

How Asians are Seen: A Teaching Challenge using Said's *Orientalism*

If you're a first-time teacher of literature, creative writing, or cultural studies, introducing your students to Edward Said's *Orientalism* may feel both exciting and daunting. The book is complex, theoretical, and steeped in academic language, but at its heart is a powerful and accessible question: how are Asians seen in Western literature, media, and scholarly discourse? This question is not only relevant—it is necessary in classrooms today where global stories and diverse identities converge.

Orientalism remains useful in teaching how Asians are seen historically and today, but this *libro-bisa* also essays reasons you might want to both assign and critically assess it with your students.

How Asians Are Seen: A Key Entry Point for Students

Before diving into the text, it helps to ground your students in the central question of how Asians are seen. Said's critique focuses on how the West has constructed images of the "Orient"—often exotic, backward, mystical, or threatening—in order to justify political and cultural dominance. These constructed images persist in today's films, books, news headlines, and even in classroom materials.

As a first-time teacher, you can begin with media examples your students already know:

- Characters like the martial arts master or the submissive Asian woman.
- Headlines that describe China or North Korea as "enigmatic threats."
- Tourism ads that romanticize Southeast Asia as spiritual and untouched.

All these examples open discussion on how Asians are seen, who creates those images, and what consequences they carry. From there, *Orientalism* becomes a tool for understanding the deeper power structures behind those representations.

Why You Should Read *Orientalism*

1. It Offers Insights on how to Read Power in Language

One of Said's central arguments is that the way people talk *about* a region—its people, history, and culture—is never neutral. *Orientalism* shows how language has been used to create a vision of the East that serves Western political interests. For first-time teachers, this is a great entry point for teaching students how to read critically—not just for what a text says, but for what it *does*.

In your classroom, you can ask:

- Who is speaking in this text?
- How are Asians represented or described?
- What stereotypes are being repeated or challenged?

By using *Orientalism* to frame these questions, students develop analytical skills that apply to fiction, nonfiction, media, and even their own writing.

2. It Connects Literature to Real-World Issues

Teaching *Orientalism* helps students connect their classroom learning to ongoing global issues. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, how Asians are seen became a matter of life and death. East and Southeast Asian people were often blamed or attacked because of racialized narratives linking them to disease.

You can connect *Orientalism* to these events to show that Said's work is not just about dusty archives or colonial history. It's about the present. It's about the ways stereotypes continue to shape foreign policy, public opinion, and personal identity. Helping students draw this line between theory and real life can make the classroom a more relevant and empathetic space.

Why You Should Read *Orientalism* with a Critical Eye

1. The Book Has Gaps—And That's a Teaching Opportunity

While *Orientalism* is a foundational text, it's not flawless. Said's focus was mostly on the Middle East and North Africa, and some critics argue he overlooked the rich variety of how Asians are seen in other regions like South Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Asia.

This opens up an opportunity for students to question the canon itself. Why did Said focus where he did? What voices are missing? Who else should we be reading alongside him? Encourage your students to critique the book—not just absorb it. You might pair *Orientalism* with:

- Short stories or poems by Asian authors.
- Contemporary essays on Asian American identity.
- Graphic novels or films from across the Asian continent.

This helps students see that how Asians are seen is not one story, but many—shaped by different histories, locations, and lived experiences.

2. Pairing *Orientalism* with Other Books or Media

Let's face it: *Orientalism* is dense. For students encountering theory for the first time, it can be overwhelming. First-time teachers may find success in assigning excerpts rather than the whole book and pairing them with more relatable texts.

For example:

- Pair a chapter from *Orientalism* with Cathy Park Hong's *Minor Feelings*.
- Compare Said's theory with pop culture portrayals of Asian characters in media.
- Use student-generated content—ask them to analyze YouTube videos, Netflix series, or TikTok trends through Said's lens.

This layered approach can make the abstract idea of representation much more concrete and participatory.

How Asians Are Seen in the Digital Age

One of the best ways to demonstrate Said's continued relevance is to explore how digital culture shapes the way Asians are seen today. Algorithms, media platforms, and content creators continue to recycle many of the stereotypes *Orientalism* critiques, just in new forms.

Examples include:

- TikTok trends that fetishize Korean or Japanese culture.
- News reports about China that frame it solely as a threat.
- AI-generated images that default to Western facial features or exclude Asian representation.

Ask your students to consider: how do these new technologies reflect old assumptions? What would Edward Said say about viral videos or influencer culture? Bringing *Orientalism* into conversation with current media helps students feel empowered to apply theory to their everyday lives.

Reading *Orientalism* with Care and Creativity

As a first-time teacher, your goal is not just to “cover” a text like *Orientalism*, but to create space for dialogue—where students feel invited to question, respond, and apply what they learn. Said’s work is valuable precisely because it raises enduring questions: How are Asians seen? Who gets to write about them? Whose stories are missing?

The answer to whether we should still read *Orientalism* is yes—but thoughtfully. It is a starting point, not a final word. Teach it as a conversation opener, a provocation, and a challenge. Pair it with diverse voices. Bring in contemporary examples. Most of all, use it to help your students see that literature, media, and storytelling are never just entertainment—they are battlegrounds for identity and power.

If your students leave your class asking better questions about how Asians are seen, then you’ve already done the essential work that *Orientalism* calls us to do: to read more carefully, write more ethically, and imagine more justly.

Related Readings: Expanding the Conversation on *Orientalism* and How Asians Are Seen

Foundational and Theoretical Texts

1. Frantz Fanon – *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952)
A classic in postcolonial theory, Fanon explores the psychological effects of racism and colonialism, offering useful parallels to Said’s work.
2. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak – “*Can the Subaltern Speak?*” (1988)
A critical response to *Orientalism* that challenges who is allowed to speak or be heard in postcolonial discourse. Can be paired with discussions on voice and agency in student writing.
3. Homi K. Bhabha – *The Location of Culture* (1994)
Introduces ideas of hybridity, mimicry, and cultural negotiation, helping students understand identity as fluid and contested rather than fixed.

Asian and Asian Diaspora Perspectives

4. Cathy Park Hong – *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning* (2020)
Combines memoir and cultural criticism, exploring how Asians are seen—and how they see themselves—in the United States. Highly accessible for students.
5. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha – *Dictee* (1982)
A postmodern, genre-defying book that challenges dominant historical narratives and reflects on Asian female identity, language, and silencing.
6. Viet Thanh Nguyen – *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (2016)
A critical look at how Southeast Asians, particularly Vietnamese people, are represented in American war memory and popular culture.

7. Merlinda Bobis – *In the Language of the Third World* (1994)
A poetry collection that explores Filipino postcolonial identity and cultural hybridity, useful for pairing with discussions on voice and representation.

Film and Media Texts for Classroom Use

8. Bong Joon-ho – *Parasite* (2019)
A rich text for exploring class, perception, and global views of Korean society. Students can analyze how the West interprets Asian stories.
9. Wayne Wang – *The Joy Luck Club* (1993)
Based on Amy Tan’s novel, this film explores Chinese American identity and intergenerational storytelling—perfect for discussions on diaspora.
10. Justin Chon – *Gook* (2017)
A lesser-known but powerful film about Korean American identity set during the 1992 LA Riots, offering a nuanced view of racial conflict and solidarity.

Creative Writing Texts by Asian Authors

11. Gene Luen Yang – *American Born Chinese* (2006)
A graphic novel that weaves Chinese mythology with modern Asian American experiences. Excellent for younger students or visual learners.
12. Ocean Vuong – *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* (2019)
A poetic and fragmented novel that deals with Vietnamese identity, queer coming-of-age, and language—perfect for creative writing students exploring narrative voice.
13. Jessica Hagedorn – *Dogeaters* (1990)
A bold, multi-voiced novel set in the Philippines that blends pop culture and politics, examining how Filipinos are seen under both Western and internal gazes.

Short Essays and Readings for Discussion

14. Lila Abu-Lughod – “*Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?*” (2002)
A critique of Western feminist discourse that echoes Said’s concerns about how non-Western women are portrayed.
15. David Palumbo-Liu – “*Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier*” (1999, excerpt)
Offers historical context on Asian American identity formation, useful for connecting theory to lived experiences.
16. Sianne Ngai – “*Our Aesthetic Categories*” (excerpt on ‘cuteness’ and ‘zany’)
Useful for analyzing how Asians are seen in pop culture—particularly through infantilization or stylized representation.

Suggested Reading Pairings with *Orientalism*

Theme	Pairing
Media stereotypes of Asians	Cathy Park Hong’s <i>Minor Feelings</i> + Edward Said’s <i>Orientalism</i>

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Theme	Pairing
<i>Colonial language & the silencing of voice</i>	Gayatri Spivak's " <i>Can the Subaltern Speak?</i> " + excerpts from <i>Dictee</i>
<i>Asian diaspora & identity</i>	Gene Luen Yang's <i>American Born Chinese</i> + Ocean Vuong's <i>On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous</i>
<i>Pop culture & global imagination</i>	Bong Joon-ho's <i>Parasite</i> + Sianne Ngai's work on aesthetics
<i>Fictionalizing resistance & representation</i>	Jessica Hagedorn's <i>Dogeaters</i> + Said's critiques of cultural imperialism