

EDWARD SAID, 1935-2003

FAKRUL ALAM

THE news of Edward Said's death did not reach me courtesy of *The Daily Star* on Friday morning as it should have, but when Farhad and Fayeza, my ex-students in America, emailed to tell me that the man they knew I admired above anyone else in English Studies had passed away. Farhad had this to say: "Edward Said died last night, and I just read an article on him--an obituary--in NY Times. I was going to e-mail it to you, but I thought the article was rather biased and felt you could do without it. The news of Said's death makes me sad; it was not an unexpected death--he was battling leukemia for about twelve years. I did hear him once in an MLA convention in which he was the keynote speaker. He was impressive, but that was only to be expected." Fayeza's note was briefer, but it reminded me of a commitment I had made to my own self and that I hope to keep someday: "Sir, Edward Said has died. Did you finish your *Imperial Entanglements and Literature in English*? I remember you telling me that you'd dedicate the book to him."

That the *New York Times* would be critical of Edward Said and ungracious till the last was not unexpected; Said had been a thorn in the side of all Zionists and most of the Jewish and rightist establishments of America for years now. *Commentary*, a periodical published by right-wing Jews, had once run an article calling him "professor of terror" for his outspoken advocacy of the Palestinian cause; someone had at one point left a bomb in his garbage bin; he had received so many death threats that the New York police department once considered installing a "panic" button in his apartment. I remember reading an article by a leading American critic in *The New York Review of Books* accusing him of being a poor scholar and of writing incorrect English, though more objective critics have noted his mastery over a variety of prose styles and eulogized him for his scholarship. Over the years, conservative New York/Israeli thinkers had tried to

do dirt on him in all kinds of ways. For example, when Said's autobiography, *Out of Place: A Memoir*, was published a few years ago, a Jewish writer tried to show that Said had falsely claimed that he was born in Jerusalem; the "scoop" was widely reported and gleefully circulated until it was found out that this was just another attempt to discredit the leading Palestinian-American scholar of the age by a supporter of the Israeli cause.

That *The Daily Star* carried a brief report on him the day after his death and only another account of Yasir Arafat's condoleance statement and nothing else for the next few days is not surprising either; most people in our country seemed to have taken little or no notice of the life and death of one of the leading intellectuals of our time. I remember, for instance, reading a paper some months ago on Edward Said and his influential concept of traveling theory at the University of Dhaka's Center for Advanced Studies in the Humanities. The Chair of the session, supposedly one of the leading scholars of our university, told me when I finished that while he found the paper interesting, he had never heard of the man before. I remember another occasion when I read another paper on Said to a similar audience where what seemed to fascinate a few of the people was not the ideas Said espoused but his name: was he a Muslim? Why Edward Said? Why would someone who was not a Muslim be doing so much to defend Islam as I had claimed?

But even if the New York or Jewish establishments found no cause to grieve the death of Edward Said and even if his passing away has had little impact in our country, he has had a major impression on people all over the world in the last three decades. His death has put many of us in mourning. He will be remembered, primarily, for two reasons: as one of the founding fathers of postcolonial studies (many would say, the father of this interdisciplinary area of advanced studies), and as the leading spokesperson for the Palestinian cause in the West, for he has been an outspoken critic of Zionism and

the Western media's attempts to "blame the victims" created by the Israeli state and to "cover Islam", to use phrases that he used as titles of two of his books. He has, also, several other claims to fame. He has been an outstanding intellectual who has articulated with great clarity and rigor the role of public intellectuals in time; a leading literary critic and literary theorist of the second half of the twentieth century; an outstanding scholar and teacher of English and comparative literature; and a widely read columnist whose columns were syndicated in English and Arabic for almost a decade. He was also an accomplished pianist and a passionate but astute writer on classical music and opera. He wrote over twenty books that have been translated into more than thirty languages; he was one of the eight university professors of Columbia University and held that position for over thirty years; he had lectured in excess of two hundred universities all around the world; and had been awarded honorary degrees by quite leading universities in all corners of the globe.

Said is widely credited with pioneering postcolonial studies because of his seminal book *Orientalism* (1978). In it, Said argued with great polemical force that for centuries Western scholarship has served the cause of imperialism and that there is a close connection between the will to knowledge and domination of other races. Said further argues that the West has misrepresented the East and has made the Orient its "Other", the better to repress it. Relentlessly pursuing Orientalist scholarship over the ages, he not only unmasks the nexus between knowledge and power in history but also demonstrates how so-called "think tanks" in the West specializing in Middle Eastern/Orientalist scholarship even now are being funded by petrodollars and grants from Mobil, Exxon, etc. and are formulating policy for persistent control over oilfields. In 1993, Said published *Culture and Imperialism*, another major work where he showed the close links between cultural work and colonization. The book has succeeded in rewriting literary his-



Noam Chomsky and Edward Said at a Middle East seminar in Columbia University

Columbia University in the City of New York | New York, N.Y. 10027

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH & COMPARATIVE LITERATURE | Photography: MAH

March 12, 1991

Dr. Fakrul Alam
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801 Strode Tower
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Dear Dr. Alam:

Thank you so much for your note and for your article, which I found most generous and (I speak with considerable self-interest) persuasive. You are particularly good on the anti-relying qualities of *Orientalism* and after. I enclose a detailed bibliography for your information. Please keep in touch.

Sincerely yours,
Edward W. Said
Edward W. Said
Old Dominion Foundation
Professor in the Humanities

tory to some extent and has implicated many of the leading writers of English literature in the drive towards the annexation of the rest of the world. While this book amplified some of the themes of the earlier book, it represents an advance over the earlier one in the sense that it has Said under-scoring resistance to Western hegemony in the Orient and emphasizing the counter-discourse of post-colonial intellectuals as a fact of history.

M.B. Naqvi's fine tribute, "Homage to Edward Said," the one extended tribute reprinted on this great Palestinian-American in *The Daily Star* till now, focuses on the other major reason why Said

will never be forgotten: he has been one of the most passionate, articulate, and committed activists the Palestinian cause has ever had. He championed his people tirelessly for decades, both in theory and practice. *Orientalism*, in fact, was part of a trilogy, and was the prelude to *The Question of Palestine* (1980) and *Covering Islam* (1981) two important books on the way Palestine was usurped, Palestinians dispersed and victimized, and Palestinians in general misrepresented and Islam in particular distorted by the Zionist-dominated media in the West. My favorite Said book, however, is *After the Last Sky* (1986), where Said and the Swiss pho-

tographer Jean Mohr collaborated to give us compelling images of Palestinians trying to pursue normal lives under the shadow cast by Israel occupation. *The Politics of Dispossession: The Struggle for Palestinian Dispossession 1969-1994*, is one of the many collections of Said's essays on the plight of the Palestinians, their indomitable spirit, and endless quest for self-determination. But Said also furthered the Palestinian struggle for their rights by counseling Arafat till the Oslo Accord and by taking part in the deliberations of the Palestinian National Council, which acted as the Palestinian parliament-in-exile for a long time. He parted ways with Arafat because he felt that the Oslo Accord had compromised Palestinian sovereignty and had ceded to the Israelis the gains made by the *intafadah* movement of the later eighties for little or nothing. Never shy of courting controversy for the cause of his people, and quite combative in public in championing them, Said was widely criticized in the west for throwing a stone at Jewish settlements in Jerusalem to demonstrate his support of the *intafadah*. It was his belief that Israelis should be made to give the Palestinians what they deserved and not a pittance. In *Peace and its Discontents*, written mainly with an Arab audience in mind, Said records his anger and anguish at the betrayal the Oslo Accord represented to him and urges for genuine negotiations for a lasting solu-

tion for Palestine. But Said also wrote for the Israelis too, urging them to reconsider and revalue their relationships with Palestine and urging them to be just. He and his friend Noam Chomsky, the great Jewish-American dissident intellectual, were among the leaders of the opposition against American expansionism in the United States during the two Iraq wars. Till the end of his life, he continued to write regularly and energetically for the Palestinian cause, taking on the American government frontally for its Arab wars, while also expressing his regret at aberrant events such as the one the world witnessed on September 11, despite the leukemia that was slowly sapping him of life.

I have no doubt that one of Said's major works is *Representation of Intellectuals* (1993), a book based on the 1993 BBC Reith lectures. In it Said theorized what the role of the intellectual should be in our time. He saw the intellectual as oppositional and secular, and as working against nationalism or state power, and for the production of non-coercive knowledge. His/her intellect is never co-opted by the establishment and is forever dedicated to upholding the cause of the oppressed, and of proclaiming "truth to power". Among Said's heroes in this book and elsewhere are Fanon, C. L. R. James, and Rabindranath Tagore, and he was always fond of citing the Bengali poet's strictures against nationalism. *Beginnings* (1975) positioned Said in the avant-garde of theory in the English-speaking world, while *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (1983) consolidated his unique position in contemporary literary criticism. Said was someone who combined theoretical rigor with humanism, and was a comparatist who used his training in philology and his mastery over many languages to comment with great erudition on a variety of subjects. Because of space constraints, I can only ask readers to read *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays* (2001) to acquaint themselves with the breadth and depth of Said's scholarship, the catholicity of his taste, and the ele-

gance and erudition with which he could discuss any number of subjects.

I want to end this memorial tribute on a personal note. For a long time now I have been working on *Imperial Entanglements and Literature in English*, a collection of essays on the colonial encounter and what it has meant for English studies and on reading postcolonially. I want to dedicate this book to Edward Said because he shaped it and my literary interests in all sorts of ways. From the moment I came across *Orientalism* in 1980, his ideas have molded me and directed the path I would pursue in my research and writing. I have corresponded with him a number of times and it is my great regret that I have lost one of the three letters (the handwritten one!) that he sent me. I have written at least six full-length essays/reviews of his works. One of these essays was an attempt to counter a critique of Said published by an American scholar in *The South Carolina Review*. The editor of the journal had invited me to respond to the critique and I sent Said the critique, my response, and the writer's reply to my response, to Said. The letter reproduced in today's *Star* was Said's comment on my piece.

Hopefully, I will be eventually able to publish almost all the essays I have written on Edward Said in *Imperial Entanglements and Literature in English*. I had intended not only to dedicate the book to him but also have him preface it for me. I had invited him to come to Dhaka to inaugurate over the "Colonial/Postcolonial Encounter Conference" our department organized in 1996. But he had declined the invitation because of failing health. Now leukemia has finally claimed him and we will never get him in our midst anymore, but his works will continue to inspire all of us who have been witness to the force he was in contemporary theory and cultural politics for over a generation now.

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Orientalism: A Quick Look

Yet none of this Orient (European construction of the East) is merely imaginative. The Orient is an integral part of Europe's material civilization and culture. Orientalism expresses and represents that part culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse, with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles."

---from *Orientalism* by Edward Said

The Terms

The *Oriental* signifies a system of representations framed by political forces that brought the Orient into Western learning, Western consciousness, and Western empire. The Orient exists for the West, and is constructed by and in relation to the West. It is a mirror image of what is inferior and alien ("Other") to the West. *Orientalism* is "a manner of regularized (or Orientalized) writing, vision, and study, dominated by imperatives, perspectives, and ideological biases ostensibly suited to the Orient." It is the image of the 'Orient' expressed as an entire system of thought and scholarship.

The *Oriental* is the person represented by such thinking. The man is depicted as

feminine, weak, yet strangely dangerous because poses a threat to white, Western women. The woman is both eager to be dominated and strikingly exotic. The Oriental is a single image, a sweeping generalization, a stereotype that crosses countless cultural and national boundaries.

Latent Orientalism is the unconscious, untouchable certainty about what the Orient is. Its basic content is static and unanimous. The Orient is seen as separate, eccentric, backward, inscrutable, sensual, and passive. It has a tendency towards despotism and displays feminine penetrability--thus the inroads of colonial armies--and supine malleability.

Manifest Orientalism is what is spoken and acted upon. It includes information and changes in knowledge about the Orient as well as policy decisions founded in Orientalist thinking. It is the expression in words and actions of Latent Orientalism.

Earlier and Contemporary Orientalism

The first 'Orientalists'--including the ones in Fort William College in British Bengal--were 19th century scholars who translated the writings of the 'Orient' into English, based on the assumption that a truly effective colonial conquest required knowledge of

the conquered peoples. This idea of knowledge as power is present throughout Said's critique. The Orient became the studied, the seen, the observed, the object; Orientalist scholars were the students, the seers, the observers, the subject. The Orient was passive; the West was active.

One of the most significant constructions of Orientalist scholars is that of the Orient itself. What is considered as one unit, as the 'Orient', is of course actually a vast region, one that spreads across a myriad of cultures and countries. The depiction of this single 'Orient' which can be studied as a cohesive whole is one of the most powerful accomplishments of Orientalist scholars. Language is critical to this construction. The 'feminine and weak' Orient awaits the dominance of the West; it is a defenseless and unintelligent whole that exists for, and in terms of, its Western counterpart. The importance of such a construction is that it creates a single subject matter where none existed, a compilation of previously unspoken notions of the Orient. Since the notion of the Orient is created by the Orientalist, it exists solely for him or her. Its identity is defined by the scholar who gives it life. It is a construction that still informs current Western depictions in print, on TV, in electronic media, in letters, columns, book

reviews, even in ordinary conversation of 'Arab' and 'Muslim' cultures. Every time we come across words like, say, 'Palestinian gunman', 'Islamic radicals' or 'Hizbollah extremists' (words which have also been uncritically absorbed into our own media lexicon) and concomitant images in Western media we come across a contemporary variant of an old imperial construct.

Reverse Orientalism

Here it must be added that Said took care to point out that Orientalism also represents a way of thinking, a *process*, which is not always a prerogative of the West, that when we non-Westerners use words such as 'Western' (as for example here) then we are also using our own particular construct, built on our own historic assumptions and experience about the 'Other'. The crucial difference here of course is that this construct is not the result of a systemic study over two hundred years that was an eloquent and eager handmaiden of colonization, manipulation and control. As Said says, there is no 'Occidentalism'. However, that does not mean, as Said also warns, that we post-colonialists and inhabitants of the Third World should be unaware of a reverse Orientalism, that we should be sensitive to the number of different cultures,

peoples and ideas that is crammed under the "falsely unifying rubric" of 'West' or 'Western.' To quote his own lucid words on the topic:

In the Arab and Muslim countries the situation is scarcely better. As Roula Khalaf has argued, the region has slipped into an easy anti-Americanism that shows little understanding of what the US is really like as a society. Because the governments are relatively powerless to affect US policy towards them, they turn their energies to repressing and keeping down their own populations, with results in resentment, anger and helpless imprecations that do nothing to open up societies where secular ideas about human history and development have been overtaken by failure and frustration, as well as by an Islamism built out of rote learning and the obliteration of what are perceived to be other, competitive forms of secular knowledge. The gradual disappearance of the extraordinary tradition of Islamic ijihad or personal interpretation has been one of the major cultural disasters of our time, with the result that critical thinking and individual wrestling with the problems of the modern world have all but disappeared.



Orientalism as representation and a visual mode of discourse is also to be found extensively in European art of the colonial era. Here is reproduced Eugène Delacroix's (1798-1863) "The Fanatics of Tangier." Note the Orientalist assumptions in both the subject of the painting and its title: that Tangier is a hellhole where a few good white men (offstage) do their duty and hold a screaming, scraggly, dirty-robed rabble at bay. Note also that today similar images of Palestinians are used extensively in American media to portray them as stone-throwing fanatics raging against the coolly superior Israelis.

---Editor, Literature Page

A Novel In Benglish: "Nowadays West Indian and Bengali set the dominant rhythms of (London). In the East End, cockney is replaced by another dialect some already call Benglish."

Foxy-T
by Tony White
229pp, Faber

Constantly invigorated by successive waves of immigrants, London produces a literature unrivalled by any other great city; she's a powerhouse of fiction, using whole cultures for fuel. London erupts with street language to match the tenor of the times, drawing vitality from the word-hoards of the powerless and disenfranchised. Working novelists, usually too poor to live anywhere but the ghettos, listen and take notes.

Spontaneously created, the new language soon becomes a strategy against authority, ultimately responding to general experience and achieving a level of expression useful to all. Rapid, exact, poetic, its cadences are as persuasive as those of Shakespeare's taverns, so subtle that, by the time words make it to the glossaries, they've already altered, even reversed, their meanings. Gaelic, French, Spanish and Italian have all done their part to broaden our vocabulary. In the 17th century Romany was one of the richest veins writers tapped.

That became vagabonds' cant, the slang of theatre and gay nightlife, before entering our common speech. Yiddish, which I grew up using, in common with every Londoner of my age and background, informed 20th-century metropolitan English as thoroughly as it did German. Then American black idiom, itself borrowing from other immigrant dialects, came to us via the movies, jazz, R&B and rap. Nowadays West Indian and Bengali set the dominant rhythms of the city. In the East End, cockney is replaced by another dialect some already call Benglish.

East-Ender Tony White has always had his finger on the vulgar pulse. He edited a seminal anthology, *Britpulpl*, gave us the lively *Road Rage and Charlie - unclenorfoltango*, and, as literary editor of the *Idler*, did much to promote his talented contemporaries. In *Foxy-T* he excels himself. His skillfully sustained use of Bangladeshi idiom combines with a surprising plot and wholly believable characters. White becomes the nearest thing to a fly on the wall in today's urban society, and you don't even guess how until his final pages.

White gives us the English heard every day in a street I once knew, whose parade of greasy spoons, betting shops and minicab businesses has mutated into video renters, sweet centers and computer cafes. Good friends Foxy-T and Ruiji Babes (their old sprycan tags) are two young women running E-Z Telephone And Internet, coping with local predators and mutually maintaining their morale. They share a flat over the shop and work for Ruiji's uncle, who is away in Bangladesh.

Zafar Iqbal, just freed from juvenile detention, accepts the chance to sleep on their couch for a while. Within days he has conceived a passion for a dazed Foxy-T, proposed marriage, fallen in with his old druggy mates, got up the nose of Ruiji's Beemer-owning gangster cousin, and seems to have broken the women's friendship while heading rapidly for disaster.

Here he is on his first night out after four years, trying to find his feet in the world again: "...aint take long till them reach at the Glass House is it and by the time them inside the place ram up believe me. Couple a well fit girl make straight over where Shabazz and Ranky is wait at the bar. Them two was dress up in it and Zafar find him cant

take him eye off them behind and how them G-strings show through them white trousers. Them G-string is disappear right up there ****. Easy now Zafar. Shit man them two girl was lean over and say something in him spar ear and touch them arm and laugh in it but Zafar just watch them behind like he never seen a girl before... Him no figure how some fit woman like Foxy-T aint make the most of herself is it and just wear them trackie bottom and polo shirt."

With vivid economy White describes young Bangladeshis' domestic, business and street life in intelligent, beautifully sustained prose. Coherent and compelling, the novel has a wonderful, if slightly tricky, denouement which made me grin with surprised admiration. Rejecting familiar influences of the past 20 years, White joins a handful of contemporary writers who are proving that the novel has never been more alive. He is a serious, engaging voice of the modern city.

(From the online Guardian newspaper)

