



essay

An Exemplary Intellectual: Edward Said—II

by Fakrul Alam

THE PUBLICATION OF *ORIENTALISM* in 1978 made Edward Said famous and this book and its sequels, *The Question of Palestine* (1979) and *Covering Islam* (1982), and Said's frequent appearance on American and European radio and television channels as a spokesman of the Palestine Liberation Organization throughout the eighties and the nineties confirmed his position as an outstanding and outspoken intellectual. Not everyone, of course, admired him; Zionists and extreme rightists combined to castigate him as "a Professor of Terror," implying thereby that he was using his academic position at Columbia University to advance armed rebellion and spread chaos in the west. Nevertheless, as the years went by, a consensus of sorts emerged amongst the critical avant garde in general and scholars from the decolonized regions in particular that Said's stance was an exemplary one and that he practiced what he preached: an independent, secular, oppositional, self-reflexive intellectual position. Also, the fact that he published theoretically significant and distinctive books such as *The World, the Text and the Critic* (1983), *Musical Elaborations* (1991), and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), and passionately committed and eloquent works highlighting the importance and the agony of the Palestinian struggle for self-determination such as *After the Last Sky* (1986) and *The Politics of Dispossession* (1994) ensured his position in the vanguard of critical consciousness everywhere in the decades after *Orientalism*.

A consequence of Said's celebrity status as an intellectual was the invitation extended to him in 1993 to give the Reith Lectures on BBC's Radio 4 that year. First given by Bertrand Russell in 1948, and rendered prestigious by him and subsequent speakers such as Arnold Toynbee and J K Galbraith, the Reith Lectures became the occasion for Said to bring together his thoughts about the role intellectuals can and should play in public life — thoughts which I have argued in the first part of this piece are implicit in *Orientalism*. Consisting of six broadcasts, Said's Reith Lectures were subsequently edited and published by him in 1994 as *Representations of the Intellectual*.

In his 'Introduction' to the book, Said points to the controversy which surrounded the Reith Lectures even before he got around to delivering them. One group of British intellectuals, for example, was aghast at the idea of an activist of the Palestinian Liberation Organization who was also a vocal critic of the persistence of western imperialist structures being invited to address the British public in this distinguished series. Another group of English commentators felt that the very subject matter of Said's talks — *Representations of the Intellectual* — was an un-English one —

were denizens of ivory towers worth talking about and would the shades of the BBC be thus demeaned! As Said notes in his 'Introduction', such disdain for intellectuals in England was symptomatic of a tendency in that and other countries to see them as best cloistered in the academy and having no place outside it. One other section of English public life felt that what Said would do is make the Reith Lectures a vehicle for self-promotion. A review in the *Sunday Telegraph* sums up this slant on the series by calling them "Palestinian propaganda" and an "implicit justification of his position and activities."

Undeniably, in defining the place of the intellectual in our world, Said is to a great extent characterizing his own position in the west and describing the vantage point he had chosen from which to highlight his concerns and confront his adversaries. Thus when Said emphasizes in his 'Introduction' the intellectual's public role as that of "an outsider, 'amateur', and disturber of the status quo," or when he underscores the intellectual's task as that of breaking "down the stereotypes and reductive categories that are so limiting to human thought and communication", or when he depicts intellectuals as figures "whose public performance can neither be predicted nor compelled into some slogan, orthodox party line, or fixed dogma," or when he speaks of the intellectual "as exile and marginal, ... and as the author of a language that tries to speak the truth to power," he is surely sketching the preoccupations of someone such as himself — but without any arrogance or the slightest sense of hubris. In fact, in the introductory pages of *Representations of the Intellectual* Said cites as his exemplars people such as Raymond Williams, Michel Foucault, Noam Chomsky, or Gore Vidal, spirits "in opposition, rather than in accommodation," dissenters from the mainstream who court unpopularity and take up the struggle of "the underrepresented and disadvantaged," and there can be little doubt that he is of their company.

Chapter I of *Representations of the Intellectual* begins by looking at the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci's distinction between traditional intellectuals — academics, exegetes, and mandarins — and organic intellectuals — people who believe with Marx that the thing to do with the world was not just to interpret it but to change it. Said next considers the definition of the French rightist Julian Benda of intellectuals as elite individuals who "constitute the conscience of mankind," and who eschew the world for the sake of truth and justice. Said makes it clear that his ideal intellectual combines the traits of Gramsci's organic one with Benda's unworldly seeker after lasting truth and humanistic values; she is someone who utilizes her mental faculties to change



Edward Said

the way things are not for her own sake or for some employer or government, but for the cause of humanity itself. Said's ideal intellectual has a consciousness that "is skeptical, engaged, unremittingly devoted to rational investigation and moral judgement;" she must therefore never compromise with the truth or perpetuate stereotypes; on the contrary, she must "confront orthodoxy and dogma" and "represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug." In Chapter II of *Representations of the Intellectual* Said examines the role of individuals in the era of nation-states. Said has no doubt that the intellectual must concern herself with national issues, but he is equally sure that he must never give up his individual accent in order to only speak the national language. In other words, the intellectual must dissent from the majority whenever necessary, or to be precise, on any occasion where his conscience tells him to speak up for the truth and to

question traditional verities. Considering the part an intellectual can play in contemporary Islam, Said urges for the revival of the Islamic tradition of *ijtihad*, or "personal interpretation, and not a sheeplike abdication to politically ambitious *ulema* or charismatic demagogues." In the decolonized regions of the world, Said quotes Frantz Fanon to the effect that the native intellectual cannot be content to see the white policeman be simply replaced by a coloured one; instead, his task would be to lead to "questions of political liberation, to critiques of the leadership, to presenting alternatives that are too often marginalized". Citing the stance taken by Tagore in India or Jose Marti in Cuba, Said asserts that "the individual's loyalty must not be restricted only to joining the collective march;" the two have become exemplary figures precisely because they never abated "their criticism because of nationalism, even though they remained nationalists themselves." In particular, an intel-

tual from one of the decolonized regions of the world must not remain indifferent to the wrong done to minorities in his country in the name of ethnic or national interests.

The third chapter of *Representations of the Intellectual* considers the extraterritorial individual and the exilic consciousness in an era of global diasporas. The intellectual is a person who, in a sense, prefers to be homeless; and makes a virtue out of a necessity. A type of this kind of intellectual is the Trinidadian-English writer, V S Naipaul, "resident off and on in England, yet always on the move, revisiting his Caribbean and Indian roots, sifting through the debris of colonialism and post-colonialism, remorselessly judging the illusions and cruelties of independent states and the new true believers." Another representative of the type is the German-American thinker Theodor Adorno who fled Nazism to found in New York a school of thought which posited continuous self-analysis and critique of existing systems to avoid critical paralysis. But Said makes it clear that he is not claiming that actual, physical exile is a necessary condition of critical thought; as he puts it, "even if one is not an actual immigrant or expatriate, it is still possible to think as one, to imagine and investigate in spite of barriers, and always to move away from the centralizing authority towards the margins, where you see things that are usually lost on minds that have never travelled beyond the conventional and the comfortable."

Chapter IV of *Representations of the Intellectual* takes up the question of whether one can hold on to an independent critical consciousness while serving in an institution such as the university where you have to withstand all sorts of pressures, either the systemic ones or the lure of acting as a consultant or expert to this or that party or corporation. Instead of transforming himself into a professional whose expertise is on hire or at the service of a power bloc, "and whose independent consciousness is compromised by their expectations, Said argues for an intellectual given to "amateurism, [which is] literally, an activity that is fuelled by care and affection rather than by profit and selfish, narrow specialization." As an amateur, the intellectual is able to ask the awkward questions elided by interest groups and radicalize the most routine operations carried out in the name of the nation or a faceless conglomeration.

Said begins Chapter V of *Representations of the Intellectual* by going back to the question of specialization and professionalism he had raised in the preceding chapter. He does so to reiterate his belief that the intellectual, "properly speaking... cannot be a functionary or an employee completely given up to the policy goals of a govern-

ment or a large corporation, or even a guild of like-minded professionals." Nor can the intellectual see herself bound by tradition or consensus; she must be able to interrogate sacred texts and uncover "truths" which have, in effect, been constituted; where essential, she must be able to break away from her group or party when she feels that they have abandoned their basic principles or compromised on key issues. Getting autobiographical at this point, Said cites his decision to break with the PLO in 1993 after many years of service to it because of his conviction that the Oslo Declaration was an "extremely limited breakthrough" which "far from guaranteeing Palestinian rights... in effect guaranteed the prolongation of Israeli control over the Occupied Territories."

Said concludes *Representations of the Intellectual* with a chapter titled "Gods That Always Fail" where he declares his distrust of all isms and where he stresses the dangers of toeing the party line for the thinking individual. As his short book draws to its close, Said becomes autobiographical once more, pointing out how he has always preferred "to retain both the outsider's and the skeptic's autonomy over the... vaguely religious quality communicated by the convert's and true believer's enthusiasm." Said emphasizes, however, that critical detachment was not the same thing as indifference or devotion to knowledge for knowledge's sake; Said's exemplary intellectual is committed to social change and transformation by advancing "emancipation and enlightenment." In the end, then, the ideal intellectual is he who cultivates his critical faculties while remaining involved in the struggle of the oppressed and the disadvantaged; he remains free of party and disciplinary affiliations while concerning himself with life itself as well as the life of the mind.

In representing the role of the individual in our world Edward Said had inevitably drawn on his own preoccupations over the years. To someone who has been following Said's career over the years, it is obvious that the reason for representing himself thus was not just self-interest; *Representations of the Intellectual* simply brings together his thoughts about the intellectual's vocations he had been adumbrating even in his earliest books. To someone who knows about Said's physical state when he was invited to give the Reith Lectures — he had at that time just started chemotherapy for chronic leukemia — it is also clear that he meant these lectures to be a testament of sorts of the ideals he had been pursuing in his life. One thing is for sure: through his life and these lectures Said had set up a model of intellectual life which we in Bangladesh could also think about.

About the writer: Fakrul Alam is Professor and Chairman of English at Dhaka University.

poem

Dedication

by Farhad Mazhar

Do you believe in Allah? You bastard heavy Communist
Who do you write a Book of Prayers on? suddenly
Let me tell you: There is many a bourgeois — atheist in one —
It only my address is in the book.
I'm going to hear my woe, so listen all
Over and over again go hand in glove.

Lord alone though I grasp that you are not, I still
Haven't proved I found God nowhere, over human
For I love humans, if I hit
They'll hurt so I've given the faithful long distance
Those who come to go to Masjid at call of prayer
I'm still in worship called by love and grace.

Take here, to buy a following
Prayers I've read in mosque.
In future. Never will forget
Lightest glist of the conflict of faith and reason
Knowledge is loveless, love jilts faith,
A heart is numbed in combat.

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A heart is numbed in combat.

Translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Avalon
Foundation Professor of Humanities at Columbia University.
Mazhar's book of poems *Ebadatnama* or Book of Prayer is
included in the post-modern poetry course taught by Gayatri
herself at Columbia. We print the dedication of the title here
and hope to publish the poems gradually. The translations have
not been published anywhere before.

art

Max Ernst, 'The Magician of Subtle Palpitations'

"Max Ernst takes the liberty to ask his severe male-readers and gentle lady readers if he deserves the flattering terms given him by one of the greatest (and least known) poets of our time (Rene Crevel): "the magician of subtle palpitations."

by Pascale Teinac

THIS IS THE LAST sentence jotted down by Max Ernst at the bottom of a biographical account written a few months before his death in 1976 and which he had called "The Final Question."

This question had already been answered ages before by his contemporaries, poets and artists, for whom he had been a "wizard," an inspired, hallucinated, visionary "magician", "a new messenger of light come from another world," as the American writer Henry Miller described him, or "the painter of illusions" for the poet Aragon.

The very beautiful retrospective organised on the occasion of the centenary of Max Ernst's birth and which is reaching the end of its tour at the Paris Modern Art Museum, after being on show in London, Stuttgart and Dusseldorf, leaves none of the aspects of his multifarious talent in the shade.

There are paintings and sculptures (these marvels which were, for a long time,

according to his biographer Werner Spies, "one of the best kept secrets of our time"), drawings, collages, rubbings, scrapings and transfers. In 250 works, many coming from private collections and having only been seen rarely, the whole itinerary of this unclassifiable painter is presented, from his first Dada period in Cologne right up to the totally visionary and cosmic iconography of his last years in France.

For a long time, he was not liked by museums and critics ("I do not have the gift of appealing to specialists," he used to say) and he enjoyed the attempts made by these "specialists" to include him in one or several schools.

"Art historians are going to find it difficult to classify me in their system. Inside me, there is a painter who is expressionist, another who is dadaist, another who is surrealist, another who is the precursor of "action painting", another who sticks, another who

rubs, another who skims abstraction, one who paints while working and one who has fun painting."

However, Max Ernst is best-known under the label of "surrealist", as he went so far "beyond" in all consciousness and all reality. Andre Breton was not mistaken to see in him "the most magnificently haunted mind there is."

He was haunted by monsters, headless women and terrifying animals, but also by fantastic landscapes no doubt inspired by the Rhine forests of his childhood, and by birds which are omnipresent in his works.

To soften all this diabolical extravagance and all this fantastic strangeness, he uses caustic and tender humour, particularly in his sculptures.

Max Ernst was born in Bruhl, between Cologne and Bonn, in 1891. He was caught up in the First World War while he was a student at the University of Bonn and deeply pacifist. On his return from the front, he threw himself into the Dada

movement.

In 1919, while looking through the catalogue of a pedagogical institute, he was struck by "the absurdity" of the juxtaposition of all kinds of models, "geometrical ones, botanical ones, paleontological ones", and others.

This "absurdity" was to give birth to the technique of collage which he was to use together with that of rubbings on paper and scrapings on canvas in order to compose completely new works.

He illegally entered France in 1922 with the passport of his friend Paul

Eluard, and enthusiastically received Andre Breton's first manifesto of Surrealism. He published "collage-novels" with such perfect technique that it was impossible to detect the "joints."

In 1938, when Paul Eluard, who had remained his great friend, was excluded from the Surrealist group, Ernst in turn left the group, indignant at being asked to "sabotage Eluard's poetry by all possible means."

The Second World War forced him to leave Europe for the United States where he married, in turn, Peggy Guggenheim and the painter

Dorothea Tanning. The tortuous landscapes of Arizona inspired him with real visions in which the trees were figures. In 1953, he moved back to France and became a French citizen in 1958.

His final joke was to die on a 1st April.

France and Germany also wanted to make this centenary exhibition, jointly inaugurated by President Francois Mitterrand and Chancellor Helmut Kohl, a symbol of French and German reconciliation.

— *L'actualite en France*