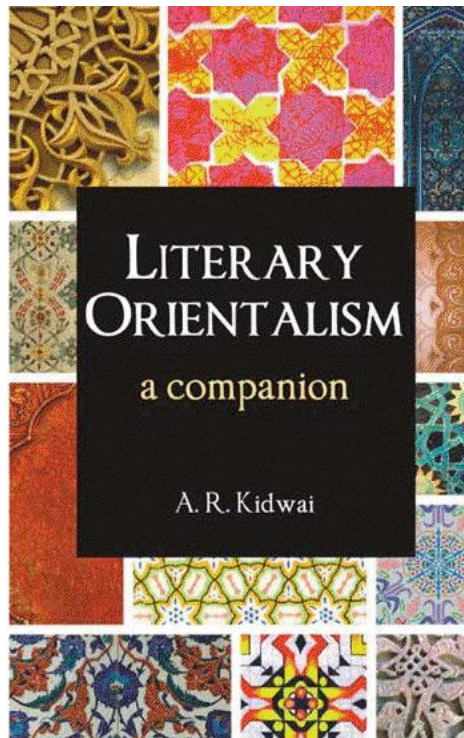


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**A Review of A. R. Kidwai 2009:**  
***Literary Orientalism: a companion***  
**by S. Imtiaz Hasnain, Ph.D.**

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**On Defining *Orientalism***

Orientalism, according to Said, is the study of hegemonizing relations between West and East “whose historical and social setting is political and cultural in the most urgent way.” (Said 1983) As a style of thought, based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction between “the Orient” and “the Occident”, it has allowed a whole range of writers to accept

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the basic distinction between East and West “as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient.” (Said 1979).

### **What Is Literary Orientalism?**

“Literary Orientalism” is a shade that emerges from this all encompassing perspective of Orientalism. It is accommodative because it can easily accommodate poets and writers from Chaucer (1343-1400) to Doris Lessing (1919-).

Despite being fairly accommodative, Literary Orientalism is a fairly unknown field of English studies. Readers are confronted with a host of questions regarding the genesis of the term “Literary Orientalism”, its significance, present status, scope and relevance. Answering these questions is not simple. It poses a formidable challenge and, therefore, demands deft handling. The challenge assumes more significance because it is located in the backdrop of ecumenically accepted much debated term “Orientalism”, which has a historically problematized past and a controversial present.

### **Prof. Kidwai Meets the Challenge**

Prof. Kidwai is, indeed, not shy of facing this challenge. He takes upon himself the task of informing readers about “Literary Orientalism” and he does so in a manner which is both academic and informative. Writing *Literary Orientalism: a companion* makes an attempt towards finding answers to a host of uncomfortable questions by “way of listing and classifying relevant material”, which comprises bibliographic details of more than 300 critical books, 900 articles, conference presentations and 400 dissertations.

This *Companion* is the first of its kind that charts out the genesis of Literary Orientalism and brings into sharper focus the contributions of 45 select British men of letters to this strand of English studies.

### **The Structure of this Significant Volume**

The book is spread into six chapters. Chapter I titled “Samples of Literary Orientalism: Writers, Works and Critical Studies” starts with Joseph Addison (1672-1719) and ends with W. B. Yeats (1865-1939). Chapters II, V, and VI have been titled as “Critical Books on Literary Orientalism”, “Role of the *Arabian Nights* in the Development of Literary Orientalism” and “Role of the Oriental Tales in the Development of Literary Orientalism”, respectively. Inasmuch as Literary Orientalism has gathered wider currency and scholarship, the remaining two chapters provide testimony to this recent spurt and interest in this sub-field and, thus, reflects the increase in the articles and dissertations dealing with Literary Orientalism. Hence, “Articles/Conference Presentations on Literary Orientalism” and “Doctoral Dissertations on Literary Orientalism” form the basis for Chapters III and IV, respectively. Each chapter in the book provides a detailed bibliographical survey, which will, indeed, be of immense help to researchers and scholars. An illuminating and crisp Preface

and a lucid Introduction makes this little-known sub-field of English literature accessible to students.

### **European Presumption of Oriental Inferiority**

European presumption oriental inferiority is quite known. Macaulay's famous 1835 denigration of literature in Arabic and Sanskrit languages is a confirmation of such attitude.

However, most specific has been the European perception of Islamic Orient which was, as Said has rightly pointed out, "regularly associated in England either with the problems of empire or with the corruption of fancy (Said 1983). Its focus was never on highlighting the prestige of high culture or systematic learning, rather with intrigue and debauch, difference and hostility.

### **Depiction of the Orient in Western Literary Texts**

Writing *Literary Orientalism: a companion* also stands for "the depiction of the Orient/Oriental in Western literary texts" with the professed aim of treating 'Orient' as referring to "the lands to the east of the Mediterranean and stretching through Asia, mainly Turkey, Arabia, Persia, China, Japan, India and also covering Africa ...[with] strong and unmistakable religious, sociocultural and emotional overtones."

### **A Subfield of English Studies**

Certainly Europeans have a long history of coming to terms with the Orient, and this justifies Kidwai's assertion that "Literary Orientalism as a subfield of English studies had come to the notice of critics and research students much before the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism*...[and] even these pre-1978 critics seem familiar with the tropes of representation, cross-cultural encounter, empathy and of employing the Oriental setting as a pretext for grappling with or interpreting some wider home."

In fact, one can find the trace of orientalism in philological tradition. The traditional philology was interested in research into ancient writing. As Al-Dabbagh (2010) has rightly observed, the traditional philologists "believe that philological studies, which consisted of the collection of ancient writings and the establishment and interpretation of true texts, appeared both in the West (where they corresponded to the Hellenistic period) and in the East (where they corresponded to the time of the Han Empire).

### **A Mark of Antiquity**

Therefore, in spite of the fact that orientalism, as a term, became widely used only in the nineteenth century, it goes back, in practice, to Antiquity..." But there is more to the phenomenon of orientalism, for it principally deals "not with a correspondence between Orientalism and Orient, but with the internal consistency of Orientalism and its ideas about

the Orient ... despite or beyond any correspondence, or lack thereof, with a 'real' Orientalism." (Said, 1979)

### **Accommodative and Sympathetic**

The Literary Orientalism of the pre-1978 critics is accommodative and equally sympathetic in its portrayal and treatment of cultures of the East discernible in the classics of the English literature and European-authored literary texts, but in dealing with this term in ideological and specific sense the methodological problems that one may encounter in such a broadly construed field as this are or will be difficult to handle.

### **The Focus of this *Companion*: Islam and Muslims in Western Literary Orientalism**

There is definite and unmistakable foregrounding of one religious group in this companion. As Kidwai points out, "This companion focuses on the treatment of only Islam and Muslims in Western literary Orientalism, to the exclusion of other religious, ethnic, linguistic or racial groups in the Orient, who otherwise happen to be equally important."

Notwithstanding the positive side of this focus which Literary orientalism with "religious, sociocultural and emotional overtones" can bring in providing a better human understanding of 'Other' cultures, the religio-cultural determinism may also lead to its being a self-validating and hermetic occlusion.

Also in the exclusivity of the treatment of Islam and Muslims, some prominent members falling in the league of literary orientalists, such as Renan and Louis Massignon, have been inadvertently missed out. Renan's 1883 speech that he gave at the Sorbonne entitled "*L'Islamisme et la science*" is a positively chilling and provocative statement on Islam and Science. Massignon, like Renan, must be seen "within the great structure of French cultural, political, and colonial domination of the Muslim world." But unlike Renan, he had a passion for Islam. To quote Said (1983), "Renan's epistemological attitude toward Islam ... is one of divestiture and judgement, and Massignon's of sympathetic assumption and rapprochement." And both should have found place in the *Companion*.

### **A Volume of Hard Work and Research Acumen**

This volume is, indeed, a volume of hard work and research acumen and will be found very useful in all further research on the ever growing interest in the topic of Orientalism.

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