalgic longing for an imagined, untainted East. This sentiment aligns with Said's idea that Orientalist discourse romanticizes a primitive, pure East, in contrast to the corrupt present influenced by Western modernity.

Flaubert's observations in Beirut, which he repeatedly notes, contribute to a generalization that he applies to the East: "More men and fewer women, but women are still not desired."⁴⁸ Flaubert's comment on the prevalence of pederasty in Beirut reflects an Orientalist fascination with sexual deviance. Flaubert's fixation on such practices reinforces the stereotype of the East as a place of moral laxity and sexual excess.

His interactions with the Druze, who criticized the immorality of the Lebanese, further illustrated this perspective. He notes, "A husband sells his wife's use to strangers,"⁴⁹ linking this perceived immorality to contact with Turks. This narrative not only eroticizes and sensationalizes

43 Flaubert, *Voyage en Orient*, 171.

44 Said, *Orientalism*, 36-40

45 Flaubert, *Voyage en Orient*, 177-78.

46 Flaubert, *Voyage en Orient*, 177-78.

47 Flaubert, *Voyage en Orient*, 182.

48 Flaubert, *Voyage en Orient*, 183.

49 Flaubert, *Voyage en Orient*, 195.

Eastern practices, but it also underscores a sense of cultural degradation attributed to foreign influences.

Anatolia—Flaubert’s transition from Beirut to Rhodes and then to Anatolia signifies his continued exploration of regions where ancient traditions blended with contemporary influences. His arrival in İzmir marks the beginning of his journey through Anatolia, where he maintained the Orientalist perspective that colored his previous narratives of the Eastern world. As Flaubert travels through Anatolia, his reflections on the East reveal a deep admiration for its historical grandeur. In his notes, he writes, “Ah, how beautiful!” The East and its ancient splendor. How the God of Love must have reveled here in his purple cloak embroidered with gold.”⁵⁰ This romanticized view aligns with Edward Said’s critique of Orientalism, which posits that the West often constructs the East as a timeless realm of beauty and sentimentality, fulfilling Western fantasies of an exotic past.⁵¹

In İzmir, Flaubert’s observations continue to blend admiration with condescension. His descriptions of the city and its inhabitants reflect his fascination with the historical and cultural layers defining the region. As he moves from the cosmopolitan port city of İzmir to the more remote areas of Muğla, his accounts carry the same traces of exoticism and vividness that have characterized his journey so far.

Crossing the Dardanelles, Flaubert evokes the legacy of Lord Byron, a figure synonymous with Romanticism and Orientalist admiration for the East. “I think of Byron. This is his poetry. This is his East. This is the East of the Turk with the curved sword.”⁵² This reference to Byron underscores the continuity of Orientalist images portraying the East as a land of romance, adventure, and danger. Said argues that such depictions reinforce Western notions of heroism and cultural superiority.⁵³

Istanbul—When Flaubert’s journey to the East brought him to Istanbul in November 1850, his observations continued to reflect the Orientalist perspective criticized by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism*. Situated on the border between Europe and Asia, Istanbul presents a fascinating blend of culture and history, which Flaubert captures with his characteristic mix of admiration and judgment.

Flaubert notes that young Greek boys with long hair buy sugared almonds in the back streets in Galata.⁵⁴ This scene evokes an exotic and peculiar feeling similar to what he experienced in Egypt, emphasizing Istanbul’s blend of cultures and traditions. Flaubert’s focus on such everyday scenes aligns with his Orientalist tendency to romanticize and eroticize the ordinary aspects of Eastern life, presenting them as curiosities for Western readers.⁵⁵

50 Flaubert, *Voyage en Orient*, 229.

51 Said, *Orientalism*, 1.

52 Flaubert, *Voyage en Orient*, 240.

53 Said, *Orientalism*, 205-206.

54 Flaubert, *Voyage en Orient*, 245.

55 Said, *Orientalism*, 1-2.

In a letter to Louis Bouilhet dated November 14, 1850, Flaubert addresses the issue of sexually transmitted diseases within the context of the Eastern Question: "Sexually transmitted diseases should be considered within the Eastern Question."⁵⁶ This statement reflects a broader Orientalist narrative that associates the East with moral and sexual decay. Said argues that such depictions reinforce Western notions of cultural and moral superiority, portraying the East as inherently corrupt and immoral.⁵⁷

Flaubert's account of Turkish marriage customs also illustrates this perspective. He describes the private life of a Turkish man: "He takes a wife and has sex with her. Three days later, he saw a young boy. He brought him home and abandoned his wife."⁵⁸ This depiction of indecisive and morally ambiguous sexual behavior reinforces the stereotype of the East as a place of perverse and capricious sexuality.

Flaubert notes cultural changes in Istanbul, where people attend theaters and operas and European clothing predominates: "The two worlds are still mixed, but the new one is prevailing. Even in Istanbul, European costumes dominate."⁵⁹ This observation highlights the tension between traditional Eastern customs and the encroaching influence of Western modernity. Said argued that Orientalist discourse often portrays the East as static and unchanging, struggling to adapt to Western influences.⁶⁰

Conclusion

Gustave Flaubert's meticulously recorded letters and travel notes from his journey to the East offer a vivid depiction of the Orientalist perspective critiqued by Edward Said in his *Orientalism*. By examining Flaubert's descriptions of Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon, and Anatolia, this analysis reveals the deep-seated prejudices and romanticized visions that characterize his observations. By analyzing these passages through Said's framework, we gain a critical understanding of the West's construction of the East and the pervasive impact of Orientalist discourse.

Flaubert's notes are filled with vivid and often sensational descriptions that emphasize Eastern life's exotic, grotesque, and morally ambiguous aspects. From the crowded streets of Cairo to the desolate landscapes of Jerusalem, from the cultural crossroads of Beirut to the historical riches of Anatolia, Flaubert's narratives display a condescending admiration for the East. His focus on sexual deviance, moral laxity, and cultural decay reinforces stereotypes of the East as fundamentally different from and inferior to the West. This narrative not only maintains the image of the East as a place of perpetual backwardness and barbarism, but it also legitimizes the notion of Western superiority and intervention.

56 Flaubert, "Voyage en Orient 1849-1851," 129.

57 Said, *Orientalism*, 186-190.

58 Flaubert, *Voyage en Orient*, 249-250.

59 Flaubert, *Voyage en Orient*, 250.

60 Said, *Orientalism*, p. 206.

Flaubert's eyes reveal how the East is romanticized as a land of ancient splendor and sensual allure but also criticized for not adhering to Western standards of progress and morality. His depictions of the changing cultural landscapes in which Eastern traditions struggle against the tide of Western modernity reflect a nostalgic longing for an imagined, untainted East that exists only in the Western imagination. This contradiction between admiration, condescension, and fascination and judgment lies at the heart of Orientalist discourse.

This study contributes to the literature by critically examining Flaubert's travel writings through the lens of Orientalism. By applying Said's insights to these historical texts, we can uncover the underlying power dynamics and cultural prejudices that shape Western representations of the East. This analysis deepens our understanding of Flaubert's works and highlights the enduring impact of Orientalist narratives on Western perceptions of the East.

In conclusion, when viewed through the lens of Orientalism, Flaubert's journey to the East reveals more about Western fantasies and prejudices than the realities of Eastern cultures. Flaubert's vivid and often problematic depictions are a powerful reminder of the need to critically examine historical narratives and their lasting influence on contemporary understandings of cultural identity and difference. Flaubert's writings blend admiration with condescension and curiosity with judgment, encapsulate Orientalist discourse's complex and often troubling dynamics, and offer valuable insights for literary scholars and cultural historians. This study underscores the importance of reevaluating historical texts to reveal the pervasive influence of Orientalism and its role in shaping our worldview.

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Online Resources

URL-1: https://flaubert.univ-rouen.fr/correspondance/correspondance/3-f%C3%A9vrier-1850-de-gustave-flaubert-%C3%A0-caroline-m%C3%A8re-flaubert/?year=1850&writing_place_id=38.

URL-2: https://flaubert.univ-rouen.fr/correspondance/correspondance/21-juillet-1850-de-gustave-flaubert-%C3%A0-fr%C3%A9d%C3%A9ric-baudry/?writing_place_id=4.

URL-3: https://flaubert.univ-rouen.fr/correspondance/correspondance/7-septembre-1850-de-gustave-flaubert-%C3%A0-jules-cloquet/?person_id=152.