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Edward Said's Orientalism and the Representation of Ancient Egypt in Western Literature

Abstract
This paper examines the representation of Ancient Egypt in Western literature through the lens of Edward Said's theory of Orientalism. Egypt is a civilization renowned for its scientific, architectural, and spiritual achievements. However Western literary portrayals have frequently reduced it to a land of magic, curses, and supernatural danger. These misrepresentations reflect a deeper colonial ideology that uses literature to project the East as culturally inferior and intellectually stagnant. This research work is the analysis of Arthur Conan Doyle's Lot No. 249 (19th century), Bram Stoker's The Jewel of Seven Stars (20th century), and Rick Riordan's The Kane Chronicles (21st century) from the perspective of Edward Said's Orientalism. These books are strategically selected from three different literary periods—the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries—to examine whether the Western perspective on Egypt has shifted across time. The primary analytical tool employed in this study is Catherine Belsey's model of textual analysis, which emphasizes the close reading of literary texts to uncover embedded ideological patterns and assumptions. The analysis reveals how these works construct Egypt as the exotic and irrational "Other"—a land frozen in time, rich in spectacle but stripped of historical truth. Mummies are portrayed as monstrous threats, ancient queens as dark forces, and deities as simplified magical beings. The research findings indicate that even modern literature, while more diverse in form, often reinforces Orientalist themes. Egypt is consistently depicted as voiceless, mystical, and dangerous, existing only to serve Western narratives. This study concludes with a call for more accurate, respectful, and historically informed portrayals of Ancient Egypt in literature.

Keywords: Ancient Egypt, Orientalism, Western literature, Mummy's Curse, Kane Chronicles

1. Introduction
Ancient Egypt has long captivated the Western imagination. Its towering pyramids, enigmatic hieroglyphs, and elaborate tombs have not only shaped historical discourse but have also significantly influenced Western literary traditions. Beginning in the late 18th century with the discovery of the Rosetta Stone (1799), and intensifying in the 19th and early 20th centuries with the opening of Tutankhamun's tomb (1922), a cultural phenomenon often referred to as Egyptomania took hold—a period during which Egypt was transformed into a literary and artistic landscape of mystery, adventure, and supernatural intrigue (Hornung, 2001). However, these depictions were predominantly informed by Western perspectives, often distorting Egyptian realities and reinforcing imperial ideologies.
One of the most enduring and emblematic myths to emerge from this cultural fascination is the Mummy's Curse. Although the myth was sensationalized following Howard Carter's discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb in 1922—with reports from sources like The New York

Times linking mysterious deaths to ancient curses—the idea had already taken root in the Western imagination long before. Literary works such as Arthur Conan Doyle's Lot No. 249 (1892) and Bram Stoker's The Jewel of Seven Stars (1903) were written decades before the discovery, yet they harnessed similar mythic elements. This seeming contradiction is explained by the fact that these narratives were created in an intellectual climate where eyes were already blindfolded by fantasy and judgements were shaped by deep-seated prejudice. Western portrayals of Egypt did not require factual triggers like Tutankhamun's tomb to imagine curses or mystical dangers—the assumptions were already embedded. These texts projected imagined threats from the East into Western settings, transforming Egyptian mummies into supernatural invaders. In doing so, they reinforced an Orientalist framework, depicting Egypt not as a historical civilization but as a source of irrational menace and exotic peril

Edward Said's theory of Orientalism is central to understanding these depictions. Said (1978) argued that the West has historically constructed the East—including Egypt—as a place of mysticism, exoticism, and danger, thereby reinforcing colonial power dynamics and cultural hierarchies. Through this lens, Western literature functions as a tool of ideological domination, projecting anxieties and fantasies onto Eastern cultures while erasing their complexities and agency.

More recent literature, however, has attempted to revise these portrayals while remaining rooted in Western narrative conventions. Rick Riordan's *The Kane Chronicles* (2010–2012) presents a modern interpretation of Egyptian mythology, embedding ancient deities and magic within a contemporary, multicultural setting. Unlike Victorian-era horror fiction, Riordan's series portrays Egyptian heritage as central to the protagonists' identities rather than a source of dread. While the work still simplifies and adapts aspects of Egyptian culture for Western audiences, it offers a more layered and humanized representation than its literary predecessors.

This study explores how these three texts—*Lot No. 249*, *The Jewel of Seven Stars*, and *The Kane Chronicles*—embody Orientalist themes in their portrayal of Ancient Egypt. By examining literary constructions of Egypt across the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries, the research aims to assess whether contemporary fiction has moved beyond colonial-era depictions or continues to echo the tropes of mystification, fear, and cultural othering.

2. Literature Review

Ancient Egypt has consistently held the fascination of Western audiences. However, its representations in Western literature have frequently distorted reality, portraying Egypt as a land of curses, tombs, and supernatural mysteries. These portrayals are rooted not in historical fact but in cultural assumptions shaped by Orientalist ideologies. Edward Said (1978) argued that "the Orient was almost a European invention," imagined as a place of "romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes." This perspective positions the East as irrational and mysterious—opposite to the rational, modern West.

One of the most emblematic outcomes of this mindset is the myth of the "Mummy's Curse," which gained momentum after Howard Carter's discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb in 1922. Following the sudden death of Lord Carnarvon and other team members, sensationalist media, including The New York Times, pushed headlines like "New 'Curse' on Egypt Tomb" (The New York Times, 1923). Dominic Montserrat (2005) notes that the curse narrative was "a modern myth, not an ancient belief," crafted by newspapers and fiction writers to sell exotic horror. Similarly, Roger Luckhurst (2012) emphasizes that the mummy's curse "was never part of ancient Egyptian religion, but a fantasy made popular by Victorian and Edwardian fiction."

In contrast to such depictions, Egypt was a highly sophisticated civilization. Salima Ikram (2003) explains that mummification was a scientific and spiritual practice, not based on superstition. Mark Lehner (1997) corrects common misconceptions about pyramid construction, stating that it was achieved through skilled labor and careful planning—not slave labor or supernatural forces. Likewise, Toby Wilkinson (2010) points out that ancient Egypt had a complex bureaucracy and an intellectual tradition often ignored in popular culture.

This study examines three literary works—Arthur Conan Doyle's Lot No. 249, Bram Stoker's The Jewel of Seven Stars, and Rick Riordan's The Kane Chronicles—to evaluate how they reinforce Orientalist stereotypes. Drawing on Edward Said's theoretical framework and scholarly research, this analysis explores how fiction has mythologized Egypt to serve Western fears and fantasies, often erasing its scientific and cultural contributions in the process.

Said's concept of Orientalism emphasizes how the West constructs the East as the "Other" to maintain cultural and political dominance. In literature, Ancient Egypt is often represented as mystical and decaying, its past portrayed as a magical threat rather than a source of knowledge. These portrayals reflect Western anxieties about race, gender, power, and empire, and reveal more about Western ideologies than about Egypt itself. The mummy's curse, for instance, was not an ancient Egyptian idea but a Western invention. Egyptian funerary texts emphasized peaceful transitions to the afterlife, not vengeance. Ikram (2003) notes that the ancient Egyptians held a deep spiritual respect for the dead. Montserrat (2005) argues the curse myth originated from colonial guilt and media sensationalism rather than religious belief. Its endurance in popular culture supports Said's point that the East is continually redefined through inherited literary conventions rather than lived experience.

Arthur Conan Doyle's Lot No. 249 (1892) exemplifies Orientalist fantasy. The story centers on a reanimated mummy used by a British student to terrorize his rivals. The mummy, silent and dehumanized, functions only as a force of ancient horror. Egypt is not portrayed for its civilization but as a source of necromancy and violence. As Luckhurst (2012) explains, such stories reflect fears of imperial decline and anxieties about knowledge slipping beyond Western control. Said (1978) calls this the "textual attitude"—using inherited tropes to imagine the East without real engagement.

In Bram Stoker's The Jewel of Seven Stars(1903), Queen Tera, an ancient sorceress, threatens the modern British world upon resurrection. She embodies both fascination and fear: a powerful, intelligent, foreign woman challenging colonial and patriarchal authority. Her tomb, filled with cryptic artefacts, is treated not with scholarly curiosity but with mysticism and dread. As Montserrat (2005) observes, Tera becomes a projection of Western fears about the reversal of colonial power. Egypt is again depicted not as a historical civilization but as a repository of dangerous, occult energy.

Rick Riordan's The Kane Chronicles (2010–2012) reimagines Egypt in a modern, multicultural setting. The series follows biracial siblings Carter and Sadie Kane, who uncover their magical heritage linked to Egyptian gods. While the books attempt cultural inclusivity, the representation of Egypt remains mythological, chaotic, and divorced from historical accuracy. Gods behave like modern superheroes; ancient symbols are simplified for narrative effect. As Teeter (2011) notes, such portrayals risk reinforcing stereotypes under the guise of diversity. Riordan's Egypt becomes another fantasy world where magic overwhelms history, aligning with Orientalist habits of mystification.

What is consistently missing across these works is the acknowledgment of Egypt's real intellectual and technological achievements. Ancient Egyptians developed one of the earliest writing systems, performed complex surgeries, managed sophisticated irrigation systems, and mapped astronomical patterns (Wilkinson, 2010). These contributions are rarely

foregrounded in Western fiction. Instead, Egypt is reduced to spectacle, often attributed with supernatural feats or alien interference—both of which undermine its African scientific legacy. Lehner (1997) and Hawass (2008) have worked extensively to correct these misrepresentations by highlighting rational and evidence-based models of pyramid construction and governance.

Several scholars and Egyptologists have challenged the persistence of Orientalist depictions. Said's (1978) work remains foundational in identifying how Western texts function as ideological tools. Montserrat (2005) exposed the journalistic origins of the mummy's curse, while Ikram (2003) emphasized the religious integrity of Egyptian funerary customs. Even early writers like E. W. Lane and Amelia Edwards, who helped popularize Egyptology, contributed to the romanticization of Egypt through colonial lenses (Hornung, 2001). These frameworks still shape how Egypt is imagined in contemporary media and literature.

In conclusion, the Western literary imagination has frequently transformed Egypt from a site of cultural and intellectual brilliance into a stage for magic, death, and fear. These distortions are not accidental but stem from deeply embedded Orientalist ideologies. From Doyle's violent mummy to Stoker's vengeful queen to Riordan's magical Egypt, the civilization is reimagined to serve Western narratives. The myth of the mummy's curse, fabricated in the 20th century, symbolizes how history is overwritten by fiction. By applying Edward Said's framework, this research critiques these enduring myths and seeks to restore Egypt's rightful place as a civilization rooted in reason, innovation, and human achievement.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study uses Edward Said's (1978) theory of Orientalism as its primary analytical lens. Orientalism is defined as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. It encompasses not only political and economic control but also the representation of the East in texts and cultural narratives. Orientalist texts often erase complexity and present Eastern cultures as static, backward, and magical.

The literary texts selected for this study are analysed for Orientalist motifs such as the Mummy's Curse, magical resurrection, and the mystification of hieroglyphs. These are then contrasted with Egyptological findings to demonstrate the divergence between fictional portrayals and historical realities.

4. Textual Analysis

4.1 An Orientalist Reading of Lot No. 249 by Arthur Conan Doyle

Arthur Conan Doyle's short story Lot No. 249 turns Ancient Egypt from a place of real culture and learning into something dark and frightening. In the story, the mummy is not shown as a respected ancestor preserved through sacred rituals—as it was in actual Egyptian beliefs—but as a walking, silent monster that spreads fear. Doyle describes it as "a thing of horror…whose dry footfalls echoed in the hall" (Doyle, p. 6). This kind of portrayal fits into what scholar Edward Said called "Orientalism": when Western writers wrongly show Eastern cultures, like Egypt's, as strange, magical, and dangerous (Said, 1978).

The main character, Edward Bellingham, is a British student who has studied ancient Egyptian texts and uses "fragments of the Book of the Dead" to bring the mummy back to life (Doyle, p. 9). In real history, "the Book of the Dead" was a religious text meant to help the dead reach the afterlife peacefully. But in Doyle's story, it becomes a source of magic and fear. This change shows how Western fiction often takes meaningful parts of Eastern culture and turns them into something to be afraid of. It supports the idea that the West is smart and logical, while the East is weird, magical, and dangerous.

The mummy in the story does not speak or have a personality—it is just a tool for revenge and horror. Its victims are British students, who represent modern Western knowledge. This

shows a hidden fear: that even after death, Eastern cultures might fight back against the West's control. Lines like "The very air seemed thick with the death of centuries" (Doyle, p. 10) suggest that Egypt is a land frozen in time, full of old secrets waiting to harm anyone who disturbs them.

Throughout the story, Egypt is shown through objects like tomb relics, ancient scrolls (called papyri), and cursed amulets. These things are not used to teach readers about real Egyptian history. Instead, they create an atmosphere of mystery and fear. The mummy is not a symbol of ancient science or religion—it becomes a symbol of what happens when the West messes with something it doesn't fully understand.

In the end, Lot No. 249 is less about Egypt itself and more about Western fears and imagination. It uses Egyptian culture as a backdrop for horror and suspense, reinforcing the idea that the East is dangerous and must be controlled. Like many stories from the Victorian era, Doyle's tale reflects how Western writers misunderstood and misused Eastern cultures, turning real traditions into scary myths to entertain readers.

4.2 An Orientalist Reading of *The Jewel of Seven Stars* by Bram Stoker

Bram Stoker's *The Jewel of Seven Stars* (1903) continues the Western literary tradition of turning Ancient Egypt into a land of mystery and fear. The story follows British archaeologist Abel Trelawny, who discovers the tomb of Queen Tera, a powerful Egyptian ruler. Trelawny becomes obsessed with bringing her back to life. But as the ritual progresses, strange and dangerous events begin to threaten the people around him.

Queen Tera is shown as both powerful and frightening. She is described as "wondrously perfect... untouched by time" (Stoker, p. 42), which makes her sound magical and otherworldly rather than human. This is an example of how Western writers often *fetishize* Eastern women—they describe them in a way that makes them seem like mysterious, exotic objects instead of real people. In this case, Queen Tera is admired for her beauty and power, but she is also feared. She becomes a symbol of danger rather than a person with her own story.

The things found in Queen Tera's tomb—amulets, sacred oils, and symbols—are not described as religious or scientific tools, but as magical and scary. The narrator even says, "There was something sinister in the air… as though the past had teeth" (p. 89). This turns Ancient Egypt into a ghost story, not a real place. Instead of celebrating its achievements, the story makes Egypt look like a land of dark secrets and sleeping curses.

The novel treats Egyptian artefacts and inscriptions with suspicion rather than scholarly interest. In one revealing moment, the narrator describes the tomb with palpable dread:

"It was a room of death, filled with strange devices, hideous forms, and threatening emblems. The walls were covered in hieroglyphics that seemed to move in the dim light, whispering secrets meant to stay hidden." (Stoker, Ch. IX)

This vivid description turns the cryptic inscriptions into supernatural warnings, not historical texts. Rather than presenting Egypt as a site of cultural heritage and scientific accomplishment, Stoker transforms it into a haunted landscape—one where knowledge itself is dangerous, and the past is treated with fear rather than curiosity. As Said explains, Orientalism often reduces Eastern culture to a mythical dimension, removing it from historical context and rational engagement.

Throughout the novel, Queen Tera cannot speak for herself. All her actions, thoughts, and even her personality are described by the British characters around her. For example, when the characters argue about whether she is evil or wise, no one ever considers her own side. She has no voice in her own story. This reflects what Edward Said describes in *Orientalism*—that the East is often shown in Western writing as silent and passive, while the West speaks on its behalf. This idea is captured in the moment when Trelawny says, "She knew secrets

which were lost to us… perhaps better left that way" (Stoker, p. 95). Egyptian knowledge is not treated as something to be studied or understood—it is seen as dangerous and best kept hidden.

Queen Tera's silence is key to understanding her role. She is supposed to be wise, powerful, and intelligent—but the reader never hears from her directly. All we know is what others say about her. Her body is put on display, her tomb is opened, her personal items are handled and discussed—but her voice is never heard. This shows how, in Orientalist literature, the East is often shown as something to look at and talk about, but not something that can speak back.

Queen Tera's spirit is portrayed as invasive, with Stoker writing, "Her spirit seemed to pass into the room, touching every shadow" (p. 101). The resurrection scene is treated not as a marvel of cultural rediscovery but as a spiritual contamination. This aligns with Orientalist fears of reverse colonization—the idea that the East, if not kept in check, could rise again and influence or corrupt the West.

At the end of the story, Queen Tera is destroyed. This reflects a deeper message: the West is afraid that the East could come back to life—gain power, speak for itself—and so it must be stopped. Her silence, then, is not just because she is dead, but because the story never allows her a voice. She becomes a mystery that must be solved, controlled, and finally erased.

In short, *The Jewel of Seven Stars* shows how Western literature often portrays Ancient Egypt—not as a place of history and human achievement, but as a strange, scary land full of magic and curses. Queen Tera is not allowed to be a real person. She is turned into an object of fascination and fear—admired for her beauty, feared for her power, and ultimately silenced.

4.3 An Orientalist Reading of *The Kane Chronicles* by Rick Riordan

Rick Riordan's *The Kane Chronicles* trilogy brings Ancient Egyptian mythology into the modern world through fantasy. The series follows Carter and Sadie Kane, biracial siblings who find out they are descended from ancient Egyptian magicians. They discover that the Egyptian gods are real and have returned to cause chaos, and it's up to the siblings to stop them. While the books try to make Egyptian culture interesting for younger readers, they also simplify and change many parts of it. As a result, Egypt is often shown not as a real place with a long, advanced history, but as a land of magic, danger, and mystery—just as older Western stories used to show it.

From the beginning of *The Red Pyramid*, the first book, we see this idea. Carter says, "The Egyptian gods are real. They've just been sleeping" (p. 15). This line shows a common stereotype: that the East is something ancient and forgotten, just waiting to wake up. Instead of showing Egypt as a living culture that still exists and changes, the book makes it feel like a place frozen in time. The gods are not shown as respected religious figures, but as characters in a fantasy world. Set, the god of chaos, becomes a typical villain with "a red-skinned warrior" look and "a cruel grin" (p. 97). Anubis is shown as "a handsome boy in black" (p. 188), turning a powerful god of the dead into a teenage heartthrob. This turns real religious figures into playful characters for entertainment.

Magic in the books also feels like something out of a video game. Carter and Sadie cast spells by shouting words and using wands or staffs. They say things like, "Speak the words. Control the power. Win the fight" (p. 134). Real Egyptian rituals were spiritual and respectful, but here they become fast and flashy, as if Egypt is just a setting for a magical adventure. This fits what Edward Said called Orientalism—when Western stories use the East to create mystery and fun, not to understand it deeply.

In *The Throne of Fire*, the second book, Egyptian ideas are made simpler and even silly. For example, Ma'at, which in real Egyptian belief meant truth and cosmic balance, is explained by Sadie as, "Ma'at is balance. Like your mother says: clean your room, save the world" (p.

203). This joke makes a deep religious concept sound like a chore. The Duat, Egypt's spiritual world, becomes "a maze of weirdness—floating islands, giant pyramids, and a river made of fire" (p. 177). While this makes the book exciting, it turns a sacred space into a fantasy world, not something serious or respectful. Egypt is shown more like a dream or a video game level than a real place with meaning.

In the final book, *The Serpent's Shadow*, Carter and Sadie battle Apophis, the god of chaos. They use his "shadow," or sheut, to defeat him. The idea of a shadow being part of the soul is real in Egyptian belief, but the book changes it to something like a magical weakness. Sadie says, "If we get Apophis's shadow, we can bind his essence" (p. 134). Instead of showing the deep spiritual meaning, the book turns it into a simple plot trick to win the battle. Carter becomes the new leader of the House of Life, saying, "I never wanted to be a pharaoh. But it's not about what I want" (p. 325). Though meant to be inspiring, it makes it seem like modern teenagers can easily take on ancient roles, ignoring the complexity and meaning behind those roles.

The siblings are part Egyptian, but they mostly act as outsiders who explain Egyptian culture to the reader. Sadie even jokes, "So I'm part Egyptian. Does that mean I get to ride a camel to school?" (p. 44). This plays on old stereotypes, making Egypt seem like a desert full of camels and pyramids, not a modern country with people and cities. The story is told through "recordings" left by Carter and Sadie, meaning Egypt's story is told through their voices—not its own. This fits another idea from Said: the East doesn't speak for itself; the West speaks for it.

In short, *The Kane Chronicles* mixes fun with facts, but in doing so, it changes the meaning of Egyptian history and religion. The gods, magic, and spiritual ideas become tools for a fantasy story, not things to learn from or respect. While the books are exciting and offer diversity, they also continue the old habit of using Egypt as a magical, strange place for Western characters to explore. This shows how Orientalism still shapes modern stories—even ones that seem inclusive and educational.

5. Conclusion

Western literary depictions of Ancient Egypt have long been shaped by Orientalist imagination, where Egypt is rendered as a land of sleeping curses, magical relics, and timeless mysticism. These portrayals often rely on tropes of resurrected mummies, vengeful deities, and arcane knowledge hidden beneath the desert sands. Rather than presenting Egypt as a real, evolving civilization, such narratives construct it as a frozen spectacle—unfolding only when animated by Western curiosity or control. These depictions reflect what Edward Said described as the West's tendency to reduce the East to a silent, mystical "Other," whose history is only made meaningful through the Western gaze.

In sharp contrast, modern Egyptologists and historians have worked to reconstruct a more accurate image of Ancient Egypt—one rooted in science, philosophy, religion, and artistic achievement. Salima Ikram (2003) emphasizes that mummification was a sacred science designed not to provoke fear, but to reflect deep religious convictions about the afterlife, spiritual purity, and the ethical structure of the universe. Likewise, Mark Lehner (1997) has shown through archaeological evidence that the pyramids were not built through slave labor or magical intervention, but by highly skilled artisans, supported by a state-organized economy with careful architectural planning. Prominent Egyptologist Zahi Hawass has also worked extensively to correct popular misconceptions about ancient Egyptian society. Through years of excavation and public engagement, he has emphasized that the pyramid builders were not slaves but skilled workers who were honored for their contributions. He states, "The builders of the pyramids were free men, not slaves. They worked in rotating shifts and lived in nearby workers' villages with access to medical care and food supplies"

(Hawass, 2008, p. 134). His research helps dismantle the myth of Egypt as a land of oppression and mystery, highlighting instead its complex labor systems, social organization, and respect for workers.

The work of Toby Wilkinson (2010) further illustrates how Ancient Egypt possessed a robust legal system, centralized governance, and a sophisticated literary and theological tradition that rivalled other ancient civilizations in intellectual depth.

Despite such well-documented realities, Western fiction continues to simplify or sensationalize Egypt, turning its historical complexity into a repository of entertainment, fear, and fantasy. Sacred texts are reduced to magical manuals, gods are recast as comic or monstrous figures, and ancient rituals are transformed into dramatic spectacles devoid of cultural nuance. This persistent misrepresentation not only distorts public understanding of Egypt's legacy but also reinforces a long-standing pattern of cultural appropriation, where the East is exoticized for Western consumption rather than engaged with on its own terms.

To move beyond this literary Orientalism, it is essential that representations of Ancient Egypt reflect its genuine historical identity—one of spiritual sophistication, scientific achievement, and cultural resilience. As modern scholarship continues to uncover and contextualize Egypt's contributions to human civilization, literature must also evolve to honor that reality with greater respect and authenticity.

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