



# Orientalism in Armenia and its influence on national identity

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Presented to the  
Department of English & Communications  
In Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

# ABSTRACT

This research explores Orientalism in Armenia from the 19th to 20th centuries, analyzing its impact on national identity. Using works by cultural theorists like Edward Said and Stuart Hall, it examines how Armenian culture and identity are portrayed in literature, films, and art across different historical periods. The study looks at Western paintings depicting Armenians as a homogeneous group from the 19th century, 20th-century posters on the Armenian Genocide, and Soviet-era films with stereotypical Armenian characters. It also examines how Orientalism has affected the self-perception of Armenians, causing a cultural inferiority complex and a desire to adopt Western values.

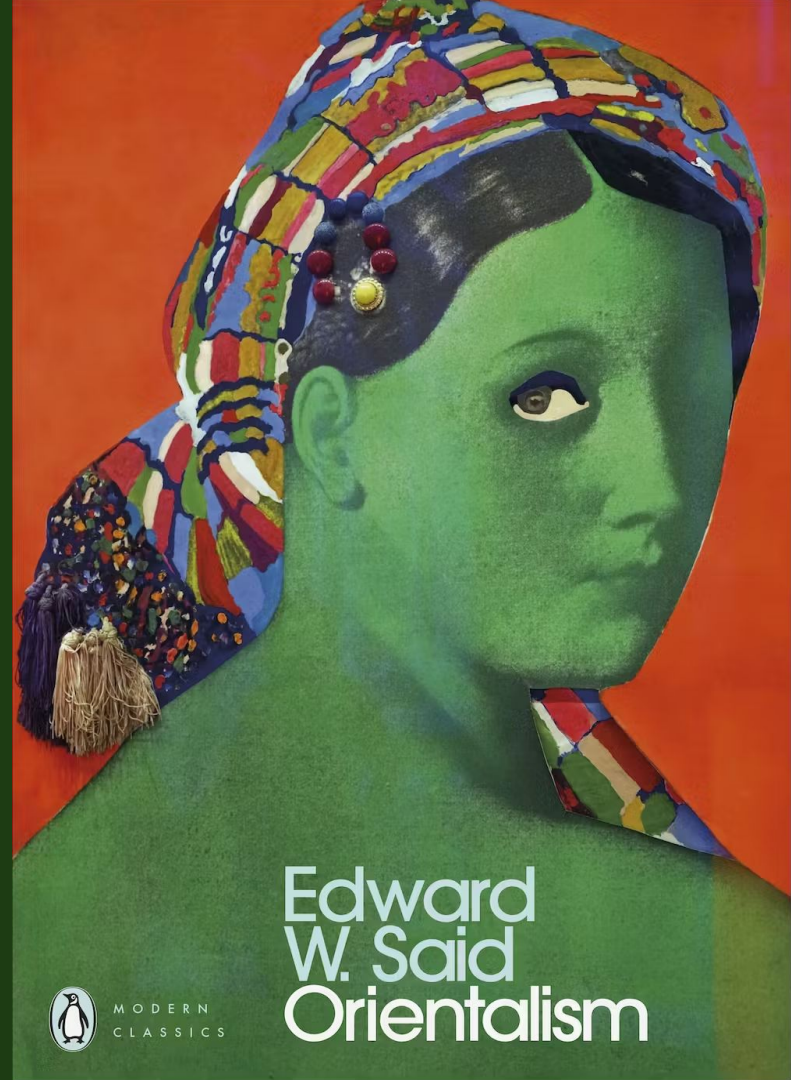


# Introduction

The Western world's depiction of the Middle East has created a stereotypical image of the region that often ignores its cultural complexity. The concept of Orientalism, coined by Edward Said, has had a significant impact on the East-West relationship and has influenced people's identities. Armenia, with its rich culture and history, has also been a subject of Orientalism, with Western countries and Russia giving false descriptions of Armenians. Orientalism has not only affected cultural and social aspects but also political ones. This research aims to explore the influence of Orientalism on Armenian national identity by analyzing Armenian artworks and cultural expressions.

# Methodology

Initially, I employed qualitative research methodology, specifically content analysis, to examine works exploring Orientalism. Then, I delved into Western literature from the 19th century to identify any Orientalist perspectives regarding Armenia. Alongside this, I explored various works of art, from paintings to posters and films, to investigate how Armenians were portrayed. With these visual aids from different eras, I aimed to illustrate how Western and Russian artists have perpetuated an inaccurate representation of Armenia, which still endures to this day.



MODERN  
CLASSICS

Edward  
W. Said  
Orientalism

# Research Question

How has Orientalism shaped Armenian national identity from the end of the 18th century to the present day? To achieve answer to this question I examined specific examples related to the representation of Armenia and Armenians in Orientalist literature and art to better understand how these depictions have impacted the construction of Armenian identity over time.

An Armenian Woman by William Page ca. 1816-1824



# Literature Review

## Edward Said (1978) "Orientalism"

Said's analysis of Orientalism reveals how the West portrays the East as primitive and exotic, justifying Western imperialism and allowing the imposition of Western values on the East. This impacts postcolonial studies by challenging traditional Western representations of the East and encouraging a more nuanced understanding of the West's relationship with the rest of the world. Orientalism was based on the notes of adventurers who did not understand foreign cultures, creating the "Wild East" image now replicated by the world media.

## Stuart Hall (1997). The Spectacle of the 'Other'.

Under the influence of Orientalism, Eastern peoples deliberately "played for others" in order to gain recognition and place themselves in the Western-dominated global economy and system. Being in the role of "Others" and playing by the rules of Western countries, Eastern people could lose their national identity.

## Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2003) "The Subordinate Can Speak"

To understand the concept of "Others" and the psychological effects of Orientalism, Spivak's (2003) short essay "The Subordinate Can Speak" provides insight. The essay explores post-colonial theories, the impact of colonization on people, and the spread of power to other countries. The author speaks about Orientalism and the concept of "Others" explaining the psychological impact on people under that pressure.

# Literature Review

## Hrach Bayadyan (2007) "Soviet Armenian Identity and Cultural Representation"

In the Soviet Union, countries under tight control were limited in expressing their national identity. The countries shared one national identity, which was under the control of Stalin's totalitarian leadership. In the short essay "Soviet Armenian Identity and Cultural Representation" by Hrach Bayadyan (2007), the author states that the Soviet national policy and methods of keeping control over Soviet peoples and the development of a single Soviet nation had features that can be characterized as Russian-Soviet Orientalism.

## Irina Anisimova's (2017) "Post-soviet "orient" in the stories by Vladimir Makanin and Liudmila Petrushevskaja,"

Many Soviet movies show the difference between Caucasian people and Russians. Russians are more intellectual, balanced, and serious, while Caucasian people are emotional, limited, traditional, and funny-looking. In the movie, Armenians are described as merchants who only think about money and always joke around. There are several Soviet movies that give a stereotyped depiction of Caucasian people; such as "Mimino," "The Diamond Arm," "Operation Y and Shurik's Other Adventures," etc.

## Amy Weber (n.d.) "Circulation, exchange, and race in Ralph Clarkson's 'Nouvarit Dzeron, a daughter of Armenia'"

Weber's analysis of Ralph Clarkson's "Nouvarit Dzeron, a daughter of Armenia" highlights its Orientalist portrayal of an Armenian woman, dressed in traditional Eastern clothing and holding a bead line. Weber gives a detailed analysis of the painting and speak about Orientalist themes present in the artwork. This is one example of how Western artists depict Armenians and their culture, as seen in other artworks such as "Armenian Ladies (At Home)" by Van Lennep Henry John and "Wealthy Armenian" by Louis Dupré.

# Through the lens of Orientalism

Orientalism is a system of power and domination where the West historically constructed a distribution of geopolitical awareness in various fields, including art, literature, science, and politics. This hegemonic gaze has kept the hierarchy between the West and East and tends to homogenize and simplify the diverse realities of the East. Religion, particularly Islam, has been exoticized and portrayed as a threat to Western civilization due to the historical conflict between Christianity and Islam. However, non-Muslim countries, such as Armenia, have also been subject to Orientalism. Therefore, Orientalism is not just a matter of religious difference but a broader system of hegemony constructed by the West.





# Orientalism during the Ottoman Empire



Armenia has a history of being Orientalized by the West, especially during its periods of foreign domination by the Ottoman Empire and the Soviet Union. The West viewed Armenia as an "Other," incorporating Middle Eastern and Islamic cultural elements into depictions of Armenians. Ottoman costume albums played a significant role in shaping European perceptions of the Orient, and three illustrations from these albums, including Ralph Elmer Clarkson's "Nouvart Dzeron, A Daughter of Armenia," Henry J. Van-Lennep's "Armenian Ladies (At Home)," and "Wealthy Armenian" by Louis Dupré, exemplify this phenomenon.

## Orientalism after the Armenian Genocide (1915)

The West and America have often portrayed Armenia as a victim due to its history of genocide and displacement, contributing to its Orientalization. The Armenian Genocide has influenced how the West has depicted Armenia as a helpless country in need of support. While aid was provided, America and the West also used the situation to showcase their power. The Near East Relief charity organization created posters to collect donations, including one featuring a strong woman protecting a vulnerable child with the American flag, symbolizing America's power to protect Armenia.

"They shall not perish" The contribution poster of Near East Relief, 1918



## Orientalism during the Soviet Period

Armenian culture was often represented as alien in Soviet culture, emphasizing traditional folk practices and music, which reinforced the idea of Armenia as a primitive and "Other" place. Soviet films also perpetuated Orientalist stereotypes about the Caucasus region and its people, including Armenians. The portrayal of Rubik in the movie "Mimino" exemplifies these stereotypes, depicting Armenians as overly emotional, lacking manners and education, and prone to emotional outbursts. This type of portrayal was not unique to "Mimino" but was a common feature in Soviet-era movies about the Caucasus region, part of a broader Soviet policy of cultural homogenization.



"Mimino" movie poster

## The Influence of Orientalism on Armenian National Identity

Orientalism has not only affected the West's representation of the East but also how the East perceives itself. This power dynamic between the West and the East has forced the East to define itself with the West and to accept negative images created by the West. Armenia has a complex history of being under foreign rule and influence, which has shaped Armenian self-perception through internal and external factors. The portrayal of Armenians as a homogenous group in Western art and literature contributed to a cultural inferiority complex and a desire to differentiate themselves from Middle Eastern cultures, with Christianity becoming an integral part of Armenian identity.

# Epilogue

My capstone project has shown me how Orientalism has impacted perceptions of Armenia. Despite centuries of external pressures and influences, Armenian culture and identity have persevered. It is important to challenge Orientalist stereotypes, not just for Armenians but for all misrepresented communities. I hope my work contributes to a broader conversation about cultural representation and celebrating diversity. As William Saroyan said, "It is simply in the nature of Armenian to study, to learn, to question, to speculate, to discover, to invent, to revise, to restore, to preserve, to make, and to give."

Portrait of Mkrtych Khrimian (1906)



Thank you for your attention!