

Analysis Paper 4: Orientalism in the Media

The media plays a powerful role in shaping how people understand different cultures, religions, and global issues. One example of this can be seen in a Cable News Network (CNN) interview clip uploaded to YouTube and featuring Reza Aslan, where he is asked whether Islam promotes violence (green422ow 2015). In the clip, the interviewers repeatedly frame their questions in ways that assume a connection between Islam and violence, often using broad generalizations about “Muslim countries” and their treatment of women. Aslan challenges these assumptions by pointing out factual inaccuracies and emphasizing the diversity within Muslim communities. Despite his efforts, the anchors continue to return to simplified and generalized claims. This exchange highlights how media discourse can reinforce stereotypes rather than challenges them. The CNN interview demonstrates how Orientalism operates in contemporary media by framing Islam and Muslim societies as inherently violent and backward, while ignoring complexity and reinforcing Islamophobic assumptions.

Orientalism, a concept developed by Edward Said, refers to the way Western societies socially construct “the East” as fundamentally different, inferior, and often dangerous. According to Said, the West portrays itself as rational, modern, and civilized, while depicting Eastern societies as irrational, backward, and threatening. This process is not simply about individual prejudice but is embedded in cultural production, including literature, film, and news media. As explained in the Al Jazeera video on Said’s work, these representations rely on recurring stereotypes that divide the world into “us versus them,” such as “the rational versus the irrational” and “civilization versus barbarism,” reinforcing ideas of Western superiority (Al Jazeera English 2017). Similarly, Johnson

(2017) explains that Orientalism contributes to Islamophobia by reducing Islam to a single, monolithic identity defined by violence and extremism, ignoring the diversity of beliefs and practices within Muslim communities. These simplified representations are powerful because they shape public opinion and political discourse. Lissovoy et al. (2017) further argue that media narratives play a key role in constructing ideological frameworks, especially for young audiences, by presenting global conflicts through binaries of good versus evil that often position the West as morally superior. Taken together, these perspectives show that Orientalism is not just a historical concept but an ongoing process that continues to shape how media represents non-Western societies.

The CNN interview with Aslan provides a clear example of how Orientalism operates in media discourse. The anchors repeatedly ask questions that assume Islam is inherently linked to violence, such as asking whether “Islam promotes violence” and framing entire “Muslim countries” as oppressive (green422ow 2015). These questions reflect what Johnson (2017) describes as the simplification of Islam into a singular, negative identity. Rather than treating Muslim societies as diverse and complex, the anchors group them together under the label of “Muslim countries,” ignoring major differences between places like Indonesia, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. This aligns with Orientalist thinking, which collapses entire regions and cultures into a single category (Johnson 2017). Aslan directly challenges this by arguing that “you’re talking about a religion of one and a half billion people,” emphasizing that social and political conditions vary widely across countries (green422ow 2015). However, the anchors continue to repeat similar lines of questioning, suggesting a reluctance to move beyond these

assumptions. This dynamic illustrates how Orientalism is maintained through media practices that prioritize familiar narratives over accurate representation.

In addition to generalization, the interview reflects Islamophobic assumptions that are deeply connected to Orientalism. The anchors focus heavily on issues such as women's rights and violence, framing them as inherent features of Islam rather than as outcomes of specific political and cultural contexts (green422ow 2015). This reflects a broader media pattern identified by Feminist Frequency (2017), which explains that Western media often constructs the figure of the 'Muslim terrorist,' such that 'brown skin has practically become synonymous with bad guys,' while erasing the diversity of Muslim experiences, particularly those of women. By focusing on extreme examples and presenting them as representative, media narratives reinforce fear and misunderstanding by portraying groups as "monolithic, evil, and scary" (Feminist Frequency 2017). Lissovoy et al. (2017) describe this as part of a larger ideological system in which media representations position non-Western groups as threats that must be controlled or contained. These representations are also intersectional, as they involve not only religion but also race, gender, and global power dynamics. Muslim men are often portrayed as inherently violent, while Muslim women are depicted as oppressed or invisible, reinforcing multiple layers of inequality (Feminist Frequency 2017). In the CNN interview, these patterns are evident in the way the anchors repeatedly return to themes of violence and oppression, despite Aslan's efforts to introduce nuance and context (green422ow 2015). This demonstrates how media discourse can reproduce intersecting forms of inequality through seemingly neutral questioning.

Aslan's responses throughout the interview show an awareness of these Orientalist patterns and attempt to challenge them. He repeatedly emphasizes that "Islam doesn't promote violence or peace... it depends on what you bring to it," arguing that the actions of specific groups or governments should not be generalized to an entire population (green422ow 2015). By correcting the anchors' assumptions and pointing out the diversity within Muslim societies, he disrupts the simplistic narratives being presented. His insistence on specificity and context reflects a sociological perspective that recognizes the importance of social, political, and historical factors in shaping human behavior. However, the interview also demonstrates how difficult it is to challenge Orientalism within mainstream media. The anchors' persistence in framing their questions in generalized terms suggests that these ideas are deeply embedded in media discourse. As a result, even when challenged, Orientalist assumptions continue to shape the conversation.

In conclusion, the CNN interview with Reza Aslan illustrates how Orientalism and Islamophobia continue to operate in contemporary media. Through generalized and leading questions, the anchors reproduce stereotypes that portray Islam as inherently violent and Muslim societies as backward and oppressive. These representations reflect broader patterns identified by Said and later scholars, who argue that media plays a central role in constructing and maintaining ideological understandings of the world (Lissovoy et al. 2017). By ignoring complexity and diversity, media narratives reinforce existing power structures and contribute to public misunderstanding. Aslan's responses highlight the importance of challenging these narratives, but the interview also shows how difficult it is to disrupt deeply rooted assumptions. Understanding Orientalism as an

ongoing process is essential for critically analyzing media and recognizing the ways it shapes perceptions of global differences and inequalities.

References

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