

Introduction

Placing Edward W. Said in Context

Edward W. Said (1935-2003) was a public intellectual who had left an indelible mark on the consciousness of the world, with his significant interventions in the terrains of academy, politics, culture, and aesthetics. Said's work continues to bear ample significance in our current times, which abounds in divisive hostilities. The world badly needs an integrative vision which can take it forward through a recuperative path of healing. A brief acquaintance with this multifaceted personality is what follows.

Said had obtained rigorous erudition within the walls of the academy, but he was not afraid to “contaminate and politicize the hoary chambers of scholarship with the clamor and urgency of worldly, political issues” (Radhakrishnan xi). R. Radhakrishnan asks whether Said was “academically political or politically academic?” and adds that Said's range was impressive, and whatever he wrote was “intellectual and public at the same time” (xii). He would ask all those who came under his influence to write on their specialized focus, “firstly for a large audience that would transcend their specialist argot, and secondly for a range of constituencies, from the narrowly academic to the broadly populist” (xiii).

In a glossary note on Said's concept of “between/between-ness” Radhakrishnan notes that, while one normally thinks of “being between,” as

an unpleasant sandwiched situation, suspended in “painful ambivalence,” or “stranded in a state of perpetual waffling and indecision, stuck in perpetual liminality, a state of precarious becoming with no guarantee of effective arrival,” Said “endows the spatiality of the ‘between’ with a positive and productive connotation” (12). Said constantly reminds us that we all “live, theorize, and make sense of our lives, literatures, and cultures *between* different languages, peoples, histories, cultures, and locations” (Radhakrishnan 14).

Bill Ashcroft and Hussein Kadhim point out that Said was besotted with “the paradox of identity in an increasingly diasporic and culturally heterogeneous world” (ix). There were a lot of contradictions surrounding him, especially his Westernized professional persona and his Palestinian identity. Though Said is claimed by many to be the founding figure of postcolonialism, Ashcroft and Kadhim remark that Said showed very little interest in this field, and they identify this contradiction in Said as part of “his desire to act as a ‘secular’ ‘amateur’ intellectual” (ix). Said consistently kept rejecting the outfits of theory, and these contradictions in him turned out to be his greatest strength.

Asha Varadharajan points out that Said’s intellectual career was well known not only in the academy but in the Central Intelligence Agency as well, which was “to keep under surveillance such an outspoken and courageous critic of the neocolonial pretensions of the United States” (113). His was a “voice in the wilderness” that refused to be silenced, “one strengthened by its

intense awareness of the human condition” (Varadharajan 113). His insistence on “worldliness” and “the self-implicating mode of knowledge production” enabled him to produce a deep-seated commitment towards mitigating the travails of existence (Varadharajan 115).

Said is often labelled as an “anti-Marxist” due to his misread affiliations with Michel Foucault, but Prasad Pannian argues that “such a sweeping categorization, often a dismissive one, overlooks several subtler interfaces within Said’s work that refer back to certain forms of humanism and to specific Marxist thinkers,” and that “the Foucauldian influence on Said is *overdetermined* as critics either have often not recognized or have discounted the influence of Antonio Gramsci, Raymond Williams, and Theodor Adorno on Said” (5). In fact Pannian strongly rebukes those contemporary pseudo intellectuals who masquerade as “pro- or post-Marxist—despite many being anti-Marxist in many ways” and that Said’s stance of an “anti-anti-Marxist” is “certainly more intellectually honest—and historically valid” (160).

Stephen Howe argues that Said’s use of Karl Marx’s words, “they cannot represent themselves; they must be represented,” as an epigraph to *Orientalism*, signals a “shift away from directly politico-activist orientation,” because this was a comment originally made by Marx about French peasants (62). Howe explains that,

Marx was not, of course, here expressing his own view of the peasantry—although he did indeed have a pretty low opinion of its political potentiality as a class—but presenting what he took

to be the Bonapartist attitude to them. The term “representation” has had two meanings: a political and an artistic one: to “represent” in the sense of acting or standing in for, as in the notion of representative democracy where elected politicians rule, supposedly, on behalf of the people; and to “represent” in the sense of depicting or designating. Marx’s original comment had been meant in the first sense only, but it is precisely the links between the two that form Said’s subject. . . . (63)

“Nonidentity” according to Adorno, says Fred Dallmayr, meant “the surplus or excess of being over knowing, especially the excess of social and historical reality over the appropriating grasp of conceptualization” (35). Said had never been a mere onlooker but always played the role of “an impassioned spokesman of the victims against the victimizers, of the colonized against the colonizers, of the Orient against the Occident,” who was ill at ease with “all kinds of local or parochial attachments,” and sensitive to “the lure of a free-floating nonidentity congruent with the delight of literary deconstruction” (Dallmayr 44). Even while engaged in a persistent struggle with imperial domination, Said was always far from yielding to “a bland synthesis,” or sliding into “the blind alleys of parochial exclusivism and global vagrancy,” and his project was able to capture “the subtle dialectical move of both embracing and transgressing identity, of a seriously engaged encounter in which difference provides both traction and attraction” (Dallmayr 52-53).

Rob Nixon pays a glorious tribute to Said in his article titled “Edward Said.” He remembers that Said was a teacher with the right kind of reverberation who proved to be an example to him for learning that, “the dissonances of living out of place could become a source of strength” (n. pag.). Nixon adds that Said thrived on “intellectual complexity while aspiring to clarity; he taught and wrote as if he yearned to be widely understood . . . his approach appeared luminous when measured against the alternatives: close readings sealed against the world or airless post-structuralist seminars in which the stakes were as obscure as the language”(n. pag.). Said was the mortal enemy of “the twenty-five-preposition sentence” and of “involved ‘fame,’” which created swaggering self-regarding celebrities who mouldered in the company of like-minded moulderers (Nixon n. pag.). Said was never happy to submit to that kind of success “that is, at heart, a species of defeat” (Nixon n. pag.).

Andrew N. Rubin comments that he had come to learn that, to Said, both his life and his work “were part of a willful human and humane endeavor” (37). Said could convincingly and eloquently argue for “the theoretical connections between postcolonial historiography, classical music, and anti-imperialist politics,” all the while being a comparative critic, and an intellectual committed to the cause of secular humanism (Rubin 43). Rubin notes that,

Said's vast *oeuvre* is a work of an astonishing will and human achievement that continues and will continue, as long as we read and re-read him, . . . because such works cannot be repeated, precisely because they have constituted not a method, but a general critical attitude and critical consciousness that enables us to imagine . . . that someday we shall be free from the coercive and dominative forms of knowledge and power that have been exercised at an extraordinary cost to the experience and lived realities of human beings. (46-47)

Despite the enormous impact Said had on anthropology, he was never welcomed as a friendly critic in anthropological circles, says Nicholas B. Dirks (38). Said was not the first to point out the discipline's colonial origins, yet he was labelled hostile. His challenges in fact made the anthropologists "uncomfortable, defensive, and reactive" (Dirks 38). Though they were well aware of the pitfalls of their discipline, via Said, they continued to privilege the ideas of "exoticism, otherness, and the primitive" (Dirks 39). Today colonialism has been accepted as a major subject of anthropological inquiry, "even as it is widely recognized that colonial forms of knowledge continue to bedevil even the most postcolonial debate on questions relating to cultural difference, moral relativism, identity, or . . . the significance of globalization" (Dirks 52). Said has made a monumental impact on the field of anthropology, and it is "forever in his debt" (Dirks 52).

Aamir R. Mufti critically comments that, though in his chief works Said is concerned with the “canonical literatures of the modern West,” and does seem to bracket off the “cultural production and trajectories of non-Western societies” by not bringing to them “modes of attention” as compelling as those he has developed for a “critical engagement with the Western tradition,” he seems to be animated by a “concern with these languages and literatures, especially of course Arabic, and their place in literary studies” (472). Said’s contributions lie in demonstrating that “‘nonrepressive and nonmanipulative’ forms of knowledge in the future in the humanities would have to be more encompassing and more comparatist, not less, than scholarship has been in the recent past” (Mufti 489).

Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan writes: “For those teaching English literature in India, in particular, Said’s identification of ‘culture’ as a correlate of ‘imperialism’ provided a point of entry into literary criticism and gave confidence to the non-native English critic to engage with the canonical English texts on her own terms” (n. pag.). It was when she had moved from the Delhi University and started to teach in the United States that she had got a real sense of the stature of Said, and the adversary he was up against. Rajan says: “However vulgar the fray, Said managed to retain both dignity and integrity intact” and his work ethic made him keep on writing, teaching, and lecturing even in the midst of illness and controversy, proving “what the scholar’s life represented in some ideal sense—a life above the fray” (n. pag.). Said was thus an exemplary example for many of those who put the blame on

the pressures of their professional life, “for progressively refusing commitments of any other kind” (Rajan n. pag.).

Rashmi Varma points out that in a meeting with Said in Chicago in the 1990’s, she was overwhelmed by his knowledge of India’s independence struggle and of “India’s unflinching historic support to Palestine” (n. pag.). She adds that “Gandhi himself, in a much-noted 1938 essay on Palestine, had unequivocally condemned nationalisms such as Zionism that were based on religious authority and that were responding to Europe’s ugly and deadly deeds by unleashing atrocities on a new set of victims, the Arabs of Palestine” (n. pag.). To Said, “the Indian and Palestinian national liberation struggles were the vanguard struggles of the twentieth century, eschewing religion as the basis of national identity and articulating a democratic revolution” (Varma n. pag.).

Moustafa Bayoumi notes that Said never suffered from a “Bloomian anxiety of influence;” instead he freely names “the philosophers, writers, and critics from whom he borrows certain ideas and concepts,” and he then “animates, assimilates, and . . . *affiliates* himself to them in his own inimitable fashion” (46). While drawing from these thinkers, Said does not show any slavish obedience, his work remaining characteristically “anti-authoritarian” and “skeptical of *all* kinds of authority, even the authority of other thinkers whom he admired” (Bayoumi 46). Interestingly, Said in fact encouraged all his readers to challenge him too.

Orientalism has been the most talked about book by Said. This highly influential book has been translated into more than thirty six languages, and is the “product of an equally protean personality, known alike for his ‘passionate humanism, his cultivation and erudition, his provocative views, and his unswerving commitment to the cause of Palestinian self-determination’” (Huggan 124). Graham Huggan comments that Said’s multifarious contributions to literary scholarship, cultural politics, and music “are less suggestive of the achievements of a single figure . . . but a veritable surfeit of Saims,” and the astonishing range of Said’s *oeuvre* has created a booming “Said industry” itself which foregrounds “critical Saidism” in which “very different readings are applied, and very ideological *uses* given, to Said’s work” (124, 125).

On the one hand, while Said extolled “humanism’s power to connect” the progressive intellectual workers, and forge “lines of solidarity” between the varied experiences of people around the globe, who were battling against grave injustices—“regardless of national filiations,” he was also wary against its destructive excesses—“the pitfalls of identitarian thinking, which propels national and religious enthusiasm”(Abraham 1). Said always advocated “secular criticism” and “worldliness” as the prerequisite conditions for a “New Humanism” (Abraham 2).

Matthew Abraham points out that after 9/11, there occurred an increased policing of academic life in the U.S. with measures like the Campus

Watch, the David Project, and the H.R. bill 3077, which sought to spy and monitor professors critical on U.S. and Israeli “military adventurism” in the Middle East, to question their academic “objectivity,” and ensure a “‘balanced’ presentation of views within area studies curricula in U.S. universities” (3-4). Abraham acerbically comments that these restraints were specifically targeted at “political mavericks such as Said and Noam Chomsky” (4).

Said had high aspirations of becoming a concert pianist, and in 1993, he gave two concerts with Diana Takieddine at the Miller Theater, New York, and at Georgetown University in Washington D.C. (Massad 20). Joseph Massad notes that while Said had played Schubert’s *Fantasie in F Minor*, op. 103 (written in 1828), for a film about him directed by Salem Brahim, shot in 2002 and titled *Selves and Others: A Portrait of Edward Said*, “his face quivered with every note that his hands transposed on the keyboard” (20). Schubert had written this piece in the last year of his short life, and ironically, Said too died within a year of playing it. Schubert’s piece has a “little phrase,” sad and beautiful, which he refuses to let go of, as if he did not want to end the piece. “Schubert’s attachment might have reminded Said of his own attachment to Palestine, which, no matter how far from it he ventured into academic, literary, and musical terrains, always pulled him back. . . . *Fantasie* might also have served as a kind of premonition for Said that it would be his swansong” (Massad 20).

The Palestinian poet-laureate Mahmoud Darwish's amazing poem "Edward Said: A Contrapuntal Reading," translated by Mona Amis, sums up their poignant relationship and dream. They both had worked for the realization of a common goal—the liberation of their homeland Palestine—jeopardizing their lives in the very process. These few lines capture the essence of the poem:

We both said:

If the past is only an experience,

make of the future a meaning and a vision.

Let us go,

Let us go into tomorrow trusting

the candor of imagination and the miracle of grass / (Darwish 177)

The thesis titled "Coalescing Margins in the Cultural Critique of Edward W. Said" tries to negotiate the various kinds of "margins" that crop up in Said's work. The term "margin" is used in the sense of "border/boundary/fringe/frontier/periphery," and also in the sense of the "subordinate status" accorded to it in relation to a dominant centre. "Coalescing margins" is used in the sense of "dissolution of boundaries" and their eventual fusion, with an attendant hope for organic unity.

The thesis has been divided into an introduction, four chapters, and a conclusion. The methodology adopted includes a "close reading"—albeit not a

hermetically sealed one—of the key texts of Said, after placing them under various kinds of margins. Relevant critical comments are also incorporated. The thesis attempts to identify and analyze how far and how well “coalescing margins” function as a “vision” and “method” in Said’s critical *oeuvre*, and hopes to offer it as a neologism in Saidian context, adding it to the conceptual list of the ever-burgeoning field of Saidian criticism.

Chapter One, “Said and Cultural Margins,” deals with *Orientalism* (1978), *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (1966), *Beginnings* (1975), *Covering Islam* (1981), and *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (1983). It tries to unravel the cultural margins.

Chapter Two, “Said and Political Margins,” deals with *The Question of Palestine* (1979), *The Politics of Dispossession* (1994), *Peace and its Discontents* (1995), *The End of the Peace Process* (2000), *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives* (1986), *Culture and Resistance: Conversations with Edward W. Said* (2003), and *From Oslo to Iraq and the Road Map* (2004). It tries to unravel the political margins.

Chapter Three, “Said and Musical Margins,” deals with *Musical Elaborations* (1991), *Parallels and Paradoxes: Explorations in Music and Society* (2004), *On Late Style* (2006), and *Music at the Limits: Three Decades of Essays and Articles on Music* (2008). It tries to unravel the musical margins.

Chapter Four, “Said and the Margins: In Continuum,” deals with *Out of Place* (1999), *The Representations of the Intellectual* (1994), *Power, Politics, and Culture* (2001), *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays* (2001), *Freud and the Non-European* (2003), *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (2004), and *The Pen and the Sword: Conversations with Edward W. Said* (1994). It tries to unravel margins further, in continuation with the analyses of the preceding chapters.

The conclusion, “Coalescing Margins in Said’s *Oeuvre*,” tries to summarize the observations of the main chapters, and ties up the different strands of “coalescing margins” in the critical output of Said. It is positively hoped that Said’s vision of “coalescing margins” would function as an antidote to the fanatic and fundamentalist notions that shut out “peoples” from the boulevards of dignity.