

ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

ESSAY

ON REMEMBERING Edward Said

The epistemic break in Said's oeuvre, if there is any, must be traced in the distance between his first two books and his third—*Orientalism* (1978)—which changed the manner in which literary criticism was carried out in the academia at that time. *Orientalism* is by far the most influential of Said's works; it is, also, his most vilified one. What is remarkable about this work is the passionate energy with which Said declares the whole of Western canon culpable of producing a binaristic discourse about the non-West.

The day eminent Palestinian-American critic Edward Said turned 50, he was so upset that he declined to step outside of his New York City apartment. Gayatri Spivak, renowned scholar who was one of Said's close friends back then, had travelled all the way from another city to NYC, hoping to take her friend to lunch. When she entered, she saw Said's wife Mariam in the kitchen, preparing a meat dish. With Said declining to go out for dinner with her, Mariam had set herself to the task of cooking. "See if you can get him to go to lunch", she told Spivak. "He is so angry at being 50 that he refuses to go to dinner with me." The astute feminist, unable to convince her friend to budge, eventually left after exchanging pleasantries with him. She was to have lunch of course, but alone.

The reason why this episode—which appears in Spivak's commemorative essay titled "Thinking about Edward Said: Pages from a Memoir"—strikes me as compelling is because, in it, I noticed Said's almost childish expectation to stave off finitude, death. It seems as if he fancied that time would slow down for him, allowing him to savour the life in which literature, music, and political activism featured prominently.

As I keep thinking about Spivak's reminiscence of Said, I realise that the latter's juvenile despair for ageing is more symptomatic than it appears at first look. For Said, life's beginning, its continuity, and its closure were not just mundane biological phenomena but also philosophical conundrums. One has to thumb through the pages of his second book *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (1974) and posthumously published *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (2006) to understand how much significance he attached to life's gradual unfolding. Yet, in a fundamental way, the force that steered Said's intellectual pursuit forward was not just the aesthetics of living but also defiance.

In order to understand how Said turned defiance into his philosophical cornerstone, one has to take a close look at his intellectual morphing. He was born into an affluent Palestinian Christian family and went on to receive education from some of the most prestigious institutions in the world including Princeton and Harvard, institutions that instilled in him western liberal values. His happy settlement in that tradition hit a fundamental crisis in 1967, when Gaza Strip and West Bank were annexed by Israel, prompting Said to feel distraught and uprooted. Reminiscing how that event had upended his life,

Said wrote the following in his memoir *Out of Place* (1999): "For me it seemed to embody the dislocation that subsumed all the other losses, the disappeared worlds of my youth and upbringing, the unpolitical years of my education, the assumption of disengaged teaching and scholarship...I was no longer the same person after 1967."

The occupation of Gaza and West Bank changed Said's personal and academic prerogatives, compelling him to lend his voice to the Palestinian liberation movement. The years that followed saw him veer further and further toward anticolonial and anti-imperial politics. Even Said's purely aesthetic contemplations, his writings on style for instance, could not free themselves from the arching shadows of his political defiance. Beethoven's atonality for Said

non-West. This is why, despite its anchorage in literary analysis, *Orientalism* reads like a political treatise, more a product of passion than a fruit of precision. Barring a few in the last decade of Said's life, almost every book that Said has written since *Orientalism* displays similar argumentative fervour. The overlapping between literary criticism and political activism, which were his hallmarks in the 1980s and early 1990s, played a significant role in establishing postcolonial studies as an important branch of knowledge in academia. One cannot overestimate the role that *Orientalism* played in creating a global platform for the academics from the global south.

Beginning from the middle of the 1990s, Said's interest in colonialism and imperialism began to blossom into an inquiry into the subject who embodies

narrowness of the western print and visual media and betrayed by some of his liberal friends in the academia who had suddenly turned against the entire Muslim population, Said defiantly ignored both as he continued to warn his predominantly Arab audience against the dangers of demonising the other.

The two books that Said completed before his death, *From Oslo to Iraq and the Road Map* (2004) and *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (2004), exemplify Said's ethical position against the Manichean discourse of "the clash of civilizations" that the extremists from both sides of the equator have wrought. Conscious of our collective precariousness and familiar with the shared life that people from different parts of the world live, he constantly reminds his readers that there is little to gain from a fractious world engaged in a life and death battle. In *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* particularly, Said straddles both western and non-western thought to argue that we live in a shared world and our intellectual inheritance cannot be entirely attributed to a singular source or culture.

My reading of Said convinces me that we have failed to do justice to his extremely vibrant and rich body of work. I have seldom come across academics who have read both *Beginnings* and *The World, The Text, and The Critic* (1983), both brilliant philosophical readings of literature. Nor have I seen our public intellectuals seriously engaging with his passionate and polemical works such as *Covering Islam* (1981) and *Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims* (1979)—works that attest to the limits and possibilities of Said's political visions. It seems as if our neoliberal academia, after taking advantage of the polemical rigour of *Orientalism*, has characteristically abandoned him altogether, leaving his books to desiccate in the cold corners of university libraries.

Ours is a dark time—the era of global fascism, fractious politics, and corporate monopoly. Faced with another conflict that threatens to erupt beyond the border, I look for Said for wisdom and insight. I see no one. Outside the cool late-October breeze blows quietly. The sky is dark. The half-blinking stars above timidly whisper: "November's arrived!"

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POETRY

My Son's SHOES

DILRUBA Z. ARA

I set out to toss the day's excess,
But found my shoes buried beneath
youthful pairs,
For in they'd trooped, a boisterous, merry
mess,
A gang of teens, my son's jovial comrades.

So, I contemplated donning his worn
trainers.
But the moment I slipped them on, a
truth unfurled,
These shoes, a room for more than just
containers,
Two cavernous spaces, dwarfing my
universe.

As though my feet in gothic halls were
ensconced,
Engulfed by vastness, their grandeur
untamed,
I stood entranced, in memories, I nestled,
Recalling when my womb his essence
claimed.

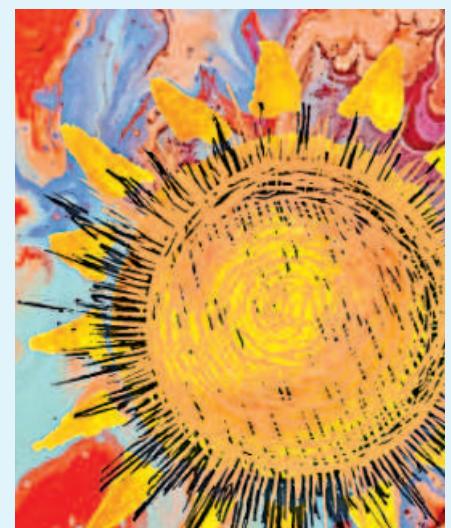


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Back then, my belly cradled all of him,
His toes, his frame, his perfect face,
And now, his strides exceed my mere
trim,
A path he paves, a destined, unique
space.

Time, heavy as a thousand suns
combined,
Bends mothers, smaller than the ones
they bore,
While children, in their growth, outstrip
the mind,
And shoes attest to time's relentless
chore.

The poem was first published as editor's choice in "Red Room," an online poetry forum in New York, in 2007. This is a revised version.

Dilruba Z. Ara is the author of internationally acclaimed novels *A List of Offences and Blame*. Ara's stories and poems—published in many international anthologies—are studied at universities across the world. She has translated *Selected Stories of Shahed Ali* into English, *A List of Offences* into Swedish and some of Sweden's *Pippi Longstocking* stories into Bengali. She lives in Lund, Sweden. To know more about her visit her website www.dilrubaza.com.

