IN 1978, THE LATE Edward Said published his seminal book, *Orientalism*, which argued that Western attitudes towards the Middle East were shaped by a series of false assumptions. Those assumptions were deliberate and deeply entrenched, and when Western scholars looked at the Middle East, they simply could not set aside their “subtle and persistent Eurocentric prejudice” against the Arab-Islamic world. By showing Asia and the Middle East as exotic and romantic, Western scholars had created the justification for colonial expansion — the underlying idea was to subjugate these cultures, making imperialism palatable.

A year earlier, a Malaysian scholar had published a book pursuing a similar inquiry from a different angle. The book was called *The Myth of the Lazy Native*, and the author was Syed Hussein Alatas, who died in 2007 at the age of 79. Alatas found the perpetuation of the idea that the people of Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines were lazy puzzling, so he studied the views of Southeast Asia held by Western scholars. He concluded that those observations reflected prejudices and were part of a political project. The image of “the indolent, dull, backward and treacherous native” allowed the colonial power to view the native as a dependent, “requiring assistance to climb the ladder of progress.”

Alatas challenged the prevailing narrative, examining the degrading image of Southeast Asians, but from the perspective of the colonized. He cited a German writer who said that Filipinos made their oars of bamboo so that when they broke the oarsmen could rest till the oar was mended, an anecdote around which the lazy native narrative was written. Alatas castigated such writing, arguing that it was aimed at justifying the dependence of the colonized population.

Now Alatas’s daughter, Masturah Alatas, who lives in Italy, has written a moving memoir about her father’s life as a writer. Instead of a chronological biography, beginning with her father’s birth and ending with his death, she has chosen to explore what made him a writer and scholar, and his impact on her emergence as a writer. She looks at the politics and philosophy in his writings, relating it to episodes from his life, and placing it in the context of his time. She describes watching him write in longhand late into the night; how she acquired his love of being surrounded by books; the enthusiasm in his eyes when she talked to him about the scholars she read during her time as a student abroad; and she narrates, as if in a documentary, his early struggles to find a publisher.

It is an affectionate and moving memoir. Hers is an unusual treatment, and at the end of the short book, you wish there were more.

In 1988, Ms. Alatas met Said in New York. On finding that she was Alatas’s daughter, he greeted her warmly. Said later called Alatas’s work “startlingly original” in his 1993 book *Culture and Imperialism*. Both men were concerned about the misrepresentation of the colonized. But, as Ms. Alatas points out, while Said was concerned with how the rulers and writers shaped the imperial project, her father’s interest lay in the amateurish scholarship about his region.

The senior Alatas was more than an academic. He also played a role in Malaysian politics for some time. In particular, he influenced how the native is viewed and valorized in Malaysia, and this has shaped Malaysian politics since the Chinese-Malay race riots that began on May 13, 1969, culminating in the contentious affirmative action plan called the New Economic Policy. The policy provides special benefits to *bumiputra* (ethnic Malays), aimed at shifting the economic balance from the dominant Chinese to the Malays.

This political aspect of Alatas’s life is absent from the book. He was a founding member of the Gerakan Party, which opposed race-based quotas, seeing them as divisive. But the riots and the political strife that followed disillusioned him, and Alatas moved to Singapore to pursue an academic
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career in the island-republic — an unusual choice, considering that he was a Muslim and belonged to the class that would have benefited from the new policies. He returned to Malaysia after more than two decades. His many years in Singapore had convinced him of the importance of meritocracy, as Singapore defined and attempted to implement it. During the time he had been away, Malaysia had made enormous economic progress, leading to the emergence of an ethnic Malay middle class. The pragmatic economic policies of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammed had attracted significant foreign investment and the country was rapidly building vastly improved infrastructure. He realized, though, that while Malaysia had progressed economically, it remained stunted politically. His ideas of meritocracy continued to clash with the prevalent view of preferential politics based on ethnic quotas. He continued to challenge the divisive politics of the National Front, the coalition led by the United Malays National Organization, but his foray into politics was unsuccessful against the powerful UMNO machine.

In explaining her father’s politics, Ms. Alatas lets his words speak for themselves. Although she does not dwell too long on it, she cites her father as saying how he was one of the few people to criticize publicly Mahathir’s divisive book, The Malay Dilemma, which was published in 1970 after the riots and laid the foundations for ethnicity-based policy.

While Alatas was a Muslim, and an orthodox one at that, he was a liberal too. When a Malay lecturer wanted Maxime Rodinson’s Islam and Capitalism banned, Alatas wrote: “The Islamic way is to understand the book and refute it with another book. There has been increasing propaganda against the Western civilization… It is centered mainly on the suggestion that the West is materialistic, that it is a source of sexual permissiveness, that it corrupts character and spirituality, and that it encourages selfish individualism. I became alarmed at the idea of what will happen if this attitude prevails.”

It is worth noting that Alatas wrote those words in 1976, soon after the Yom Kippur war between Israel and its neighbors in 1973, before the Iranian revolution, before V.S. Naipaul made his journeys “among the believers,” and long before the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. A quarter-century earlier, in 1950, during a visit to London, Alatas had attended a conference on Islam where he met intriguing “young men in sparsely grown beards” from Egypt. When he asked whether it was necessary to follow every hadith (narrative) in Islam, they asked him why he posed such a question. The tone was polite but threatening — it wanted to root out doubt. Alatas didn’t debate those men with conviction who thought they knew all the answers; but for the remainder of his life, he retained the spirit to continue questioning.

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