

# The Anti-Essentialism of Saidian Thought

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‘What do you think he was?’ asked Pete Ryder  
‘A lover of mankind. And of jazz’

Nayantara Sahgal, *Lesser Breeds*

Going by the widespread and diverse reception of *Orientalism* it is now generally accepted in the academic circles that Edward Said is a complex phenomenon – an intellectual enigma who drenched his thought in contemporary philology yet held on to his own premises. As an engaged intellectual he was passionately committed to the issue of the role of the intellectual/literary critic in the betterment of the human condition globally, and viewed the “abdication of the social involvement by those in a position to know or do better as one of the contemporary forms of *la trahison des clercs*” (“The treason of the intellectuals”; Williams xiv). Most notably, he was a staunch defender of the rights of the Palestinian people for a homeland and was the most effective intellectual in the creation of the state of Palestine<sup>1</sup>. If his political activism for the cause of the Palestinians instantiates his commitment to justice, freedom and egalitarianism, his abhorrence of gloating defensive nationalism is symbolic of his aversion to partisanship, exclusivity and over-valorization of national identity. It is Said’s balancing of various critical thoughts in the larger interest of the universal principles of justice and equality that makes his pragmatic philosophy viable and accepted.

Said does not fit in with any pre-conceived mould or school of thought. Much as he appreciates the archaeologies of thought, both ontological and phenomenal, of the great critical and historical minds of the modern period, he is in total denial of any limiting theoretical categorization. Deriving from the uniqueness of most theories, Said is wary of their confinement, as Patrick Williams has aptly summed up his stance:

“[Theory] begins well; it generates useful and enabling insights; eventually – and inevitably, in Said’s rather pessimistic view – it over-reaches itself, becoming in its turn too much of an all encompassing, all explaining system” (xiv). The key concepts of *Orientalism*, primarily, the complicity of the Western scholarship with its imperial regime and the focus on the historical dynamics of human experience, energize the academic subversion of the cultural constructs of colonialism. Quite unwittingly, Said has been ascribed with the role of the inaugurator of the contemporary academic school of postcolonialism and metropolitan cultural studies.

This paper analyses the Saidian thought as a liberating text – its eclecticism as well as ambivalence, its transformation and growth – as a pioneering philosophical leap towards a practical engagement of ideas with reality. It is Said’s anti-essentialism which helps him gain selectively from diverse thinkers, amateurishly absorbing the strengths of their systems of thought, casting aside their pessimism, redundancy and confinement to evolve a poetics of politics that delivers. Said’s elaborate critical discourse in *The World, the Text and the Critic* (1984) cautions against the politics of intellectual indifference to social and historical reality, and the self-imposed confinement of critics in the abstractions of esoteric aesthetics.

To some a polemical figure, to many a paradoxical entity, Said has persisted as a voice that has re-defined the role of an intellectual, and the breathtaking range of his endeavour makes it difficult to believe all of it is one man: an author, a literary theorist, a compelling cultural critic, an anthropologist, a radical activist, an irrepressible dissident intellectual, political commentator, prolific journalist, skilled concert pianist and music critic. His awesome credentials have inspired some to call him arguably the most transformational thinker of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – a superstar among intellectuals – whereas some

remain highly skeptical of such claims. If Aram Veiser has titled his book on Said as *The Charisma of Criticism*, Edward Alexander maligns him as the “Professor of Terror” in a pro-Israeli journal *Commentary*. On a closer look at the life and works of Said, one finds no discernible incongruity in the steadfastness of his intellectual intentions, so that a lot of the hysterical criticism directed at him is totally unjustified. In truth, in the face of the deluge of works by academics which is sometimes restraining, combative and reductionist, Said is an inspiration to go one’s way meaningfully and purposefully, offering a liberating text to the reader and to other critics.

Before delving into the relevance of the Saidian thought it is important to know the process of its evolution, its rootedness, or to use the author’s own terminology, its “worldliness”, which is inextricably woven into his texts. Since “texts have effects” in the real world, the material reality of the writer has bearing on the creative process – Said’s “rootedness” is the condition of his uprootedness. A brief survey of his life, his cultural and political engagements, with some inputs from his memoir, *Out of Place*, is in order. Born in the dispute-ridden town of Jerusalem, he died after a prolonged battle with leukemia in 2003 at the age of 67. His schooling was culturally layered: it began with St George’s Academy in Jerusalem, continued at Victoria College in Cairo as a result of the exodus on the formation of the nation of Israel, and finally culminated at Mount Hermon school in Massachusetts. Henceforth he remained in the US - graduated from Princeton - did his Masters and Ph.D. (on Joseph Conrad) from Harvard - taught for decades as professor of English and Comparative Literature at the Columbia University – was Visiting professor at Harvard, John Hopkins and Yale. Said was conversant with the various archaeologies of knowledge for he spoke French and English fluently, was very good at his mother tongue colloquial Arabic, and was also literate in Spanish, Italian, German and Latin. Said strengthened the margins by writing on a war-footing for magazines, newspapers and journals and his lectures at various universities are now landmark literary events in themselves<sup>2</sup>. It is quite understandable that he received numerous honorary doctorates and awards.

His anti-essentialism is nourished by the factual ironies of his life - the paradoxes are far too many. His first name is British and the last, Arab. He is a unique case of a Palestinian Christian - a protestant –who became an American citizen –and went on to become the most convincing voice of the homeless Palestinian Muslims internationally. He lived and died in the metropolis of New York - tirelessly unveiling the subtle mutations of

coeval orientalization of Islam, critical of the untrammelled hegemonic imperialism of the Western world in market economy and was extremely vocal about the unfair Middle-East policies of the United States. The most fruitful aspect of his critical energy is the harnessing of his assimilated thought to highlighting the injustice and exploitation by the dominant powers of the weaker nations. In concurrence with the other paradoxes, he is equally criticized and adulated, both, in the East and the West.

Said catapulted into international fame with his seminal work *Orientalism* in 1978 – a study of the “seductive degradation of knowledge”; a persuasive deconstruction of the Western construct of Eastern cultures. The conceptualization of the Orient by the colonizers was highly politicized, romanticized, discriminatory, racial, stereotypical and, therefore, suspect. Said unveiled it as a tool of imperialistic domination, a political strategy for colonial expansion that arbitrarily formulated the “European perspective as a norm from which the Orient deviates.” The text interrogates the “summational attitude” of the humanistic scholars like Massignon and Gibbs, and the anti-Islamic propaganda of intellectuals like Bernard Lewis, who responded slightly to the treatise<sup>3</sup>. In a forceful rebuttal of the caricatural criticism, “disquieting polymorphousness” and willful misinterpretations of the book, Said writes:

My objection to what I have called Orientalism, is not that it is just the antiquarian study of Oriental languages, societies, and peoples, but that as a system of thought it approaches a heterogeneous, dynamic, and complex human reality from an uncritically essentialist standpoint; this suggests both an enduring Oriental reality and an opposing but no less enduring Western essence, which observes the Orient from afar and, so to speak, from above... The reason why the anti-essentialism of my argument has proved hard to accept is political and urgently ideological. (*Orientalism* 331-334)

The legacy of Said in essence will remain with mankind forever, for “Orientalism” as a critical concept, now, broadly connotes any false assumption or belief constructed to capture collective cultural imagination. It actually symbolizes a cover up for hegemonic political intentions of imperialistic forces anywhere, anytime in the world and the thinkers in every era must remain vigilant to the manufacturing of falsehoods used as cultural tools of tyranny and abuse.

The Zionist slogan “A people without land (the Jewish people) for a land without people (Palestine)” according to Said is a lucid example of the modern guises of Orientalism. There is no denial of the unfortunate persecution and genocide of the Jewish people – the

historical experience of the holocaust is under no circumstances to be forgotten but it should not be used to deny the Palestinians their homeland by sending them into exile. The secular credentials of Said and his avid interest in music came together when he founded the award winning West-Eastern Divan orchestra with the Argentine-Israeli conductor Daniel Barenboim. It consisted of Israeli-Arab-Palestinian children. His humanism runs deep and his criticism of the West is not to be mistaken for anti-Semitism. Said feels that falsehoods and unexamined assumptions like, "Arabs are all terrorists, they are all fundamentalists, they are oil-rich", "Americans are all the same", "Americans are all materialistic" are methods of barricading the study of the heterogeneous Arab world, or the multicultural American nation by creating monolithic structures or essentialized caricatures. Said's celebration of cultural diversity disillusioned all the parochial claimants of his intellectual kinship and "whether by accident or design, he finds himself excluded by various opposing partisan camps at the same time" (Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 6).

"Speaking truth to power is no panglossian idealism; it is carefully weighing the alternatives, picking the right one and then intelligently representing it" wrote Said in *Representations of the Intellectual* (75) and amply exemplified it. He not only spoke "truth to power", he spoke the truth to all, with the unfortunate consequence, however, that he received scathing criticism not only in the US and Israel but also in the Arab world and the Indian sub-continent. Ironically, *Orientalism* was banned in Palestine itself. He did not hesitate to call Rushdie an orientalist for his contribution to the programme of constructing a stereotypical Islam but was also with those who stood up against the archaic, resurgent fundamentalism of the Iranian fatwa against him. And so is the case with Marx - he is appreciative of the Hegelian residue in Marxism and its emergence as a force of resistance within Occidentalism and yet he locates the Marxist aphorism "They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented" as the epitome of the Orientalist thought. This quotation is one of the two epigraphs of his book, *Orientalism*. The layered flexibility of Said's thought is obvious when he states that "we can better understand the persistence and durability of saturating hegemonic systems like culture when we realize that their internal constraints upon writers were *productive*," yet "by the same token we must not unilaterally abrogate the connections" in the texts (*Culture and Imperialism* 175).

No doubt Said has emphasized the material reality or the "worldliness" of a text, but this thrust is gravitation towards the historicity of the text, rather than an

inclination towards Marxist ideology. Theorists with leanings to the Left, Aijaz Ahmad in particular, have been unforgivingly critical of the ambivalence and eclecticism of Said. Ahmed passionately laments his blindness towards the Marxist tradition - he closes his critique of Said, in his book, *In Theory*, with this observation, "Said's warning that a choice for Marxism entails putting 'oneself outside a great deal of things' points towards a possible inventory of renunciations... Having access to 'a great deal of things' always gives one a sense of opulence, mastery, reach, choice, freedom, erudition, play. But resolution of the kind of ambivalences and self-cancelling procedures which beset Said's thought requires that some positions be vacated, some choices be made, some of these 'great deal of things' be renounced" (219). A lot of scholars have critiqued the standpoint of Ahmad, but Michael Sprinker sums it all up when he says that Ahmad is simply confronting Said with the question, "Why are you not a Marxist?" (116)<sup>4</sup>.

While the breadth of Said's reading is amazing and he acknowledges with gratitude the influence of Marx, Derrida, Foucault, Fanon and other great thinkers, he is quite unequivocal about his areas of difference with them. He seems to value the playfulness of ideas; he strives to harness them urgently to bring about a positive change in human relations and abhors the reductionism of ideas and confinement to a particular critical theory merely to prove a point. Among other areas of rapprochement he shares with thinkers like Adorno, is his refusal as an intellectual to limit himself to narrow specialization, authority, systematicity and obligatory closure - he does not restrict himself to the specific rhetoric of a particular theory. Said argues that theories appear as a response to specific historical conditions and cannot be used with impunity in any context to produce pseudo-creative reading of texts.

Among the sustained influences on his thought Said cherishes Giambattista Vico, his German translator Auerbach, Gramsci, Adorno, Chomsky, Bertrand Russell and early Foucault. His engagement with the Foucauldian discourse best illustrates his eclecticism. Said's discourse on Orientalism is deeply influenced by Foucault's theory of power / knowledge. It is in fact a neat instance of the historical verification of the praxis of constructing a suitable epistemology by the West to sanctify the European politics of conquest in Asia and Africa. While Said has acknowledged the perceptive brilliance of Foucault's analysis of how power propagates itself through non-coercive cultural beliefs, which invoke negligible skepticism or immediate opposition due to their subtlety, he warns against taking Foucault as the final word on the function of an intellectual in society

and with a valid reason. The concreteness or "worldliness" of Said's visionary argument is almost antithetical to the esoteric abstractions of the Foucauldian pessimism. Foucault is doubtful of the need or even the presence of an intellectual in society; Said envisages a role of purpose and commitment for an academic from the margins of power.

In his essay "Traveling Theory" (*The World* 226-47), Said prioritizes Foucault over Derrida. Foucault in spite of his "theoretical overtotalisation" which falls short in efficacy in realistic situations has openings into the historical and institutional practices. Derrida on the other hand limits himself – he must stick to the text, without its context, under all circumstances. It is Said's anti-essentialism which helps him synthesize the post-structuralist Derridean and the Foucauldian structures of thought. He gains from both - the oppositional reading of texts and Foucault's eye-opening accounts of the ineluctable, discursive nature of power. This syncretism helped Said conceptualize the "contrapuntal reading" of texts to complete the historical reality of a text for he firmly believed that "texts are fundamentally facts of power, not of democratic exchange...a system of forces institutionalized by the reigning culture at some human cost to its various components" (*The World* 45,53). In a conversation with Bill Ashcroft in 1995 Said observed, "Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* is the point at which I thought he went astray...the moment he began to generalize into a larger theory - potentially a theory that no resistance was possible, that we were moving towards a disciplinary society, that there was a kind of clockwork quality to it - I just felt it was completely wrong" (289).

As a professor of literature Said was quite averse to the idea of fan following and stood in favour of originality and amateurishness in academics. It was this discipleship which he felt detrimentally affected Derrida and institutionalized him. In an interview with Joseph Buttigieg and Paul Bove in 1993 he emphatically makes a point: "the idea of the anti-dynastic intellectual is very important to me... I stake a great deal on the question of doing something for oneself. It is a form of independence I cherish. I don't think the kind of works I have written... derive from formulas or concepts that can be handed down. They all derive from personal experience and that is terribly important to me" (154). Throughout his scholarly endeavour he was persistent in his emphasis on the worldliness of the works of literature and as well as the realities of the literary critic. Both the text and its critic are embedded in their respective social and political contexts – in their material reality. They cannot get away with an over and above attitude, a sort of supra-

transcendental approach or even an aesthetically empowered literary garb.

There is absolutely no anomaly between Said's life and his texts – if his works heavily drew upon his life, his life religiously lived out his beliefs – he exemplified the significance of the engagement of ideas to reality and strove to harness non-coercive knowledge to power so that it operates with a secular humanitarian thrust for freedom and equality. Said's legacy urges every writer and intellectual to rise above the glorification in academic specialization and excellence, to locate his/her Palestine, however big /small, landed /landless it be, and to step out of the ivory tower to work towards a world which is just and fair for all.

The reductionism of the Saidian thought to polarizations such as East-West, Orient-Occident, Islam-Christianity, Marxist-Metropolitan, colonial - anti-colonial, historicity – textuality, aesthetics – politics is the chaining down of the high-flying spirit of his anti-essentialism, resplendent in its awareness, intuition and discovery. Said admitted in an interview to the "residual hedonism" involved in the critical act of liberating oneself from one's past alliances and predictability: "Schools and systems often exist as a method for warding off such eventualities[stripping the critic of the privilege of circumscription], that is why I am temperamentally anti-systemic and anti-school" (*Diacritics* 45). It would not be wrong to infer, considering Said's aversion to discipleship, that he would not cherish the label, "Saidesque" attached to a work of another thinker or, even, to his own successive "stray", attempts at interpretation of reality.

Rightly understood, *Orientalism* is primarily a well-researched discourse highlighting the harmful fallouts of the monolithic hermeneutics of social history in terms of binary oppositions and cultural stereotypes. While commentators, both hostile and sympathetic, have adopted a derivational approach and read the book to suit their specific ideologies, Said, in an "Afterword" to the book in 1994, categorically stated that the book "in its arguments is explicitly anti-essentialist, radically skeptical about all categorical designations... and painstakingly careful about not defending or even discussing the Orient and Islam". The journey of Said is a leading paradigm of the growing section of informed humanity which is "in powerful and immediate ways, transnational,"<sup>5</sup> and is engaged in working out the dynamics of global peace, human advancement and multiculturalism.

## Notes

1. The dissemination of the Saidian philosophy into real politics is evident in the invocation of world peace in the foreign policy of President Barak Obama, a student of Said in the Columbia University. In spite of the risk involved, Obama invested presidential capital in the Mideast peacemaking process in the early days of his presidency and stated in the UN General Assembly on 28 Sept.2010: "true security for the Jewish state requires an independent Palestine". But the ghost of the foreign policy of the previous US regimes, and the current face-off with Iran on the nuclear issue, continue to mire the six-decade Israeli-Palestine dispute with more complexities and provocations, and peace awaits final compromises from both sides.
2. Said contributed to the *The Nation*, *The Guardian*, *New York Book Review*, *The London Review of Books*, *Counterpunch*, *Al Ahram* and *Al Hayat* (a pan Arab daily). Being an involved intellectual he lectured in more than 100 universities and colleges – his Reith lectures at the BBC, the Camp lectures at Stanford, Northcliffe lectures at University College London are now major publications.
3. Bernard Lewis' vociferous attacks on *Orientalism* are, in fact, a political response to the onslaught on the procedures and genealogy of the discourse which sources the identity, position and power of the entire guild of Orientalists. Projecting the book as anti-Western, he produced a series of essays, some of which are collected in the book, *Islam and the West*. See Bernard Lewis, "The Question of Orientalism," *New York Review of Books* 24 June 1982, for a provocative defense of Orientalist scholarship by the author.
4. Responding to Aijaz Ahmad's book *In theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*, Michael Sprinker in his essay, "The National Question: Said, Ahmad, Jameson" interrogates the Said - Ahmad conflict in the context of the inter-relationship of Third World nationalisms to the Marxist tradition. Defending Said "as a non-Communist intellectual on the anti-imperialist Left," he avers Ahmad's indictment of Said as an inadvertent

proponent of "anti-communist radicalism," as far-fetched.

5. Michael Sprinker, "The National Question: Said, Ahmad, Jameson" in Patrick Williams, ed. *Edward Said*. vol.1. London: Sage Publications, 2001.

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