

Edward W. Said: An Anniversary Tribute

Edward W. Said, *The Pen and the Sword: Conversations with David Barsamian*. Monroe: Common Courage Press, ISBN 1-56751-031-0, 1994.

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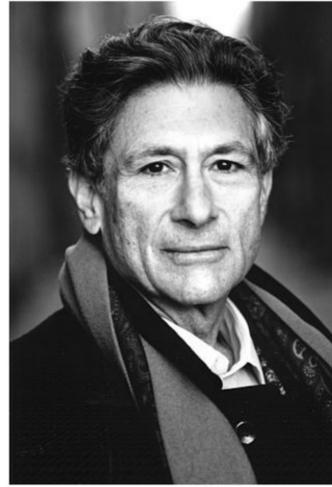
Edward W. Said (1 November, 1935 - 25 September 2003) – former Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University – was a fearless academic, outstanding as an intellectual and a key interpreter of the crises of civilization witnessed in recent history. He has also been one of the most articulate and consistent defenders of the Palestinian right to self-determination. This Palestinian-American scholar, critic and pioneer of postcolonial studies was showered with numerous accolades and awards in his lifetime but he was also stigmatized by the label of “The Professor of Terror” for his forthright criticism of hegemonic representations of Islam and Muslims, as well of U.S.-Israeli foreign policies in the Middle East and elsewhere.

The Pen and the Sword: Conversations with David Barsamian showcases five interviews of Said, conducted between 1987 and 1994 by David Barsamian, the producer of the award-winning audio program Alternative Radio. In his Introduction to the 1994 edition of the book, Eqbal Ahmed, at the very outset of his introduction, raised the following question: “Why this set of interviews with a writer as prolific and widely known as Edward Said?” (7) According to Ahmed, the interviews were worth recording because they revealed the “linkages between the writer and his life” (7); moreover, they helped uncover the connections between the “man and his ideas” (8).

Conducted over several years, these interviews explore divergent issues: the intricate relationship between knowledge and power, culture and imperialism, the pitfalls of uncritical nationalism, the Oslo Accord and its aftermath, the role of PLO in the struggle for Palestinian liberation, and the contemporary predicament of the Palestinian people. Three of the interviews – “The Politics and Culture of Palestinian Exile,” “The Israel/PLO Accord: A Critical Assessment” and “Palestine: Betrayal of History” – largely revolve around Palestine, the history of its people’s dispossession and loss, and the varied nuances of the

Israel/PLO agreement.

Said was one of the early advocates of peace with Israel; he supported the theory of a bi-national state, premised upon the harmonious co-existence of both Israelis and Palestinians. The 1991 Israel/PLO Accord, however, failed to realize the dream of Palestinian sovereignty. Yasir Arafat, Said believed, had succumbed to U.S. sponsored and Israeli-dictated terms that impaired Palestinian interests. Said offered cogent reasons to justify his belief and stated that Arafat should have offered a counterpoint to Rabin’s



Edward W. Said (1935 - 2003)

narrative, represented the plight of stateless Palestinians, and articulated the narratives of their loss and dispossession in front of the media in the White House, where Clinton, “like a Roman Emperor” had brought two vassal kings to his imperial court in order to shake hands and deliver speeches which hardly addressed the issue of Palestinian independence.

What Said was preoccupied with also was the role of “culture” and “memory” which could save the bitter narratives of oppressed Palestinians from extinction and obliteration. Such

preoccupations exemplified Said’s engagement with the narratives of the marginalized and revealed his unwavering commitment to never let a “dominant myth or viewpoint become history without its counterpoint” (11), that is to say, without its counter-narratives. And in order to do so – according to Said – Palestinians would have to put forth effective resistance to prevailing structures, to the status quos, by bringing forth alternative narratives and viewpoints.

Unlike Stephen Daedalus of *Ulysses*, Said did not consider history a nightmare; rather, he believed that history was a “place of many possibilities” (104), an amalgamation of many voices. As he would say, what matters is “many voices producing a history” (22). In the case of Palestine, people in the west only encounter the homogeneous version of history represented by the U.S.-Israel led media coalition, which energized evils in the present political setup both in the Middle East and in the United States. Said believed that education is the “central instrument in all of this,” stating that without a “self-conscious, skeptical, democratically minded citizenry (emphasis mine), there’s no hope for any political change for the better” (104).

Such change could appear a distant dream too if people remain entrapped within an insular and narrow national consciousness. When nationalism—an “ethnic particularity or a racial particularity” (60-61), a parochial entity enmeshed in chest-beating exercises—becomes an end in itself, then human community as a whole ceases to exist. As a person living “between worlds,” and under the grace of an ecumenical tradition, the concepts of mapping geographical/national territories and ethnocentrism appeared completely foreign and of “relatively new vintage” to Said. That is why he considered Aime Cesaire’s envisioning of a world where people coming from diverse classes, races and ethnic backgrounds would have space for all so significant. Said’s intellectual journey is thus

preoccupied with a quest for universal and optimistic alternatives to sectarian structures, ideologies and claims. His journey was informed by his deep sense of individual and collective loss. His pursuit of positive and empathetic alternatives shaped his methodology of interpreting histories as well as texts, which is “based on counterpoint,” meaning, the presence of many voices.

The two other interviews of *The Pen and the Sword* – “Orientalism Revisited” and “Culture and Imperialism” – offer Said’s illuminating and insightful discussions on a host of literary luminaries. The likes of Joseph Conrad, Jane Austen, E. M. Forster, Albert Camus, V. S. Naipaul and Mahmoud Darwish jostle with others in them. Reflecting on the intertwining relationship between knowledge and power, and establishing their connection with culture and imperialism, Said discussed how in the age of empire, cultural artifacts such as the novel can play an important and extraordinary role in shaping “imperial attitude towards the rest of the world” (64). For Said imperialism is a contested history, constituted of the narratives of the oppressor as well as the oppressed. The central point for him is that it is a shared enterprise, and an experience of interdependent histories; that is why the history of the colonizer and the colonized has to be studied together. Reminiscing about Forster’s phrase “only connect” – the epigraph to *Howard’s End* – Said defined his intellectual stand by saying that, “It’s important to connect things with each other” (72).

In Edward Said’s life we encounter a convergence between “ideals and reality,” and a translation of theory into practice. Often seen as the “quintessential oppositional intellectual,” Said has always experienced a discomforting relationship with power, never being a part of the coterie of those intellectuals who remain subservient to it. For Said, being an academician or a professor was not enough; he felt that a person must transcend his predetermined

professional assignment in order to address broader issues involving human sufferings and to confront instances of injustice, discrimination and marginalization. According to Said, the task of the intellectual is to refute the “seductions of power,” the “delights of authority,” the “absence of dialogue,” and to examine state-sponsored news and views with “subversive criticality.” Though the intellectual remains a lonely voice, a figure at the fringe of society, he/she must move on despite the sense of marginalisation and loneliness he or she may feel; all intellectuals must aspire for alternatives and learn to dream different dreams. Acknowledging the debt of Raymond Williams – who introduced Said to the idea of alternatives, he says “to every situation, no matter how much dominated it is, there’s always an alternative. What one must train oneself is to think the alternative, and not to think the accepted and the status quo or to believe that the present is frozen” (105).

With the unrest now evident in so many places of the world – in the Middle East, in Europe, in the Indo-Pak and Indo-China borders, in Kashmir or in the province of Rakhine – the earth seems to be a place plagued by sectarian violence, communal riots, ethnic cleansing, intolerance, greed and capitalism run amok. Amid such frenzy – where “ignorant armies clash by night” – we must inculcate within us the ability to imagine alternatives; we must learn the lesson to envision a world-order where tolerance, mutual respect, moderation and accommodation appear as tangible and viable realities. This slim volume of interviews, I believe, is adorned with all these lessons, and will be loved by anyone who is inclined to embrace the world of ideas and ideals, and anyone possessed by the willingness to learn from great minds.

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MUSINGS

Poetry with Emily Dickinson

TULIP CHOWDHURY

Recently, the Fifth Amherst Poetry Festival, held in tandem with the Emily Dickinson Museum, had downtown Amherst abuzz with western Massachusetts’ historical poetry legacy. The four days of the festival, September 14- 17, made the college town vibrant with presentations on Emily Dickinson’s life and her poetry. In and around the town were enthusiastic students and community members participating in the series of events that marked the festival. It was my good fortune that I could be present at the Homestead and the Evergreens, the poet’s home in Amherst and few other events.

On the third day of the events, I met my old friend Cathie on the public bus. She was dressed grandly in a gown and hat, as if walking out of the 18th century. When asked where she was headed to, she replied, radiant and smiling, “It’s the Emily Dickinson Poetry marathon and I am going to read there.” She then held out her own volume of *The Emily Dickinson Poems*. As I neared the Emily Dickinson Museum, a short walk from the bus stop, I could see streams of people entering through the wooden gate, although some were coming out as well; but all looked excited. I felt as if Emily was observing the throbbing poetry scenario from heaven. Luckily, dressing like the women of western 18th century was not a requirement; I was in jeans and T-shirt but was allowed in!

At the Emily Dickinson Museum, I was amazed by the day-long poetry marathon which consisted of readings from all of the 1,789 poems of Dickinson. The poet had lived and composed hundreds of poems in her Amherst home, “The Homestead”. Being present with other poetry lovers and listening to the poems in Emily’s home was like stepping back in time and feeling her presence through the priceless writing she had left behind. Words and verses echoed with depth and sweetness as they poured out from the parlor of her house.

There were around 20 seats arranged

in a semicircle for the readers. They would take turns, each reading one of Dickinson’s poems. They started around 7:30 pm and went on reading turn by turn until all the poems were read. It was a carefully organized creative journey into the poetic field. The late summer evening saw new readers continue to drop in to read while others were leaving, making way for the newcomers to take part in the event as they did so. Each person sat and took a note of the poem read before and continued from the next number. And if one didn’t want to read, all he or she had to say was “Pass”. But the reading would then be picked up by the nearest person.

People from as far as New Jersey had come to participate in the event. A gentleman I talked to mentioned coming here for the poetry festival and reading in it for the last four years. He said, “I am alive this year and so couldn’t miss it!” A lady, who sat in a trance listening to the other participants said, “Emily’s poems are my Bible and when I hear them through other voices, they take new depths and heights.”

Another memorable part of the festival was sitting in Emily’s room and writing. Each participant had the room to him or herself and could write away in the familiar setting of the furniture that Emily had used, gaze out through the same window, and see the same trees that had witnessed her life. It was a unique experience to see the world through the window that she must have used, like seeing nature through her eyes.

Different workshops were offered to the general public in the garden of the Homestead where contemporary poets shared their writing. Those were held on James Tate Memorial Stage, named in honor of Amherst’s famous poet James Tate who had passed away in 2015. And there was food and beverage available by the door of the museum.

The four days of festival also saw poetry reading at the Bassett Planetarium on the Amherst College

ground. That day, in the evening, I sat with people of different age groups, waiting to experience poetry in a different way. The light went out and Dickinson’s poetry came filtering down to a spellbound crowd, while stars twinkled from the domed roof of the planetarium. The readers read from a tiny lighted corner of the room so that the stars could be clearly seen. While I heard Emily’s poems while the planetarium’s sky revolved overhead, it was easy to think of those stars reaching down to us. I recalled her poem “Ah,



Emily Dickinson’s house

PHOTO: AUTHOR

Moon and – Star” and its opening lines, “Though you’re very far -- There is one -- farther than you -- He -- is more than a firmament -- from Me -- So I can never go!”

The readers were Dara Wier and Bianca Stone. Wier introduced her newest book *In the Still of the Night* According to the Emily Dickinson Museum source highlighting the poetry festival, “As Wier and Stone read, planetarium’s analogue Spitz A3p optical projector, one of the last of its kind still in use, will display the

starscapes on the nights of Emily Dickinson’s birth and death.” The turnout was such that some people could not be accommodated in the limited seats of that evening. It was truly a great feeling to experience poetry come alive.

In another venue of the poetry festival, Hampshire College Art Gallery, an event titled “Of Soil and Tongues” began with the invitation to install poetry in space, and broadening poetry horizons as they were being simultaneously heard, read, performed

The Emily Dickinson Museum in Amherst also runs a monthly Open Mic for poetry at the Homestead. Summer days see much glorious poetry streaming out of its garden and on other occasions they are held in the parlor of her home. Co-organizer and co-coordinator of the Open Mic, Michael Medeiros reaches out to local poets throughout the year and every time I am there, I see a bustling crowd, eagerly reading or listening to poetry. Even if one is not much into poetry, evenings like these can certainly be a source of inspiration for many to write it.

The Amherst Poetry festival came at a time when fall was just whispering in nature, officially wanting to be in. On the final day of the festival, yellowing leaves came drifting on the grounds of the Homestead, Emily’s home. Fall, the season that marks the ending of colorful summer, comes with letters from winter and its snow. Fall and winter come with reminders that the year is ending and of death and decay. I stood before the home of the nature’s poet, the people’s poet, and recalled one of my favorite Emily’s poems, “Because I could not stop for Death”

Because I could not stop for Death – He kindly stopped for me – The Carriage held but just Ourselves – And Immortality. We slowly drove – He knew no haste And I had put away My labor and my leisure too, For His Civility –

Experiencing 2017’s Amherst Poetry Festival and embracing Emily Dickinson’s poetry was a milestone in my life. Never had poetry seemed so alive and passionate before. As poetry lovers and readers came together for celebrations, the beauty of poetry illuminated countless lives. If one is not yet into Emily Dickinson’s poetry, I would request him or her to read the unique poet who was really a harbinger of truth and beauty of life.

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