Orientalism and the Syrian Refugee Crisis

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The Syrian civil war since 2011 has led to perhaps the largest mass exodus of refugees in the present century. This exodus has created unequal distribution of refugee population across the European nations that have offered asylum to the refugees, or where the refugees have been forced to migrate. The varying reception to this refugee migration has been the cause of critical and political debate since the beginning of the civil war and of the migration as well. Instead of viewing the refugee as an individual seeking asylum, the discourse of West-centric political thought has branded the refugees with the status of a thematic 'Other'. This 'other'-isation is another manifestation of the Islamophobia rampant in Western cultural imagination. The paper argues for a more inclusive system of acceptance, and humanitarianism, in observance of Edward Said's notion of "the Orient", to suggest alternative views to the crisis and its resolution through more balanced and humanitarian methods.

Keywords: Syria, refugee crisis, asylum-seekers, Orientalism

The Syrian refugee crisis has traumatised the world since the Syrian civil war in 2011. An estimated 9 million Syrians have fled their homes and have taken refuge in neighboring countries. While over 3 million have fled to Syria's immediate neighbors, fewer than 150,000 Syrians have declared asylum in the European Union (*syrianrefugees.eu*). The Western world has fallen short in taking in more Syrian refugees. For instance, EU28 countries combined with Norway and Switzerland have only taken in 310,140 registered refugees as of September 2015. On the other hand, countries that are more on the Eastern front such as Turkey have

taken in as much as 1,939,999 (Focus on Syrians, *migrationpolicycentre.eu*). The numbers in comparison are staggering. Two positions are held on this issue: take in Syrian refugees or don't. Clearly, more Western countries need to take in more of these refugees, but they are reluctant to do so. This reluctance to support such a humanitarian objective can be better understood with Said's explication of the construction of "the Orient" and his theorisation of the way the West views Muslims, and particularly the people of the Middle East. Western and Christian civilizations are skeptical of providing asylum for Syrian refugees due to the negative representations of the Islamic faith propagated by the media. The Judeo-Christian world, which has colonized countries such as Syria for years, is reluctant to open their doors and provide protection for the refugees fleeing from the Middle East.

The Syrian refugees have been viewed as Other, or in the well-known words of Said, as the Oriental. It is important to note, especially in this instance, that the Orient was a European invention (Said, *Orientalism*, 71). This is important because the Orient then becomes a dichotomy for the West. The Orient is a contrasting image of the West and thus helps define Western civilization in terms that the Orient is foreign and therefore an exotic entity. This dichotomy separates the Western mindset from that of an Eastern one. In these regards, Said famously stated: "Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, by settling it, ruling over it…" (*Orientalism* 73).

This idea of the corporate institution, or the sense of responding to the crisis, the West, brought to mind Great Britain's prime minister David Cameron and his stance on accepting more Syrian refugees. Cameron stated that the best solution would be to bring peace and stability to the Middle East. He has said: "We have taken a number of genuine asylum seekers from Syrian refugee camps and we keep that under review, but we think the most important thing is to try to bring peace and stability to that part of the world … I don't think there is an answer that can be achieved simply by taking more and more refugees" (*theguardian.com*). Cameron has caught some criticism for these views. Andy Burnham, health secretary and Labour leadership contender, has said that the response of Cameron and his ministers have veered from the inadequate to the misjudged and was a stain on the nation's conscience (*theguardian.com*). Furthermore, Burnham states:

> Many of these refugees are children, fleeing the violence and horrors of war. The images we have seen of children washed up on beaches will leave no person unmoved. When Parliament returns next week, MPs must be given an opportunity to debate the Government's handling of the crisis and the chance to make a judgement on whether

> Britain should accept a share of refugees. (*thegurdian.com*)

Burnham's words paint a grim picture and pose a call of action for Cameron and Parliament. Cameron does not want to join any Europe-wide resettlement programs for refugees, believing that if the UK became involved in a large-scale scheme, it would act as a magnet for other migrants and it would be impossible to distinguish economic migrants from refugees (Wintour, *theguardian.com*). Both Burnham's and Cameron's words touch on exactly what Said was discussing, the idea that Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient. Cameron and Burnham, although they have opposing views, are both making statements, describing, and authorizing views of the Orient, or in this case, Syrian refugees. Cameron even goes as far to state that the crisis would be averted if they just bring peace to the Middle East, which has become a defunct notion and battle cry of the West. Cameron is speaking out of line and hints that the crisis in the Middle East can be cured if Western nations bring peace to the region as though they could have that authority to do so.

David Cameron is speaking from the Judeo-Christian stance that derives from the first-world and Western civilization. This dichotomy between Judeo-Christians and Muslims is part of dichotomy that puts the Muslim faith as 'other'. Cameron states that the best thing to do is to try and bring peace to the Middle East. However, he does not state who should try and bring about this peace, but since he feels that Great Britain can not solve the crisis (the West) accepting more refugees then it can be solved by the West trying to bring peace to the Syrian region. This implies that, in Cameron's view, the Christian world is more civilized or peaceful than that of the third world, the Muslim world. We know this not to be wholly true. In his text *Discourse on Colonialism*, Césaire states: "…the chief culprit in this domain is Christian pedantry, which laid down the *dishonest* [emphasis added] equations Christianity = civilization, and paganism = savagery, from which there could not but ensue abominable colonialist and racist consequences…" (61). Césaire makes a valuable point here that attacks Cameron's implications. Cameron's statement does have racist connotations in that he is stating that the underlying problem is that Muslims are incapable of peace. Cameron's comments come from a Judeo-Christian standpoint which juxtaposes those of Césaire's that fit into an Eastern mind-frame. Cameron's standpoint equates with that of Césaire's notion of the West's pedantry believing that Christianity = civilization. This can be seen from Cameron's earlier comments about bringing peace to the Middle East. In his mind, Muslims (or for my purposes "pagans" can be used in the Césarian sense here), are savages who cause their destruction thus producing these refugees. Con-

notations such as these are widely due to the portrayal of Islam in the Western media.

It is important to note that "Islam" and "the West" mean two separate things from each other depending on the perspective. For instance, a Westerner would view the West differently than a Muslim would and vice-versa. Edward Said touches on this idea stating that on one level Islam and the West can act simply as an identifying function such as apples and oranges, but then there is a deeper level to these labels. Said states: "To speak of 'Islam' in the West today is to mean a lot of the unpleasant things I have been mentioning. Moreover, 'Islam' is unlikely to mean anything one knows either directly or objectively" (*Covering Islam* 10). This statement is a reaction to what the Westerners know or what they may think they know about Islam. Terrorism has set a state of mind in the Western world in the 21st century. The U.S. media has painted a negative picture of Islam in the post-9/11 world that is, as Said states, a view of Islam that is misinformed or a view that is unlikely to mean anything a Westerner may know objectively. Islam is unlikely to mean anything one may know directly or objectively in the West because of the West being considerably Christian. Therefore, the practices of Islam are seen as foreign. Furthermore, the peculiar practices of Islam have always formed a part of the Western narrative of quintessential otherness and inferiority of Islam (Ahmed, 319). It is the misrepresentation of Islam that drives people like Cameron to describe Muslims as "other," subtly or not. The Western view of Islam as being other and inferior is a conscience barrier that prevents countries such as Great Britain from accepting more Syrian refugees.

I have laid out two positions for this issue of the Syrian refugee crisis. On the one hand, there is Cameron, a product of the Judeo-Christian West, whose position is that taking in refugees will not solve the crisis at all, but that peace should merely be brought to that region as though peace is something that can be air dropped by the United Nations. Then there is my position that Andy Burnham shares. Burnham has seen the pictures of women and children refugees who have been washed up on shores by trying to gain access to a safe and better life. Western nations should not be hesitant to accept Syrian refugees. We are reluctant to do so because of the ideas we have about Islam and the way it has been portrayed in the media. The Syrian refugee crisis calls for a humanitarian mission to provide safety to a group of people regardless of religious views. The West should try and abandon their misconceived views of Islam and open their doors to the people that need help from this region.

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