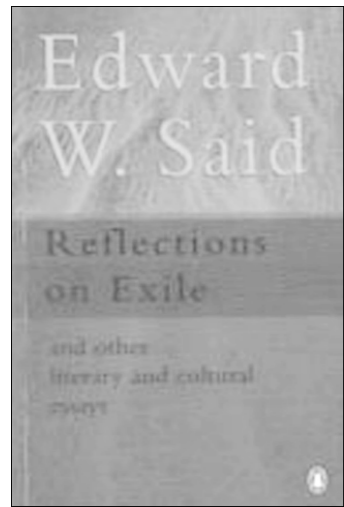


BOOK REVIEW

## Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays



Edward W. Said  
617pp, Granta, £20  
The Edward Said Reader  
eds Moustafa Bayoumi and Andrew Rubin  
473pp, Granta, £12.99

EDWARD Said introduces his collected essays, *Reflections on Exile*, with a poignant hymn to New York, the restless and turbulent "capital of our time", where he has taught since 1963. Long before September 11, he sensed a tension between this absorbent city of immigrants and exiles and its "almost overpowering status as a centre of global capital" for the world's remaining superpower. Several of these 46 essays, written over 35 years, can be read as an indirect but impassioned argument against a looming new cold war that insists on a spurious "clash of civilisations", and whose McCarthyite target at home would be US citizens of "suspect" ethnicity.

These essays, together with *The Edward Said Reader*, are a timely consolidation of the work of arguably the most influential intellectual of our time. As a Palestinian-American, professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University, and the most persuasive voice in the west for Palestinian self-determination, Said has had his career punctuated by ferocious controversy. Two years ago, efforts were made to discredit him with specious claims that he had lied about his childhood. More recently, the Freud Museum in Vienna revoked an invitation after Said was photographed in the West Bank throwing a pebble at Israel in a symbolic act. Once crudely disparaged as "Arafat's man in New York", he has been a vociferous critic since 1993 of both Yasser Arafat and the Oslo Accords.

There is no such thing, Said maintains, as a private intellectual. He has accordingly sought to infuse his writing with "worldliness", by which he means not jaded savoir-faire but a "knowing and unafraid attitude towards exploring the world we live in". His essay "The Clash of Definitions" should be read by anyone interested in the intellectual history of the present "war on terrorism" and its unstable elision into a war on Islam. Said dismisses Samuel P. Huntington's 1993 prophecy that post-cold-war global politics would be dominated by the "clash of civilisations" as a "crudely articulated manual in the art of maintaining a wartime status in the minds of Americans and others". As Said points out: "What is described as 'Islam' [in Europe and the US] belongs to the discourse of Orientalism, a construction fabricated to whip up feelings of hostility and

antipathy against a part of the world that happens to be of strategic importance." The simplistic ascription of "Muslim rage" to those supposedly resentful of western modernity makes economic and political problems appear timeless and intractable.

Yet Said is even-handed in his scorn for African and Asian "Occidentalism", which views the west as an abstract monolith hostile to non-white, non-Christian peoples. "Defining a culture is always a major and... democratic contest," he insists. While "the very idea of identity involves fantasy, manipulation, invention, construction", seeing civilisations as clashing monoliths obscures their silent exchange and dialogue, hybridity and mingling. "There are no insulated cultures or civilisations," Said writes. "The more insistent we are on separation, the more inaccurate we are about ourselves and others."

Embedded in these two volumes are autobiographical nuggets, a vein mined most concertedly in his 1999 memoir *Out of Place*. In an interview in the *Edward Said Reader*, Said explains how that memoir arose from "my own sense of my life ebbing away"; his impulse to make sense of his life after his mother's death and his 1991 diagnosis with leukaemia. Born in 1935 in west Jerusalem to Palestinian parents (his father had American citizenship), Said lived between Palestine and Cairo before the creation of Israel in 1948 forced his family into exile. In his 1998 essay "Between Worlds", he recalls the tensions of a western-educated Palestinian Arab, caught between colonial English and Arabic resistance, belonging to a tiny Protestant minority in a Sunni Muslim majority. "To be at the same time Wog and Anglican was to be in a state of standing civil war."

Yet a resurgence of Palestinian nationalism after the Arab defeat of 1967, and a sabbatical in Beirut in 1972 after years in the US, helped reveal the creativity of that tension. "I began to think and write contrapuntally, using the disparate halves of my experience, as an Arab and an American, to work with and against each other... By the mid-70s I was in the rich but unenviable position of speaking for two diametrically opposed constituencies, one western, the other Arab."

The *Edward Said Reader* traces the development of his writing, from his first book on Conrad, through the seminal 1978-81 trilogy on the relationship between the Arab or Islamic world and the west - Orientalism, *The Question of Palestine* and *Covering Islam - to Culture and Imperialism*, whose most contentious chapter proved to be that linking Jane Austen's Mansfield Park to Antiguan slave plantations. He revolutionised swathes of the academy by insisting that western culture could not be understood outside its links with empire, and exposed the "invention" of the Orient, which "helped Europe define itself by being its opposite".

The 1984 title essay recognises the creativity of exile without glibly denying its pain, particularly for refugees who lack his cushioning affluence. "Seeing the world as a foreign land makes possible originality of vision," writes Said, for whom the exile's predicament is "as close as we come in the modern era to tragedy". His aim was partly to restore to increasingly and literary criticism real historical experience, especially that of migration ("the greatest single fact of the past three

decades"), dislocation, empire and exile. He was drawn to "stubborn autodidacts" and "intellectual misfits", such as Conrad and Swift, Giambattista Vico and Theodor Adorno.

While the *Reader* is suited to the systematic student, the essays in *Reflections on Exile* provide the better lay introduction, and are often lighter in tone and catholic in scope. Scathing about V S Naipaul (a "gifted native informer" with "blocked development") and Orwell, both renowned for their transparency and "honesty" of their styles, Said writes: "Like all style, 'good' or transparent writing has to be demystified for its complicity with the power that allows it to be there." Although he has taught the western canon alone, Said's more journalistic essays range from Conrad and Nietzsche, Hemingway and Moby-Dick, to Naguib Mahfouz ("Cairo's Balzac") and Egyptology at the New York Met. Classical music recurs, with pieces on Bach, Schumann, Chopin and Glenn Gould, as Said, a sometime concert pianist, revels in polyphony and laments the modern isolation of music from other arts.

He gaudily fails to convince the film-maker Gillo Pontecorvo (to turn his *The Battle of Algiers*) to turn his hand to Palestine, while Hollywood's biblical epics are ridiculed for bypassing Egypt's Arab identity; "Charlton Moses" is the "American abroad". In welcome lapses into relative levity, Said finds in Johnny Weissmuller's Tarzan an attractive immigrant orphan, pioneer of "grunts and tree-swinging", who vastly improved on Edgar Rice Burroughs's "relentlessly Darwinian" novels. Paying homage to the subversive role of the Egyptian Tahia Carioca, in his view the finest belly-dancer ever, Said deplores the "appalling wiggling and jumping around that passes for 'sexiness' among Greek and American imitators", noting with stern authority: "As in bullfighting, the essence of the classic Arab belly-dancer's art is not how much but how little the artist moves."

Said's work has sometimes been misunderstood as attacking the western canon, when what he does more often is read between its lines. As he says in the *Reader*, "I've always been interested in what gets left out." The task, he writes, is to "re-read and re-examine, not simply to distort and reject". In "The Politics of Knowledge" he sees off the dismal strains of drum-beating identity politics, which he regards as revelling in victimhood or "possessive exclusivism" ("only women can write for or about women"). Although the unequal contest conjures the image of a sledgehammer cracking a nut, his clarity is useful: "It does not finally matter who wrote what, but rather how a work is written and how it is read... Marginality and homelessness are not to be gloried in; they are to be brought to an end."

Partly because of empire, we share the same "irreducibly secular" world, with a common language of rights and ideals, "American intellectualism," he says, "owe it to our country to fight the coarse anti-intellectualism, bullying, injustice, and provincialism that disfigure its career as the last superpower." It is not least his work against separatism and artificial barriers, or the notion of "us versus them", that makes Said a crucial and persuasive reader of the world.

Source: Internet

## The Picador Book of Modern Indian Literature

Anthologising modern Indian literature, however, is a perilous business. You have to be fair to so many languages, and keep the peace between those who write in Indian languages and those who write in English.



Edited by Amit Chaudhuri  
638pp, Picador, £16.99

WILLIAM RADICE

MUCH of the comment on VS Naipaul's well-earned Nobel Prize has dwelt on his gloom and pessimism. Yet his three books on India - *An Area of Darkness*, *India: A Wounded Civilization* and *India: A Million Mutinies Now* - tell a story of triumph over despair. The upbeat conclusion of the third book speaks of "shedding my Indian nerves", of the British Raj as "a time of intellectual recruitment", and of post-Independence India's "liberation of spirit".

How does modern Indian literature fit into this? Naipaul has been

scathing about Indian writers in English as he is about EM Forster. But would he give more of a hearing to writers in Indian languages if translations and anthologies could give him the opportunity?

Anthologising modern Indian literature, however, is a perilous business. You have to be fair to so many languages, and keep the peace between those who write in Indian languages and those who write in English. In 1997 Salman Rushdie, in *The Vintage Book of Indian Writing 1947-1997* which he edited with Elizabeth West, said in his introduction that Indian writing in English "is proving to be a stronger and more important body of work" than writing in Indian languages. It was a view that caused great offence.

In his note on selection at the beginning of his absorbing new anthology, Amit Chaudhuri states that it is "not a riposte to any other anthology". But it's hard not to think that it is, especially as he mentions Rushdie's "throwaway comment" lower down the page. His own views on the issue are delicately equivocal: "Rushdie's remark is an interesting one, and also somewhat mystifying; less interesting, and equally mystifying, has been the sanctimoniously outraged and self-congratulatory response to the remark in liberal, middle-class India."

If Chaudhuri believes that *The Vintage Book* (which contained only one item translated from an Indian language) led to an imbalance that needed correcting, he seems to have addressed it in two ways.

One was to devote about half the book to translated selections from Bengali, Hindi, Urdu and "the South" (Kannada, Malayalam and Tamil). The other - whether conscious or not - was to weaken the English section by leaving out major figures such as Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Khushwant Singh and Rohinton Mistry. This gives him space for some less predictable choices: I particularly enjoyed and admired the extract from Aubrey Menen's autobiography *Dead Man in the Silver Market*, Pankaj Mishra's excellent essay on reading Edmund Wilson in Benares, and Dom Moraes's haunting travelogue. But of the other *outré* inclusions, several are so thin that it's as if they are there purely to make the Indian-language section seem stronger.

That they fail to do so is the most embarrassing but also (to use Chaudhuri's own non-committal word) the most interesting aspect of the book. Time and time again, in his thoughtful and elegant prefaces to each passage, we are told that his so-and-so is "one of the greatest living writers" or "the greatest 20th-century humorist" in a particular language, only to be disappointed

by the passage that follows. Why should this be?

One standard plea is to invoke the inadequacy - or paucity - of translation. But translating Indian literature into English is quite an industry in India these days, and standards are rising all the time. Another possibility is that by favouring modernist and experimental writers over more popular and realistic ones, he has ended up with passages where the loss of linguistic nuance does the most damage. Strong realism can survive even indifferent translation.

But I suspect that the most profound reason for the anthology's apparent vindication of Rushdie's view is to do with the story that Chaudhuri himself wishes to tell: a story not so dissimilar to Naipaul's in his Indian trilogy. In Chaudhuri's introductory essays - "Modernity and the Vernacular" and "The Construction of the Indian Novel in English" - as well as in his individual prefaces, his main focus is on the unfolding of modernity and the expansion of experience and range. Significantly, the Bengali selections that open the anthology are all but one from the period before Independence. Although many of the Hindi, Urdu and South Indian writers chosen are more recent, it's difficult to escape the feeling that the English section that follows is a further and higher development of trends in pre-

Independence Indian-language writing.

One of the most brilliant pieces in the book is AK Ramanujan's "Is There an Indian Way of Thinking? An Informal Essay". He writes of the difference between context-bound and universal conceptions of truth, and of how "one might see 'modernisation' in India as a movement from the context-sensitive to the context-free in all realms".

For ambitious, modern Indian writers, English is temptingly "context-free", and that may be why they have favoured it. But there is no reason why this should remain an irreversible trend. Just as Anglicised Indians in the 19th century flirted with writing in English and then made a nationalistic switch to the mother tongue, so when Indian writing in English has peaked - and maybe it already has - there could well be a return to ambitious writing in Indian languages.

Supported by a huge Indian diaspora, and by increasing professionalism in translation, the balance of reputation could become very different. Meanwhile, we can celebrate the fact that Indian writers in English - Chaudhuri among them - have given so much to India and the world.

William Radice is editor of *Myths and Legends of India* (Folio Society)

TRIBUTE

## After the Last Sky

AMITAVA KUMAR

A GHA Shahid Ali was a poet and a lover. I can think of no other writer who deserves that description. The writer as Majnoon, this is what Shahid was, seeking beauty and love in a desert studded with sorrow. There is an early poem of his in which Shahid considers a Persian miniature.

Majnoon's father has laid his head down to rest on an uncut sapphire / bereft of prayer." The miniature painting has margins of gold where "verses wear bracelets of paisleys / tied into golden knots of Arabic." It is impossible not to think of Shahid's own poetry when you read those lines, each delicate syllable stitching rubies on what he, with everyone else, sees as desolation.

Shahid left us a few days ago. For many months before he died, Shahid had struggled with a grave illness, and he did not spare even death his love. In his latest collection of poems, *Rooms Are Never Finished*, a finalist for the National Book Award, Shahid is a visitor in the dreamland of death. The opening poem, one that Shahid addresses to his mother dying in Lenox Hill Hospital, finds death's page "filling with diamonds". In another poem, Jesus weeps because he has seen a vision in which centuries later the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, Hussain, will be killed on the very site on which Jesus now stands. Reaching across extinction's divide, and also the divisions of time, this image is touched with tenderness. Shahid writes of Hussain's severed head being brought to Obeidullah who care-

lessly turns the head over with his staff. "Gently," one officer protests. "By Allah! I have seen those lips kissed by the blessed mouth of Muhammad." Once more, I only hear Shahid's loving voice in those lines, finding the memory of love which more than being unrequited actually risks being forgotten.

An important point that can be made about Shahid's poetry is that it drew as much upon English poetic traditions as it did on Urdu literary forms. This needs to be stressed because Shahid's influences were as varied as James Merrill on the one hand, and, on the other, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, whom he translated with great delicateness. Indeed, it can be said that no other Indian poet writing in English came close to attempting what was Shahid's great achievement - the elaboration of a poetic voice that was representative of the subcontinent's own mixed history. *Rooms Are Never Finished* is the last milestone in this yet unfinished project.

A *Nostalgist's Map of America* had introduced an Indian poet to America and the world. But it was the publication of *The Country Without a Post Office* with which Shahid came back home to India. This latter set of poems was scored with the pain of Kashmir: "They make a desolation and call it peace." And yet, what was distinctive about Shahid's lament was not that it admitted politics. Many have done that routinely. Rather, Shahid, even in addressing the politics of his homeland, presented his strongest protest because he turned away from it incessantly to fashion in his writing something infinitely more



beautiful. In other words, Shahid allowed politics to step into his house but boldly drew in its face the purdah of poetry. "The century is ending. It is pain / from which love departs into all new pain: / Freedom's terrible thirst, flooding Kashmir, / is bringing love to its tormented glass. / Stranger, who will inherit the last night / of the past? Of what shall I not sing, and sing?"

In *Rooms Are Never Finished*, this beautiful book of leave-taking, Shahid writes of airports and rooms in hotels and hospitals. In other poems, clad in black, bearing the cry of the gazelle, Shahid goes back to Karbala and Kashmir. This book is not so much a rebuke to death as it is a wooing. Shahid wants to find in death another kind of meeting. After all, there is a terrible solitude about

woods of that deep deep darkness / Violins tear the horizon and smell my blood in the vein / ...

Violins are complaints of silk creased in the lover's night / Violins are the distant sound of wine falling on a previous desire // Violins follow me everywhere in vengeance / Violins seek me out to kill me wherever they find me // Violins weep for Arabs leaving Andalusia / Violins weep with gypsies going to Andalusia.

Form must be foregrounded in any discussion of Shahid's work because it is that which gave his poetry its intensity. In a remark made about the writing of Roland Barthes, the critic Michael Warner had said that Barthes, who was gay, seldom wrote about his dissident sexuality. Barthes' gayness was expressed not at the level of the signified but, instead, at the level of the signifier. At least for Warner, it was the excess embodied in the language that Barthes used - the complexity and richness at the level of syntax - that marked Barthes as gay. In Shahid's case, it is the extraordinary texture of his verse, the delicate fire that returns us to a sense of tragedy and beauty that is always at the verge of being ground to dust. Shahid's broken lines recall what has been broken in history, and their inventive musicality restores to history a human dignity. We are now condemned to mourn and to love Shahid in every new poet in English who will pick verses in the rubble that grows around us.

Amitava Kumar is the author of *Passport Photos* (University of California Press and Penguin-India).

INTERVIEW

## 'I decided not to be coy'



Sukanya Rahman

It was, therefore, with considerable trepidation that I made my way to Sukanya's Delhi flat. Surprisingly, where I expected pomposity, I encountered timidity... uncomfortable questions brought forth frank answers. Was Sukanya cashing in on her colourful family history? Or was this, despite my reservations, an honest attempt to bring alive the stories of two women India has chosen to forget?

It took time to reconcile the brash and nonchalant writer of *Dancing in the Family* with the shy, diminutive author eager to know if I liked the "story". Since, I must admit, I liked the story for the verve and passion its protagonists embodied, I decided to follow it up with some questions.

Excerpts from the interview with Charu Soni:  
**When did the idea of writing this book germinate?**  
I had been carrying the story for a long, long time but I got down to it only three years ago. Mind you, my first draft of the book read like a press release! I wanted to tell the story of these women people had no idea about. It was then that I attended a writing workshop "Memoirs" held by Bapsi Sidhwa at Sri Ram College, which in a way gave me courage. She said I had to be honest... which I have tried to be.

**What did your mother think of it? Did she encourage you?**  
She (Indrani Rahman) wanted it to be my book. At that stage, she collected some photographs that she wanted me to use in the book... and it was only after she died (1999) that I actually started doing the rounds of the publish-

ers... coming finally to Harper Collins and Renuka Chatterji, who helped draw out more "personal information" about the people I was writing about.

**Talking of "personal information", one particular reviewer of your book found it distasteful that "a modestly gifted daughter should grass her spectacularly gifted mother"... would you like to respond to this?**

I really can't comment on what someone's opinion is. All I can say is that if people buy the book thinking it will have bodice-ripping bedroom scenes they are going to be disappointed. (Laughs)  
I would also like to add that I tried to handle delicate matters with sensitivity. I hope I did it without being prudish. You know, last year when I came to India to participate in the *Kitsch-Kitsch* exhibition, I was interviewed by *Doordarshan* about my mother. And one of the first questions they asked me was, "How did you deal with your grandmother and mother's infidelities?" This was before the book was out. I was taken aback... later, when Renuka asked leading questions, I decided not to be coy about things that were, I realised, public knowledge. In fact, a lot of people in this city know more than what has been revealed in my book!

**So, is it a double bind, people want you to be both circumspect and candid at the same time?**  
It is a double bind. And I just wanted to be as honest as possible. They are real, flesh-and-blood people. The book finally came to life after I decided to present them as real human beings - warts and all. If I were to write everything I know about them, the book would have been longer than *War and Peace!* (Laughs)

**To your mind, which of the two women, Ragini Devi and Indrani Rahman, contributed more to Indian dance?**

They both happened at different times of history. My mother certainly got more publicity than my grandmother did. But my grandmother came into a completely raw field. In fact, her interest in India started with her first book *Nritanjali*, which she wrote before she had been to India. I think her contribution in terms of research needs to be recognised.

**Dancing for Ragini Devi, I gather from your book, was a passion that would often flit from one dance to another. Her presentation too was, in a manner of speaking, akin to "fusion" of western and Indian styles...**

I don't think she did "fusion". What she did was to edit - creating her own "Indian" dance. She was stickler for the classical arts, though she liked Marwari dance... But there was no "fusion". I think her greatest contribution lay in recording and researching Indian dance.

**Purists would maintain that while your mother dedicated herself to dance, giving in to the rigours of learning classical dance, your grandmother was a self-appointed impresario...**

My grandmother was completely devoted to Indian dance. She studied and performed only two dances - Kathakali and Bharatanatyam.  
**But her interests were very varied, weren't they?**



Sukanya Rahman



Ragini Devi nee Esther Sherman, author's grandmother

Yes, she travelled a lot, and would discover lost dances, which in turn my mother would follow up and learn to dance. This happened with Odissi, for example. My mother, like my grandmother, would perform several styles of dance in an evening. In that sense, theirs was a joint effort.

**What of your mother, Indrani?**  
She would be criticised for presenting several dance styles in one evening. But what many dancers remember her for was the fact that she presented new dancers to the stage every time she danced. In Kuchipudi, she introduced Sonal Mansingh and Raja and Radha Reddy, and in Kathak, Durga Lal. Artists were grateful for the exposure.

**In your book you credit your mother with reintroduction of Odissi to Indian dance pantheon... yet this distinction in India is largely attributed to Sanjukta Panigrahi, whom you mention in the book in passing... That has always been there. There have been all sorts of incorrect claims made. My mother never took credit for it, and she admired Sanjukta greatly. But it was my mother who presented Odissi professionally on stage first. She also took it out of India for the first time. I feel she was forgotten before her time.**

**Did you resent that?**  
My mother had no regrets, neither do I. She had a great spirit of generosity.

**Writing a biography is a subjective exercise, in this case, Ragini Devi and Indrani Rahman are viewed from your perspective. How do you**

**think they would have described their life had they written instead?**

I think their stories would have been very different! If my brother (Ram) wrote the book, it would have been a different angle, remembering different times... My grandmother in her second book, *Dance Dialects of India*, wrote a little bit about her touring times. For instance, though she mentioned Harin (Harindranath Chattopadhyaya), it was only as an impresario and friend. And I think she might be upset about her cover being blown - not so much about her personal life, but her family life - about being American. Because she liked people to believe she was an "Indian". But my mother, in fact both my parents, were largely open souls.

**Dancing in the Family is an account of the passion you, your mother and grandmother shared... a passion that was not equally shared by the men in the family, whom you tend to relegate to the background... was this intentional?**

Yes, absolutely. Our lives were definitively dominated by women... including my *ayah*. And both my mother and grandmother were very independent, strong and free women.

**It seems you were drawn to dance despite yourself... your initial reaction being of how to get away from "this all" - taking up art studies, then rediscovering dance for yourself, and then coming back to painting.**

I knew that I would come back to the fine arts because I knew that dance would not last. And I knew, especially by watching my grandmother, who danced till her last days, that it was very difficult for her to leave the stage. My mother stopped performing much earlier than other performers. I saw that as a wise decision. My career was mostly in the US, as I was raising my children... And yes, I am glad that my mother was there when I did my first exhibition in New York.

**Did you perform in India at any stage?**  
Very early on... A little bit, when I was not ready to perform.  
**Was your choice of fine arts dictated by the tremendous pressure and expectation that your mother and grandmother imposed on you? After all, they wanted you to carry on the tradition. Do you feel apologetic about not being able to do so?**

Yes, absolutely. I had to try harder than anyone else. At the same time, however, I was given a tremendous sense of freedom. I saw sunshine. I did not see any shadows. People find that hard not to believe. My mother and I were very close in age... she had me when she was 16. We had a very close and free relationship. I was free to choose what I wanted to, which I have done.

**Does not having a daughter rankle?**  
Actually not! I think three generations is enough.

Source: Internet