

## XENOPHOBIA: AN OUTCOME OF ORIENTALISM

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### Abstract

Wikipedia defines xenophobia as “a fear and distrust of that which is perceived to be foreign or strange”. Loosely described as feelings of an in-group towards an out-group and it can be seen as the desire of the in-group to preserve its purity, a suspicion of its activities and an intent to eliminate the out-group as to assert their own identity. Xenophobia can also be exhibited in the form of an “uncritical exaltation of another culture” in which a culture is ascribed “an unreal, stereotyped and exotic quality.” What Edward Said contends in his book *Orientalism* is a process of “othering” which has taken a new force with the nationalist tendencies of the countries in Europe and USA (in the domain of the present discussion) and led to a new surge of hate crimes, bigotry and racist incidents in these countries. The body of knowledge which created the binary categories for the Orient and the Occident has a major contribution to the current spur of xenophobia and can be accounted for among other causes of globalization and capitalist reconstruction for the current crisis of humanity as is visible from the increase in terrorism in the Western countries and also from the Syrian crisis.

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Xenophobia was the 2016 ‘Word of The Year’ and it gained a widespread reality around the election of Donald Trump as the president of America and during Brexit. Obama also used the word and said that Trump’s presidential campaign was not run on populism but “nativism or xenophobia.” Interestingly, the previous year’s word was “identity”. These facts are of much significance if we observe the cultural trends which reflect a movement towards conservative values. Cris Shore observes in his ‘Ethnicity, Xenophobia and Boundaries of Europe’ that cultural chauvinism crystallizes most sharply in situations where people feel that their culture is at risk, that is, when the boundaries which serve to define a people’s sense of culture and community appear to be threatened or violated. It becomes most vocal and militant when people’s jobs and economic security is threatened. Said’s concept of ‘other’ here helps in how the people or majority white Christian masses view the migrants who have as a result of globalization been able to live in the same countries due to employment opportunities etcetera. The earlier perception of their enigmatic existence has merged with a brutish or savage identity and given rise to the white man’s superiority over the coexisting

masses whose origins can be traced back to the Orient of book of knowledge's making. Said finds a perception of East in the literature, created by the powerful colonizers which presents East in direct opposition to the cultural values of the West. He further instigates that this perception or identity is made with the help of a regulated traffic between the imagination and reality by the authorities of power. In his book he also identifies countries like Britain, France and USA for exercising their political and economic influence over the world in straight reference to the brute political, economic and military authority.

The new European 'culture-area' frequently referred to in official EU resolutions and documents echoes the old culture-area concept in early writing; the idea of distinctive regions set apart from others by race, religion, language and habitat. In the case of Europe, it is a 'civilization' rather than just a culture: one set apart from (and usually above or superior to) others by Christianity, science and the Caucasian race. The merging of ethnic identity with citizenship has rendered the contribution of people of non-European origins to the economic, cultural and social life of Europe and they are consequently viewed as intruders. The danger that permeates such actions is that xenophobia might become a respectable construct in the propaganda which excludes these others to create a sense of 'togetherness' among the people who harbor nationalistic and economically competitive tendencies in Europe and America. As Alibhai warns "One way of triggering such a frenzy of togetherness would be to create the image of demons at the door. A more sophisticated way, though, is to assert the existence of a shared European ethnic identity, emanating from a common Graeco-Roman tradition. This is the current talk of many right wingers who claim that the core culture which runs through the backbone of Europe needs to be nurtured and protected from alien influences.

The process of ascribing a cultural identity to these countries is often laden with Eurocentric and elitist assumptions about the constituents of this cultural identity of these countries. Said too comments that the Occident derives its identity by fixing the Orient as its "surrogate" self. The attributes such as progressive, rational, scientific, noble, civilized and pure are associated with the West while the East becomes backward, emotional, ahistorical, corrupt, savage and decadent. Such a selective and partial view of Europe's cultural legacy becomes a genealogical success story while the chaos and descend into ruins is left for the 'decadent', 'cruel' and 'brutish' East. The elitist assumption can be seen as the moving forward of classical Greek civilization, Christianity, the renaissance, the scientific revolution, the enlightenment and the industrial revolution, and culminating in liberal democracy, capitalism and the rule of law as stated by Cris Shore, which can be dubbed as from 'Plato to

Nato'. The attempts thus have been to unite against a common enemy and here the national identity merges with the supposed cultural identity to pit the masses on top of the race hierarchy against the marginal or previously colonized groups. Here the ideological movement against Islam, Africa and Asia, sometimes on commercial account has been resounding. Fontaine also indicated the existence of a discourse that represents the European Community as the heir and repository of Enlightenment ideals of liberty, progress, rationality and civilization. Characteristic of this discourse is its uncritical identification of the idea of Europe or the neo-colonial states with the notion of 'civilisation', and a conceptual dualism which contrasts the sophisticated European homeland with the Eastern state of anarchy, barbarism and backwardness. Such descriptions readily align with Said's idea of the Orient as the Other and is full of colonial and imperial resonance.

In the present capitalist world, the economic thus plays a pivotal role in outlining the primary concerns of people. The widespread migration has made it easy for the majority of white population living in a country to negotiate their identity in terms of their race and in that same process to establish the 'others.' With a rise in unemployment and the aftermath of witnessing economic instability, the othering acquires a more assertive strain. The prior powerless people of the Orient or colonized areas, now equipped with ways to grasp economic opportunities such as education have come to be seen as a threat to the whites in the times of massive competition in the global employment models. The propagation of this ideology of cultural superiority of whites (with origins such as EU or USA) by cultural materialism which can be seen in the popular culture (movies, books and information media) and our everyday discourse thus, has had a major contribution to ignite incidents of hate crime and bigotry.

The epistemic violence done to represent the Orient as an exotic, savage and ahistorical place has made it vulnerable to major violations of human rights by the few powerful countries. The general human sentiments are manipulated to an outrageous extent due to these created identities. The continuous direct violence in countries like Iraq and Syria and the atrocities in Syria are not given space in media while minor disturbances in America and Europe get ample coverage. The event of Brexit was concluded to be strongly linked to xenophobia by scientists. The 'Leave Campaign' gave a new acceptable way to express xenophobia which had been mongering since the colonial and postcolonial discourse, fed on by the government. The horrific hate crimes in Britain reached an all-time high after Brexit as an increase of 29% was noted from the previous year. What is being cited as an

‘unprecedented’ occurrence is predictable if one were to examine closely the forces that had been at play in creating polemic superior and inferior categories. It was noted in Britain that the anti-Muslim or xenophobic hatred was no longer isolated to pockets of United Kingdom, and it is a phenomenon that affects mainly visible Muslims at a street level, with the vast majority of victims being women and perpetrators male. Greater Manchester Police’s data showed a 500 per cent increase in reported anti-Muslim hate crimes after Abedi’s bombing, with 224 reports in the following month compared with 37 during the same period in 2016. The National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) said police recorded 234 hate crime incidents 48 hours after the Westminster attack, 273 following the Manchester bombing and 319 two days after the London Bridge attack. On average, there were 171 hate crimes per day in 2016.

In Canada, when it comes to opinions on both Sikh's and Muslims, a poll done by Maclean's revealed that only 28% of Canadians view Islam favorably, and only 30% viewed the Sikh religion favorably. 45% of respondents believed Islam encourages violence. In Quebec in particular, only 17% of respondents had a favorable view of Muslims. As in most countries, many people in the U.S. continue to be xenophobic against other races. In the opinion of various US civil rights and human rights organizations, "Discrimination permeates all aspects of life in the United States, and extends to all communities of color." Discrimination against racial, ethnic, and religious minorities, especially when it comes to African Americans, is widely acknowledged. Members of every major American ethnic and religious minority have perceived discrimination in their dealings with other minority racial and religious groups. Philosopher Cornel West has stated that "racism is an integral element within the very fabric of American culture and society. It is embedded in the country's first collective definition, enunciated in its subsequent laws, and imbued in its dominant way of life." After Donald Trump took presidential office in 2017, he repeatedly attempted to enact a travel ban on originally seven countries (Iraq, Iran, Somalia, Sudan, Yemen, Syria and Libya) which were listed as "countries of concern" by Secretary of Homeland Security Jeh Johnson under the Obama administration in 2011. This was later changed to six in a revision that removed Iraq in part due to criticism that the original order overlooked the country’s role in fighting Islamic terrorism and barred entry even to the Iraqi interpreters who had been embedded with US forces in the region. The order was described as xenophobic by Amnesty International. The policy was also criticized for targeting exclusively Muslim majority countries. Since then several bigoted comments by Trump (which had also led in his election as the president and the country’s misogynistic bias) have sparked hate crimes in the country.

The promise of building a ‘wall’ to stop the migration of Mexican people, the description of third world nations as “shit hole” countries, the bombing in Syria etcetera spurred on an increase in racist incidents after years of decline. Hashtags like ‘stopislam’ and ‘Paki’ were used in a widespread fashion on social media websites in 2016, to connect the Islamic identity with terrorism and ‘Paki’ becoming a derogatory term, while the gun attacks in America by white citizens are viewed as gun abuse problem or mental health issues of the offender. The Alt-American groups have been on a surge and a total of 201 cases of domestic terrorism in U.S, in which 115 crimes were committed by rightwing extremists compared to 63 cases of Islamist inspired terror attacks yet they aren’t accounted as ‘terrorist’ attacks. White Christian terrorists continue to get a free pass in America.

What is apparent from these figures is that there is a divisive rhetoric which is utilized by the political institutions to propagate a discourse of the other. The representation of the East, however disinterested it may seem has to its core the intent to hegemonically dominate the previously colonized masses. The extent to which this process harms or tarnishes the way the people from the Orient are viewed by the Caucasian Christian groups can be seen in these acts or bigotry or discrimination. And the dealing of the acts of violence shows an inherent double standard which is deep rooted in the prejudice found in the same discourse. There exists an undeniable bias in how the culture operates to subjugate the coloured peoples. In some countries like America, racism and xenophobia has become a kind of an addiction. As Said presented in *Orientalism*, the Orient is an integral part of European material civilization and culture. The carefully and patiently disseminated bias by the enterprise of *Orientalism* as taken on by the European powers is finally bearing fruits in the form of terrorism and violence.

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