Abstract:

In this book, *New Perspectives on Richard Burton*, John Wallen, an academic, a poet, a short story writer, and a novelist, offers a case study of Burton to read alongside Said’s polemics on the same figure. Wallen does not discount Said’s argument altogether. He does not clearly favor or oppose Said, but attempts to lucidly highlight Burton’s character in the time period in which he lived.

Keywords: Said, Burton, Wallen, Orientalism, New perspectives, Postcolonialism

Author Bio: Mansoor Abbassi earned his PhD from Arkansas University and taught in Turkey for several years. He currently lives in Canada.

Author email: mansoorabbassi@gmail.com
Edward Said’s *Orientalism* remains one of the most controversial texts in contemporary literary theory since its publication in 1978. Essentially, among other things, Said postulates that “Orientalism derives from a particular closeness experienced between Britain and France and the Orient, which until the early nineteenth century had really meant only India and the Bible lands” (p. 4). One may not agree with this premise, but one has to admit that Said gives a new and unique angle on that branch of scholarship which had dealt with the orient: European scholarship about the orient (according to Said) was part of the hegemonic colonial project and so evil and repressive in its intent. Hence, the term “Orientalism” no longer enjoys the respect that it once did.

However, while Said’s eclecticism and knowledge of European literature and orientalist scholarship is considerable, the book *Orientalism* is not without its flaws. A great deal of ink has been spent on arguing about this work. There is no dearth of enthusiastic young and established scholars in support of Said’s *Orientalism*. But there are also Bernard Lewises, Robert Irwins and Ibn Warraqs, who hold diametrically opposite views.

And in these extremely polarized debates (at a time when literary studies are heavily invested in the value judgments of postcolonial theory) it is hard to keep a balance in evaluating the so-called “orientalist” figures in Said’s book such as Gustave Flaubert, Edward Lane, Richard Burton, Karl Marx, Samuel Coleridge, and so on. The most reprehensible of all colonial stooges, it seems, was Sir Richard Francis Burton. Burton was a Victorian gentleman, a man of letters, an explorer, an ethnographer, a linguist and an adventurer; to at least one biographer he was also a Sufi in disguise. Above all, Burton was and is a polemical figure. In this book, *New Perspectives on Richard Burton*, John Wallen, an academic, a poet, a short story writer, and a novelist, offers a case study of Burton to read alongside Said’s polemics on the same figure. Wallen does not discount Said’s argument altogether. He does not clearly favor or oppose Said, but attempts to lucidly highlight Burton’s character in the time period in which he lived. Burton, as *New Perspectives* shows, attempted to present the East in a forensic way for detailed anthropological and scientific study.

Wallen highlights the “most significant influence” on Burton, which was Islam—as pointed out earlier by Dane Kennedy. Burton’s appreciation for Sufi Islam was intense and sincere; it was not an interest he cultivated for the sake of British imperial power. Burton was no orientalist in the sense Said uses the term. Rather, he was genuinely influenced by Sufi Islam in diverse and profound ways; the religious and cultural influence of the Near East and South Asia enriched his outlook and improved his life and scholarship. True Burton was, at times, sexist, misogynistic, and racist: but so were most of the people, native and foreign, of the period in which he lived. In this respect, he was typical of his time. In other words, this work contextualizes Richard Burton’s life and work in his time period.
New Perspectives is a lucid and careful study of Burton’s life. Firstly, it gives the reader a comprehensive picture of Burton the man, as well as Burton the writer and explorer. Secondly, it offers a systematic critique of postcolonial discourse on Burton—including Said’s polemics against Burton in Orientalism. Thirdly, while many books concerned with the topic of postcolonial theory are well known for their incomprehensibility and complex jargon, Wallen must be credited for keeping this book on Burton relatively jargon free. Scholars and students alike should appreciate this.

Lastly, as the dust of postcolonial theory settles down, this book will be remembered as a sound critique on Edward Said’s polemical discussions on Burton. I hope it generates healthy critical debates and scholarly curiosity among the admirers and opponents of Said, Burton, and orientalism itself.