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## **Orientalist Discourses And The Politics Of Representation: The Decontextualization Of Sale's 'A Preliminary Discourse' On His Quran Translation**

**Ahmad Nadeem**, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Govt. Ambala Muslim Graduate College, Sargodha [ahmedsahibzada92@gmail.com](mailto:ahmedsahibzada92@gmail.com),

**Kanwal Zahra**, Assistant Professor, Department of English, University of Gujrat, [dr.kanwal@uog.edu.pk](mailto:dr.kanwal@uog.edu.pk)

**Muhammad Javed Iqbal**, Lecturer, Centre for Languages and Translation Studies, University of Gujrat, [javediqbal188@gmail.com](mailto:javediqbal188@gmail.com)

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### **Abstract**

This paper analyses 'A Preliminary Discourse' added to George Sale's English translation of the Quran. The preliminary discourses contextualize the Quran translation to fit in the orientalist view of the Quran as a human authored book and not a divine testament. The research takes Gumperz's (1982, 1992) concept of 'contextualization', Goffman's concept of frames (Goffman 1974), and the concept of entextualization (Bauman and Briggs 1990; Silverstein and Urban 1996) as the perspectives for the analysis. Through the critical analysis research shows that in 'A Preliminary Discourse' Sale has contextualized the Quran in a particular way to disapprove the Quran as divine revelation. In the backdrop of orientalist discourses this representation is political and biased.

**Key Words:** contextualization, entextualisation, frames, orientalist discourses, politics of representation

### **Introduction**

Western representation of Islam has always been a site of heated debate. The orientalists who worked on Islam claimed that they were producing authentic knowledge whereas Said (1978) and many other critics view it as a politics of representation. In this backdrop this article explores the nature of orientalist representation of Islam in Sale's 'A Preliminary Discourse' to his translation of the Quran. The researcher has decontextualized and entextualized the Preliminary Discourse to foreground the political nature of the representation and the power struggle and silencing involved in it.

Said's seminal work *Orientalism* (1978) introduces the idea of orientalist discourses as an academic endeavor to create knowledge about the orient for political purposes. The power of representation and the access to discursive space enables imperial scholars to produce a body of knowledge that marginalizes the people who are being represented in these discourses. However, Ashcroft (2004) is of the view that though 'Orientalism' has emerged as the central narrative of Europe's interactions with its others, but it has sparked debate on all sides due to its extremely narrow and selective treatment of 'Orientalism'. We may then see that Said's work fulfils a far greater job established for the "Oriental": to reclaim the power of representation from the dominant culture. This requires viewing Said's work as an argument rather than as the presentation of some transcendental historical fact (Ashcroft 2004).

The representation of Islam by the orientalists itself is a political phenomenon. The academic research conducted by the orientalists is not at all neutral and unbiased. Said (1978) even questions the very possibility of an unbiased representation:

The real issue is whether there can be a true representation of anything, or whether any and all representations, because they are representations, are embedded first in the language and then in the culture, institutions and political ambience of the representer. If the latter alternative is the correct one (as I believe it is) then we must be prepared to accept the fact that a representation is eo ipso implicated, intertwined, embedded and interwoven with a great many other things besides the 'truth,' which is itself a representation. (Said, 1978, p. 272)

The linguistic, cultural, institutional and political dimension of the representation and the position of representer make this representation a political phenomenon. Ashcroft (2004) is of the view that this view of representation is the most important contribution of Said and that 'Orientalism transformed both the representation and the understanding'. The crux of the transformation is the fact that the postcolonial engagement with imperial discourses takes back the role of self-representation. In this regard Ashcroft observes:

Post-colonial transformation occurs when these societies take hold of the various cultural technologies which form the substance of colonial domination and use them for the purposes of a particularly subtle and constructive form of resistance. The key to the success of this resistance has not been opposition, but the seizing of the power of self-representation. (Ashcroft 2004, p.5)

In this background our argument in this paper is that the Western representation of Islam marginalizes the Muslim perspective and it is through a critical discourse analysis that Muslim voice may be recovered through self-representation. With this view Sale's 'A Preliminary Discourse' is analyzed to foreground the misrepresentation of Islam by Sale.

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Sale has developed his argument by contextualizing and interpreting the data from sources of Islamic history, however by omitting some significant details and interpreting it from a particular context he has produced a discourse which (mis-)represents Islam by excluding Muslim perspective and interpretation. Contextualization is a concept introduced by Gumperz (1982, 1992) which:

‘comprises all activities by participants which make relevant, maintain, revise, cancel . . . any aspect of context which, in turn, is responsible for the interpretation of an utterance in its particular locus of occurrence’ (Auer 1992: 4).

Though the idea of contextualization is primarily developed for the conversational interactions, however as Bakhtin (1986) has highlighted the dialogic nature of all linguistic activities, a written text may also be seen in this backdrop. Blommaert (2005) observes that:

‘...whenever we read a book, we recontextualise what we read and add or change meanings. The book is re-set in a new contextualising universe and becomes a new book -- but we do drag along with us the baggage of the history of contextualisation/interpretation of the text.’ (Blommaert 2005: 46)

All texts are produced by contextualizing and interpreting the information which are selectively gathered from the sources. Blommaert (2005) relates this with ‘Goffman’s concept of frames (Goffman 1974)’ which in his view ‘comes closest to the concept of contextualisation’. The analysis of a contextualized and framed discourse therefore involves decontextualization and recontextualization. In Blommaert’s view (2005) recontextualization also involves the intertextuality and entextualization. Using these insights, this paper has first foregrounded the context of Sale’s discourses. Then by adding the Muslim perspective through the recontextualization the political nature of the representation of Islam by Sale is highlighted.

### **The Contextualization of Sale’s ‘A Preliminary Discourse’**

The Quran translation tradition in the West is known as "the orientalist translations of the Quran," and Sale's translation is a part of that lineage (Ali 2004: p. 324). The Koran, often known as the Alcoran of Muhammad, is the name of the translation of the Quran by Sale. In 1734 CE, the translation was released. Sale's father was a trader, and he was born in London. He learnt Arabic and studied law. Because of his proficiency in Arabic, he was able to join the London chapter of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK) (Qidwai 241). His translation of the New Testament into Arabic was requested by the community in order to spread Christianity among Arabic-speaking people (Qidwai 241). Sale developed an interest in the English translation of the Quran as a result of his interest in Arabic.

The early Orientalists' translation of the Quran was followed by Sale's translation. The earliest Latin translation of the Quran into Europe emerged in the 12th century, in 1143 CE. Peter the Venerable gave Robert Ketenesius the job of translating the Quran. This translation was meant to challenge Islam (Ali 2004). According to Ali, this Latin translation "became the basis for the translation of the Quran into current European languages." (p. 325)

In 1649, the Quran was translated into English for the first time. The translation was done by Alexander Ross, and the publication took place in London. Ross acknowledged that his translation was the English version of du Ryer's French translation. Ryer and Ross were both eager to disprove the Quran's status as a sacred text (Ali 2004). The French version of du Ryer was translated into numerous additional European languages in addition to English. Ali opines:

"Thus for more than five hundred years, from the middle of the 12<sup>th</sup> to the end of 17<sup>th</sup> century there were two basic translations of the Quran, the one in Latin by Robert Ketenesius (1143 CE) and the other in French by du Ryer (1647 CE) from which other translations were made into Italian, German, Dutch, English and Russian." (Ali 2004: p. 326).

Both versions were created to misinterpret the Quran and disprove its message in an effort to establish the Quran as a fake book. The translations employed a variety of tactics, including "omissions, commissions, and transpositions" (Ali 2004: p. 326). These translations were made for Christian audiences with the intention of "giving the Europeans a skewed impression of the Quran and of Islam." (Ali 2004: p. 326).

Another Latin translation of the Quran by Ludovico Marracci first appeared in the 17th century. The Roman Catholic translator Marracci explicitly said that his goal in producing this translation was "to refute and discredit Islam and the Quran" (Ali 2004: p. 327). In many aspects, Marracci's translation was unique from others. Along with translating the text, he also included explanations and notes. (Ali 2004: p. 327) Additionally, he created "a companion volume" that was meant to serve as an introduction to this translation and explanation (Ali 2004: p. 327). The topic was "Refutation of the Quran." Marracci enumerated all of the prior Orientalists' criticisms of the Prophet of Islam (PBUH) and the Quran in this introduction. The explanation and commentary made reference to the outlandish Arabic interpretations on the Quran. This translation's first publication was in Padua in 1698 CE, and its second was there in 1721 CE. Immediately following its release, Marracci's translation was made available in several contemporary European tongues, and "the famous English translation of George Sale... was based on Marracci's work." (Ali 2004: p. 327).

There are significant parallels between Sale's and Marracci's translations. According to Rodwell, who personally translated the Quran into English, as stated in Muhammad Mohar Ali's "The Quran and the Orientalists":

“Sale’s work mainly owes its merits to the research of Marracci Sale has ... followed Marracci too closely, especially by introducing his periphrastic comments into the body of the text, as well as by his constant use of Latinised instead of savon words” (Ali 2004: p. 328).

A more than 200-page introduction, titled "A Preliminary Discourse," was added by Sale, like Marracci, to his translation of the Quran. Additionally, he inserted a brief preamble outlining his goals for the translation of the Quran. Like Marracci, Sale also accompanied his translation with explanation notes. Sale only reluctantly acknowledged his responsibility to Marracci's translation, despite the fact that he made very little changes to it. Mohar Ali opines:

“Thus Sale’s work was essentially an English rendering of Marracci’s with the modification of what was considered to be his too little adherence to the Arabic idiom and the ‘unsatisfactory’ and impertinent aspects of his ‘refutation of the Quran’ (Ali 2004: p. 328)

Sale's bias and hostility for Islam and the Quran are extreme. Sale called the Quran an "imposture" in the preface to the translation titled to the reader, denounced earlier translations of the Quran as "ignorant or unfair" because they gave the Quran a favorable impression, and stated that he was attempting an impartial translation that would manifest the Quran's flaws and demonstrate its falsity. He claims:

“But whatever use an impartial version of the Quran may be of in other respects, it is absolutely necessary to undeceive those who, from the ignorant or unfair translations which have appeared, have entertained too favourable an opinion of the original, and also to enable us effectually to expose the imposture; none of those who have hitherto undertaken that province, not excepting Dr. Prideaux himself, having succeeded to the satisfaction of the judicious, for want of being complete master of the controversy.” (PIII)

This passage amply demonstrates Sale's motivation for translating as well as his disdain for the source material. Therefore, Sale's effort is not concerned with discovering the truth, but rather with disproving the assertions made in the original text. Sale behaves superiorly in his translation, using a master narrative to assess a minor narrative. Because of this attitude, Sale is visibly careless with the delicate style and discursive patterns of the original text.

### **The Decontextualization of ‘A Preliminary Discourse’**

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In his introduction, "A preliminary Discourse," Sale elaborates his viewpoints on Islam, the Prophet of Islam, and the Quran. It establishes an Orientalist and Christian viewpoint on Islam and is divided into eight parts. Out of these eight parts, four parts are discussed in the following pages. This Christian and Orientalist viewpoint informs and shapes Sale's translation. The backdrop of Preliminary Discourse is contextualized and the analysis of this discourse will decontextualize Sale's representation to entextualize it as the part of the politics of representation of Islam and the Quran in the West. As earlier pointed out with reference to Said's Orientalism and Covering Islam, this representation of Islam by Orientalists omits the voice of Muslims in their representation. The following analysis of the first four parts of Preliminary discourse will add Muslim view to voice the silenced position.

In the first part of the discourse Sale establishes a context for his subsequent discussion on Islam and the Quran. Sale provides a brief review of the Arabs' history, religion, culture, and customs prior to the arrival of the Prophet Muhammad (PEACE BE UPON HIM) in part I. He discusses the diversity of tribal affiliations among Arabs as well as the sensitivity entrenched in tribe mentality related to various ancestral origins. After a thorough analysis of the landscape and population of the Peninsula, he draws the conclusion that Arabs were a group of people with contrasting allegiances. The people did not have a single point of authority because they had not yet reached the point in their social and societal development when unity and center were necessary and compelling in order to establish and maintain the order.

Sale conducts a thorough analysis of the Arabian Peninsula's terrain. All the provinces, with the exception of Yemmen, had barren soil, thus Arabs were forced to rely on trade and business to support them. They had prosperous trade ties both with their immediate neighbors and with distant nations. Due to their relationship, they had the chance to engage in cultural exchanges with citizens of various nations. They affected them and were affected by them. The Prophet Muhammad (PEACE BE UPON HIM) twice joined his uncle on such excursions when he was younger. These neighbors included Jordan, Syria, and Iraq.

According to Sale the ancient Arabs were Pagans, just like the Greeks, Romans, and Indians. Laat, Manat, and Uzza were the three most notable and revered idols that they worshipped. However, he is of the view that Arabs were heavily exposed to different religions like Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Judaism. Additionally, there were Sabees and Hunafaas (those who understood the fallacy of paganism but lacked direction to take the proper course). Christians communicated with Jews in Madina as they travelled to the Hijaz from Yemmen. The Hijazis were accustomed to a wide range of belief systems. Sale presents Arabia's religious plurality in a way that suggests that a new religion may be created with ease. He links these origins to a number of Islamic ideas in later responses. This is how he contextualizes his discourse on Islam in a particular way. But in doing so he does include the argument and interpretation of the Muslim on these details. By omitting the voice of those

whom he is representing to the western audience he follows the procedure of imperial orientalist discourses as elaborated by Said (1978).

Sale believed that Arabic people solely took pride in their poetry. Their poets served as both their historians and guides. People in the culture were illiterate and lacked the skills necessary for reading and writing. They relied on their memory to preserve their cultural heritage, including their poetic and linguistic expressions. By appreciating the poetic skills of Arabs Sale set the ground for claiming the beautiful style of the Quran as an influence of the contemporary poetic and literary tradition. However, Sale does not mention the Quranic challenge to the contemporaries regarding producing a text like the smallest Surah of the Quran which comprises only three verses. The Quranic challenge is presented in the very text of the Quran as a proof of its being Divine revelation (Al-Quran 2:23).

Sale provided some insight into the moral climate of the day. The main characteristics of Arab character were believed to be hospitality, charity, and bravery. On the down side, they had a propensity for violence, bloodshed, retaliation, brutality, and malice.

In their period of ignorance, the Arabs had developed three important sciences: astronomy, history, and genealogy. Even though they made little progress in astronomy, the ancient Arabs had a sufficient understanding of the stars to allow them to travel at night in the deserts.

The first section provides context for Sale's explanation in section 2. He repeatedly returns to this portion in section II and the other sections that follow in order to make his argument. According to him, the Quran is a self-declared revelation, and Islam is not a true religion. By putting the data in a particular frame Sale is set to prove the falsity of Islam. He completely ignores the Muslim interpretation of the facts that he presents. He does not feel any need to bother about the Muslim line of interpretation.

Sale discusses the situation of Christianity during the time of the Prophet Muhammad (PEACE BE UPON HIM) in Section II. "Of the state of Christianity, particularly of the eastern churches, and of Judaism, at the time of Muhammad's (PEACE BE UPON HIM) appearance; and of the methods taken by him for the establishing his religion, and the circumstances which concurred thereto" is how the title of this section sums up its subject matter. Sale believed that the Prophet of Islam devised a strategy to present himself as God's messenger in response to the circumstances. In this regard, he examines traditional eastern Christianity critically and states his opinion that Islam is a fraud and that the Quran was written by the Prophet Muhammad (PEACE BE UPON HIM) rather than being a divine revelation. Sale believes that the Prophet of Islam's reform campaign was made possible by the divide in Christianity and the corruption of Eastern Churches.

Sale asserts that because the Prophet Muhammad (PEACE BE UPON HIM) adopted many Jewish practices and ideas for his own faith, he had a favorable opinion towards Jews. Later, he changed his tune and declared his abhorrence for Jews.

According to Sale, the Prophet Muhammad (PEACE BE UPON HIM) had aspirations of becoming a renowned and towering figure, and it was this desire that led him to choose to present himself as a messenger. Sale also provides a brief biography of the Prophet Muhammad (PEACE BE UPON HIM), concluding that his success in presenting himself as the Prophet was the result of excellent planning, admirable character traits, and favorable personal circumstances. Sale, however, is adamant that the Prophet Muhammad (PEACE BE UPON HIM) fabricated his persona as a legitimate Prophet and that Islam is a human fabrication. In this section Sale's discussion on Islam's similarities with Judaism and Christianity are meant to build his argument regarding the falsity of Islam as a religion.

"Of the Quran itself, the peculiarities of that book; the manner of its being written and published and the general design of it" is the title of Section III. This section outlines Sale's opinions on the Quran's status as a revealed text. Sale links the Quran's varied characteristics back to past religious texts. In his opinion, Jewish scriptures, particularly the Torah, have an influence on how the Quran is divided into Chapters of varying length. All of the Quran's Surahs, with the exception of Surah 9, are introduced with the salutation Bismillah, in imitation of the Persian Magi, who started their works with a verse that conveyed the same idea.

Sale goes into great detail regarding how the Quran was put together. He claims that the various Quranic editions differ from one another. Seven separate primary additions are mentioned by him, two of which were utilized at Madina, a third at Makkah, a fourth at Kuffa, a fifth at Basra, a sixth in Syria, and the seventh, known as the common. Sale, like other Orientalists, actually views the seven recitations that are accepted among Muslims as recitations in seven editions.

Sale admires the Quran's beauty and style, despite the fact that at times he thinks it might be confusing. Sale asserts that the Quran contains repeats that have no logical or practical significance. He claims that Prophet Muhammad (PEACE BE UPON HIM) employs a variety of rhetorical strategies. According to him, this rhetorical technique is a parody of Old Testament rhetoric.

Sale claims that the doctrines and laws of the Quran are drawn from the Bible. The progressive revelation of the Quranic verses, in Sale's opinion, is a ruse to deceive the audience into believing it has been revealed and to adapt the laws to constantly shifting conditions. Despite the fact that his countrymen were unable to refute him, Sale is adamant that the Prophet Muhammad (PEACE BE UPON HIM) wrote the Quran himself.

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Sale goes into great length about the nature and process of the Quran's compilation. He believes that after the Prophet Muhammad passed away, the successors completed the entire organization of the text (PEACE BE UPON HIM). Based on oral tradition, this arrangement failed the final test of authenticity. He also discusses the problem of inconsistencies in the Qur'an, and claims that Muslim academics' idea of abrogation was used to resolve it.

Knowledge of Sale's perspective on the Quran as a sacred text requires a thorough understanding of this part. Sale does not have a sympathetic attitude toward the Quran because he wants to disprove it, and this affects both his translation and his attitude toward the text as a whole. He actually has no interest in discovering the text's veracity, which is essential to all interpretative operations including the translation itself.

Sale explores the Quranic concepts in section IV and shows how they have appeared in various religious systems. He believed that, in light of various religious traditions from the past, Prophet Muhammad (PEACE BE UPON HIM) developed the framework and principles of permissive injunctions connected to religious obligations. Sale believes that Muhammad (PEACE BE UPON HIM) purported to be the Prophet of God and that he claimed to reform this archaic religion known as Islam. The Prophet declared that Islam was not a new religion; rather, it was the same as that which was revealed to Adam but had been corrupted in his time.

Sale explains the framework of Islamic beliefs and behaviors to support his claim that the Quran is a forgery. Sale argues that the Jewish people, who themselves inherited this idea from the prehistoric Persian sources, are the ones who gave the Muslim theory of angels its origin. Due to the many parallels between Jewish and Muslim approaches to the notion, the concepts of Satan, devils, and geni are also borrowed from Jewish texts.

Sale disputes the Muslim assertion that the earlier texts have changed and asserts that the majority of Muslim ideas are derived from those earlier scriptures. He asserts that Jewish thought is undoubtedly responsible for the Jewish concepts of life after death, the grave, Munkir, and Nakeer. Sale goes into great length about Muslim eschatology. Sale contends that Muslim eschatology also borrows from Jewish and Magarian thought. These sources serve as the basis for both the descriptions of paradise and hell. Some of the customs, like circumcision and the custom of cleaning the body with sand and water, are taken directly from Christians and Jews. Jews are greatly responsible for the institutions of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. Sale claims that the Makkah pilgrimage and the associated rites were already common among the Arab pagans.

Sale hopes to disprove the legitimacy of the Quran as scripture through this conversation and show it to be a fake. The translation, commentary, and explanatory notes all exhibit this aggressive approach.

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In the four sections of Sale's 'A Preliminary Discourse' the primary emphasis of Sale is on the falsity of Islam's claim to be genuine religion. The argument is developed on the basis of similarities between Islam, Christianity and Judaism. However, this similarity is no secret that is discovered by Sale. Islam has the claim of being the continuity of earlier revealed religions. The claim clearly presented by the Quran as a proof of its being a divine message. Sale deliberately omits the claim of the Quran that it is the continuity of the earlier divine revelation and that the Quran not only testifies the earlier revelation but also points out the changes brought in the message of earlier Prophets by their followers (Al-Quran, 2:136; 3: 81-82; 5:48). The Quran has claimed to be the final testament in continuity of the earlier revelation. In the verse 136 of the Surah 2 the Quran says:

Say, we believe in God, and that which hath been sent down unto us, and that which hath been sent down unto Abraham, and Ismael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the tribes, and that which was delivered unto Moses, and Jesus, and that which was delivered unto the prophets from their Lord: We make no distinction between any of them, and to God are we resigned. (Translation by George Sale)

Sale's own translation shows that the Quran does not claim to be a new religion and claims to be the continuity of Semitic tradition of divine revelation and Prophethood. Therefore, similarity is expected and it should not be presented as a proof without the acknowledgement of the claim of the Quran. In the verses 81-82 of Surah 3 the Quran claims that the prophet Muhammad is the final prophet and Allah took oath in the spiritual realm from all prophets to support him spiritually and believe in him as he testifies their prophethood and their message:

And remember when God accepted the covenant of the prophets, saying, this verily is the scripture and the wisdom which I have given you: Hereafter shall an Apostle come unto you, conforming the truth of that scripture which is with you; ye shall surely believe on Him, and ye shall assist Him. God said, are ye firmly resolved, and do ye accept my covenant on this condition? They answered, we are firmly resolved: God said, be ye therefore witnesses; and I also bear witness with you: And whosoever turneth back after this, they are surely the transgressors. (Translation by George Sale)

In these verses the Quran claims that prophet Muhammad carries the same message with more details as was presented by the earlier prophets. In Verse 48 of Surah 5 the relation between the Quran and earlier divine books is more clearly elaborated:

We have also sent down unto thee the book of the Koran with truth, confirming that scripture which was revealed before it; and preserving the same safe from corruption. Judge therefore between them according to that which God hath revealed; and follow not their desires, by swerving from the truth which hath come unto thee. Unto every

of you have we given a law, and an open path; and if God had pleased, he had surely made you one people; but he hath thought fit to give you different laws, that he might try you in that which he hath given you respectively. Therefore, strive to excel each other in good works: Unto God shall ye all return, and then will he declare unto you that concerning which ye have disagreed. (Translation by George Sale)

In this verse the Quran claims that it testifies the earlier messages of God and the diversity of religion is a divine decree though all these religions have an essential similarity at the core level. However, in his preliminary discourse Sale does not voice this argument of the Quran and claims that the borrowing is a strategy of devising a false religion. By hiding this point view Sale does not represent Islam. Rather he is building a case against Islam by hiding the claims of Islam and Quran.

In fact, Sale's position is the orientalist position that generates knowledge about east to control the colonized East. It is the part of the politics of representation earlier mentioned in background to the study. The Muslim perspective is silenced by omitting the arguments put forth in the Quran and subsequent historical and polemical debates of muslim scholars and the tradition of Islam. This type of representation is typical of western imperialism and the knowledge generated in such discourses are reflective of western biases towards East and the representation of the East is obviously biased.

## **Conclusion**

It is evident from the above discussion that Sale's 'A preliminary Discourse' is an orientalist representation of Islam. It omits the voice of Muslims while representing them. The representation of Islam to the west by orientalist has an obvious political purpose. It serves the Empire and imperial discourse. It creates asymmetrical power relation in terms of access to representation. The analysis of this representation has revealed the imperialist ideology behind the orientalist endeavors in editing, translating and interpreting Muslim texts through the history. At the surface level it seems to be a great service of knowledge and learning. However, it is an important part imperial project of colonizing the east and creating hegemony by usurping the discursive space.

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