Introduction:
Edward Said and the Politics of Subjectivity

What about identity? I asked.
He said: It’s self-defense . . .
Identity is the child of birth, but
at the end, it’s self-invention, and not
an inheritance of the past. I am multiple . . .
Within me an ever new exterior. And
I belong to the question of the victim. Were I not
from there, I would have trained my heart
to nurture there deer of metaphor . . .
So carry your homeland wherever you go, and be
a narcissist if need be
The outside world is exile,
exile is the world inside.
And what are you between the two?
(Mahmoud Darwish, “Edward Said: A Contrapuntal
Reading” 177).

The status, function and meaning of subjectivity in its various forms and manifestations have been an abiding preoccupation with philosophers, political theorists and cultural critics. The notion of subjectivity, as some of these thinkers commonly conceive, exists in negotiation with broad cultural definitions and “implies always a degree of thought and self-consciousness about identity,¹ and at the same time allowing a myriad of limitations and often unknowable, unavoidable constrains on our ability to fully comprehend identity” (D. Hall 3).² Though these two terms are sometimes used interchangeably, the term identity does not capture the sense of social and cultural entanglement that is implicit in the term subjectivity. We may have numerous discrete identities of nation, race, gender, class and sexual orientation; subjectivity comprises all of these facets, as well as our

¹Emphasis added.
²Donald Hall adds: “Subjectivity as a critical concept invites us to consider the question of how and from where identity arises, to what extent it is understandable, and to what degree it is something over which we have any measure of influence or control” (3-4).
own ‘imperfect’ awareness of our own selves. The concept of subjectivity has become one of the central concerns for students of literature and culture as well, mainly because literary studies have broadened now to include a wide and varied collection of texts transgressing the boundaries of disciplines. Today, reading is more politically driven and connected to enterprises that are well beyond purely aesthetic considerations. Therefore, questions concerning how notions of subjectivity are implicated in or constituted by various discourses are matters of grave concern. And further, any inquiry into the notion of subjectivity would involve a proper understanding of the notion of ideology and its relation to and impact on individuals. It follows that an exploration into social and individual existence as determined by the collective organization of knowledge and power is inevitable for an investigation into the subject and subjectivity. As Lawrence Grossberg puts it:

The question of subject is an epistemological one, in the broadest sense of the term. The subject describes a position within a field of subjectivity or within a phenomenological field, produced by a particular subjectivating machine (since not all subjectivations are subjectifications)…Everyone has some form of subjectivity and thus, in at least one sense, exists as a subject, although further research would have to specify the different forms of the existence of the subject (98).
Grossberg also recognizes that individuals have the possibility of occupying more than one subject position with their access to different forms of experience and knowledge. Their experience of themselves and the world need not necessarily be equally distributed. He further argues that although “everyone exists within the strata of subjectivity, they are also located at particular positions, each of which enables and constrains the possibilities of experience, of representing those experiences and of legitimizing those representations” (99). Therefore it is correct to say that “subjectivity is the intersection of two lines of philosophical inquiry: epistemology (the study of how we know what we know) and ontology (the study of the nature of being or existence)” (D. Hall 4).

However, it has to be said that most of the contemporary cultural and critical theory of subjectivity are promoting an impasse in the political arena. An intensified awareness towards the political relevance of the subject is therefore a topic of immense significance. It is primarily against this backdrop, the present study tries to contextualize Edward W. Said, the exemplary intellectual of our times, basically by focusing on the constitution of his own subjectivity and by analyzing the notions of subjectivity implicated in the ensemble of his writings. Though he is often designated as one of the main progenitors of Postcolonial Studies, my attempt in this work, however, does not concern with his contribution to this field. The study focuses more on
the hitherto less researched aspect of his conceptualizations of subjectivity. Though Said never comes out with explicit theories of subjectivity, it is not too difficult to see that the idea of a political subject is a running strand in his protocols. Hence, Said’s various works are analyzed in this project to excavate his deliberations on subjectivity and human agency. But before probing further into the relevance of taking Said as the focus of this study, I would like to discuss briefly how the subject as a category evolved over the years and emerged in contemporary discourse. However, to make a comprehensive analysis of the history of the ‘subject’ and ‘subjectivity’ is neither within the scope nor the objective of this research. Hence, starting with the enlightenment assumptions on subjectivity, I shall be focusing primarily on some of the major thinkers and theorists of subjectivity whose impact has been most keenly felt in humanities and in literary and cultural studies in particular.

**Enlightenment, Modernity and Subjectivity**

Enlightenment refers to the movement in Western Europe that roughly spans the period from Francis Bacon (1561-1626) to the French Revolution (1789). The common element in this intellectual movement was “a trust in human reason as adequate to solve the crucial problems and to establish the essential norms in life” (Abrams 52). Thinkers of the Enlightenment revolutionized this period by helping to develop the cult of individualism and freedom, the origins of modern empirical science and the elaboration of universal ideals of
political organizations. In a sense, the ideas and principles of the Enlightenment still resonate in the present-day discourses along with its propositions of a free, autonomous and rational subject.

Rene Descartes was one of the pioneering thinkers of this movement. His work represents major developments in the field of mathematics, scientific method and epistemology. Writing in the first half of the seventeenth century, Descartes proposed a universal form of the subject through the famous formula: *cogito, ergo sum* (I think therefore I am). That is to say, he based his philosophical explorations of existence and truth in a process of raising doubt about that which is known and believed, and arrived at this formula which guarantees the subject’s objectivity and confirms that it is the subject’s thinking that is taken as a proof of its existence. Descartes writes:

I resolved to pretend that nothing which had ever entered my mind was any more true than the illusions of my dreams. But immediately afterwards I became aware that, while I decided thus to think that everything was false, it followed necessarily that I who thought thus must be something; and observing that this truth: *I think therefore I am*, was certain and so evident that all the most extravagant suppositions of the skeptics were not capable of shaking it, I judged that I could accept it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking (qtd. in D. Hall 19-20).
Thus, Descartes, equating experience with thought and thought with experience, conceptualized the subject as a thinking thing exercising instrumental power over selfhood. Subjectivity came to be seen essentially as self-reflective by Descartes. This celebration of reason challenged the traditional assumptions on divinity. The Cartesian notion of agency—“namely, *if one thinks and works hard enough, one can make oneself into a better person*—still underlies much of our thinking today about identity and our own responsibility for our selves” (D. Hall 21). This idealized notion of agency disturbed the then religious institutions which always wanted to reaffirm human dependence on the divine. As Nick Mansfield observes, in Descartes, there are two major principles of the Enlightenment subjectivity: “firstly, the image of the self as the ground of all knowledge and experience of the world (before I am anything, I am I), and secondly, the self as defined by the rational faculties it can use to order the world (I make sense)” (15).

While Descartes, the epistemologist, under the influence of the growth of scientific knowledge, “accepted that individuals were free to think what they want,” Thomas Hobbes, the political philosopher, under the influence of popular revolution and religious disputes accepted that “individuals were free to do what they want” (Valentine 40). While the former accepted that the ‘subject is free to doubt,’ the latter accepted that the ‘subject is free to resist.’ Hobbes’s *Leviathan* maintains that authority is always legitimated by the freely given
consent of the individuals over whom it is exercised. He argued that any established political authority has to be subjected to the authority of the free individual through a social contract.

Several subsequent philosophers addressed further questions on subjectivity. For example, John Locke’s *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* is another work imbued with “unshakeable faith in human perfectibility” (D. Hall 25). Charles Taylor in his *Sources of the Self: the Making of the Modern Identity*, points out Locke’s idea of the ‘punctual self.’ According to him, Locke demonstrated how through “disengagement and rational control” the self is fully within our power to perfect. Taylor adds: “Locke’s theory generates and also reflects an ideal of independence and self-responsibility, a notion of reason as free from established custom and locally dominant authority” (160,167).

Another major philosopher, Immanuel Kant, though differing from Locke in many ways, reaffirms the concept of the rational agent. He does not treat the subject as a thing, but as a presupposition of experience. He not only declared women as irrational beings unequivocally, but also held it right to exclude women from the educational system and political realm. And for him, rational human behavior can be reduced to a single ethical principle: the categorical/ethical imperative. He maintained that all individuals are accountable for their strict adherence towards duty and ethics while exercising their free will under conditions that should be created for
them. “In order for us to be in any contact with the world, according to Kant, we must have an awareness of ourselves and a sense of unity of self” (Mansfield 19).

Put briefly, these different streams of thought and principles of the Enlightenment philosophers such as Bacon, Descartes and Rousseau, Voltaire and Kant directly challenged the “dominant religious doctrines that determined and organized ‘knowledge’” (Malpas and Wake 182):

Disputing the church’s pre-eminence in governing common societal wisdom, and the myth of the ‘natural’ rights of the hereditary aristocracy, the Enlightenment encouraged individualism, reason and freedom. It was a combination of these doctrines that resulted in the French Revolution of 1789, where the partnership between church, state and gentry was so manifestly challenged and defeated (182).

Consequently, the cultural, political, economic and intellectual atmosphere signaled the rise of many other divergent theories on subjectivity. For instance, the origins of the theories of the marginalized and the emergence of potentially politicized subjectivities are traceable to this period. And further, the eighteenth century witnessed the first stirrings of what would later turn out to be a feminist consciousness. Drawing inspiration from Rousseau’s *Emile*

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3 Galileo’s Copernican interventions can be remembered in this context. His assertion that ‘the earth orbits the sun’ directly contradicted the biblical notion that God’s earth is the dynamic celestial body.
and its encouragement of women’s sense of themselves as a significant group in society, Mary Wollstonecraft came out with her *Vindications of the Rights of Women* modeled on Tom Paine’s *The Rights of Man*. She provided a new perspective on the marginalized subjectivity of women. She was followed by a few other liberal feminist writers such as Margaret Fuller, who in her *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* delves into the causes and consequences of women’s degraded subjectivity. John Stuart Mill’s “The Subjection of Women” and Harriet Taylor Mill’s “The Enfranchisement of Women” seek solutions for the inferior and subjected position of women in society. J. S. Mill’s works acted as the main driving force behind the politicization of subjectivity in the nineteenth century. His writings, while focusing on giving to all the new freedom allowed by modern society, also exhorted to make of oneself what one wishes. Thus conceptions of subjectivity have transformed over the years with reference and in response to the changing economic and material conditions.

But it has to be admitted that, a comprehensive theory of class exploitation was lacking in most of the liberal theorizations mentioned above. It was Karl Marx who filled these lacunae with his critique of capitalism. He sought for a groundbreaking transformation of a ‘naturalized’ economic system as well as the subjectivities that are encompassed by it. Marx’s theories owe much to the work of George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel whose notions on self-consciousness are very relevant. Hegel’s methodical historicizing of existence and self-
conception is crucial to subsequent contributions to theories of subjectivity. In his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel claims: “Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged” (qtd. in D. Hall 51). In short, Hegel’s thought revolves round the complex relationship between self and other, sameness and difference, universalism and particularism.

Marx appropriated and worked upon the Hegelian dialectical process on consciousness and created the theory of class consciousness, ultimately to develop the idea of * politicized class subjectivity*. His notion of subjectivity links “historical conditions to the products of consciousness (ideas)” (Decker 32). When individuals recognize a shared experience of oppression and unite toward a common cause, the human condition also will change along with the individual identities. Disconnected and relatively apolitical individual identities develop into class identity and consequently into a political party, according to Marx. *Manifesto of the Communist Party* by Marx and Engels traces this process of radicalization and creates an awareness of common cause and agenda. Citing from the *Manifesto*, Donald Hall explicates this further:

Thus Marx and Engels, to an unprecedented degree, evacuated subjectivity of any essential or trans-historical quality, arguing that “man’s ideas, views, and conceptions, in one word, man’s consciousness, changes with every
change in the conditions of his material existence, in his
social relations and in his social life” (54).

Marx writes again: “It is not the consciousness of men that
determines their being, but, on the contrary, their social being that
determines consciousness” (Selected Writings 425). For him, human
identities, ideas and aspirations are produced by the material
economic and social conditions in which they exist. In a certain sense,
it is correct to assume that all identity political movements in the
contemporary world owe much to Marx and Engels. As Donald Hall
claims, “the possibility that one can gain control over that which has
controlled one’s consciousness by becoming conscious of that
dynamic of control is the premise of most twentieth-century theories
of politicized subjectivity” (55). The unequivocal representation of the
interests of the oppressed is the sole aim of Marx, presupposing that
the dynamic opposition between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie
would inevitably lead to an eventual clash that would result in the
destruction of the latter. His conceptualization of ideology as “false
consciousness” and its later modification by the French Marxist Louise
Althusser are central to the study of subject formation.

Though sociologists such as Emile Durkheim, Auguste Comte,
Wilhelm Wundt and Herbert Spencer also contributed towards the
development of the theories of subjectivity in the nineteenth and early
twentieth century, it was Freud with his theory of the unconscious who
contested any blind faith in rational control over human behavior.
Donald Hall sees the Freudian theory as “one of the most powerful manifestations of a general desire for instrumental control over subjectivity” (60). The increased recognition of the powerful influence of the unconscious on conscious life, and the developmental aspects of individual psychology provided a landmark turning point to the explorations on subjectivity. The adult human consciousness and identity is the culmination of a complicated childhood developmental process according to Freud. The cornerstone of his theory is the distinctive isolation of the familial context and erotic/sexual desire as integral to the development of adult identity. The child’s gratification of desires (oral, anal, genital, and so on), frustrations and rivalries necessitate different kinds of defense mechanisms like sublimation and redirection of desires into socially acceptable channels. In his discussion on Freud, Donald Hall Maintains: “To recognize that our personalities, self conceptions, and interactions with others are always haunted by the past is a powerful tool that enables us to better understand subjectivity” (62).⁴ Later thinkers such as Jacques Lacan and Judith Butler revised and modified Freud in their efforts to better understand subjectivity.

While the psychologists analyzed the impact of the unconscious on human lives, philosophers such as Nietzsche, Camus and Sartre emphasized the significance of making our lives as conscious as

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⁴ According to Hall, “psychoanalytic theory in its early Freudian manifestations comes into inevitable conflict with most theories of politicized subjectivity...it is fundamentally a theory of agency in the pursuit of social normalization rather than one of agency in the urgent contestation of any unjust social values” (62).
possible. They were skeptical about all deterministic implications of theories. For instance, Nietzsche believed that man is ultimately responsible for his actions in the process of self-creation. And through his spokesperson/prophet Zarathustra, Nietzsche declares the death of God. Though his scorn for the timid, herd-like masses and his exhortation to live dangerously were sometimes misread by fascistically inclined people, one cannot ignore the impetus he gave to the gathering awareness that one’s identity is socially and potentially self-constructed.

The challenge of creating new forms of selfhood was also taken up by the existentialist philosopher Jean Paul Sartre. His famous dictum existence precedes essence presupposes the fact that ‘man is nothing else, but that which he makes of himself.’ Sartre also argues that “the first effect of existentialism is that it puts every man in possession of himself as he is, and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his shoulders” (qtd. in D. Hall 72). He tries to address the charge that his notions would lead to solipsistic power seeking, as follows:

When we say that man is responsible for himself, we do not mean that he is responsible only for his own individuality, but that he is responsible for all men....Subjectivism means, on the one hand, the freedom of the individual subject and, on the other, that man cannot pass beyond human subjectivity. It is the latter
which is the deeper meaning of existentialism (qtd. in D. Hall 72).

In the light of above discussions, it can be said that the subject of modernity is often depicted as a Promethean self, a sovereign and unencumbered subject. Critiquing the modern subject involves in the first place a critique of rationality and also a critique of the modern episteme. Thinkers from Hobbes and Descartes to Rousseau, Locke and Kant believed that reason is a natural disposition of the human mind. Reason, if guided properly, they maintained, can discover moral and epistemological truths. Their belief in rationality presupposes that reason is innate and essential.

However, the Enlightenment concept of the rational subject was discarded by later thinkers as “monological” (Reindal 359). Inspired by different traditions, several scholars of the nineteenth century came out with critiques of this epistemic lineage of modernity. The assumed self-transparency of the Cartesian subject was unmasked, as Benhabib observes, first, ideologically and politically by the tradition stemming from Hegel and Marx, and second, psychologically by the psychoanalytic tradition emerging from the works of Freud. That the modern episteme is an episteme of domination has been pointed out by critics such as Nietzsche, Heidegger, Adorno and Horkheimer, in their own ways. “To Heidegger, philosophers from Descartes onwards had seen the human passage through the world as dependent on a fixable and self-aware entity called the subject that is the most fundamental form
of experience” (Mansfield 22). Heidegger also discovers that most of the Enlightenment philosophers had defined subjectivity in terms of reason, human spirit, or the simple act of perception. Condemning this “highly artificial” practice of selecting some “arbitrary feature of human experience and [choosing] it as the key or lodestone to all [forms of subjectivities],” Heidegger attempts to define the place of individuals in the world in terms of “the most fundamental aspect of life: Being in itself” (22).

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer, the Frankfurt school thinkers, argue that “all ‘enlightened’ societies are unreservedly repressed” (Malpas and Wake 182). They present a stringent Marxist critique of the limitations of Enlightenment by “exploring the unexpectedly pernicious effects of rationality” (Jay 37). They “reached even gloomier conclusions about the ways in which Western society had undermined its emancipatory potential” (37). In addition, postcolonial critics argue that Enlightenment was basically a Western phenomenon, which “idealized its European notions as universal truths and subsequently allows little or no ‘speech gap’ for the subaltern” (Malpas and Wake 182). Critics of Enlightenment, in general, attempted to examine the way in which the ‘modern episteme’ creates binary oppositions. And the ‘linguistic turn’ of contemporary theory and philosophy has resulted in the mounting of a major critique of the modern episteme, characterized as follows by Benhabib:
Whether in analytic philosophy, or in contemporary hermeneutics, or in French post-structuralism, the paradigm of language has replaced the paradigm of consciousness. This shift has meant that the focus is no longer on the epistemic subject or on the private contents of its consciousness but on the public, signifying activities of a collection of subjects (208).

**Language, Ideology and Subjectivity**

The shift from the paradigm of consciousness to the paradigm of language has initiated two ways of interpreting the identity of the epistemic subject. In the discourses of structuralism and poststructuralism, the subject is dismissed and priority is given to objectivity, structures or the system. As Magnus Reindal observes, “the critique of the modernist subject has led to an often cited slogan: the death/end of the subject. Subsequently, writers discuss the end of the individual, the end of the subject and the end of the mono-centered personality” (361). Many thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Francois Lyotard and Jacques Lacan have voiced this in their various writings.

The French psychoanalytic theorist Lacan formulates his conceptions on subjectivity by enjoining psychoanalysis with linguistics. While lauding Freudian insights, he also departs from them for he was less interested in pathologising certain desires or activities. For Lacan, (for Derrida too) language is intrinsically related to
subjectivity or an autonomous *apriori* structure, which envelops reality. Lacan broadly interpreted the structuring principles of social identity and asserted that “the unconscious is structured like language” (203). One of the clearest expressions of Lacan’s constructions of the subject can be found in his essay on the ‘mirror stage.’ Reworking Freud’s conception of the ego as the site of narcissistic self-idealization (and hence misrecognition), Lacan’s ‘mirror stage’ acts as a structural moment that necessitates the birth of an autonomous subject. Before the child achieves motor control, claims Lacan, it identifies with an illusory image of unity and completeness. This notion of misrecognition in the imaginary was crucial in the development of later theories of ideology. Althusser alludes to this moment in his account of ideology and of the interpellation of the subject. And the implications of this imaginary identification were very significant, as it involved not only the subject’s self-perception but also its perception of the world.

Drawing largely from the linguistic theory of Ferdinand Saussure, Lacan shifts his emphasis from the imaginary to the symbolic order. He argues that it is through the freedom of the signifier that unconscious effects are expressed in language. But he also realizes that some crucial signifiers--that would enable the subject to express itself--are missing in this account, as the fixing of signification by symbolic conventions, laws and practices (what Lacan calls the symbolic order) attempts to place limits upon modes of enunciation
and thus upon unconscious expression. Or in other words, the unconscious could never be fully verbalized. The speaking subject or the subject of enunciation can never put everything into words. Carolina Williams explicates this point: “For Lacan, there is a kernel to subjectivity which can never be represented by or expressed in language” and she adds that “the dimension of the real frustrates and undermines every presupposition of the autonomy, self-determination and agency of the subject and has important implications for the theorization of the political” (32). The real for Lacan then is what is outside of both the imaginary and the symbolic.

Questions of subjectivity, as noted earlier, are intimately linked to the concept of ideology which functions by persuasion rather than force. It was Antonio Gramsci who worked out this aspect of ideology in terms of an opposition between hegemony and domination. Later, Louis Althusser elaborated Gramsci’s concept by distinguishing the ideological state apparatuses (ISAs)--the media, the schools, churches, school, family, political parties, and so on--from the repressive state apparatuses (RSAs)--the police, army, and courts. Althusser along with Etienne Balibar in his Reading Capital tries to read Marx radically in order to recover the scientific foundation of Marxist theory. According to him, all forms of historicist and empirical methods of enquiry depend upon certain categories of thought, perception and consciousness. He maintains that the perceiving subject, in these methods, identifies the object, or the concrete real, as a form of self-
knowledge. Althusser deems this as the idealist principle of subjectivity and seeks to displace it with his scientific and structuralist Marxist theory. In “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses,” Althusser theorizes the construction of the ideological subject more cogently:

In the ordinary use of the term, subject in fact means: (1) a free subjectivity, a center of initiatives, author of and responsible for its actions; (2) a subjected being, who submits to a higher authority, and is therefore stripped of all freedom except that of freely accepting his submission. [And] the individual is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject, i.e. in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection, i.e. in order that he shall make the gestures and actions of his subjection “all by himself.” There are no subjects except by and for their subjection (182).

The function of ideology, maintains Althusser, “is to reproduce the relations of production, to ensure that individuals are constituted as subjects ready to take up their allocated position within the social structure” (C. Williams 26). To this end, ideology operates through ISAs and RSAs. The RSAs secure, “by force where necessary, the conditions for the reproduction of the relations of production, and hence the conditions for the actions of the ISAs” (26). It is by repressing the threats to capitalist class structures that the RSAs
function in the society. “We all encounter RSAs and their restrictive force regularly, in our acknowledgement and conformity to the dictates of police officers, passport control officials, judges and tax collectors” (D. Hall 85). In short, the RSAs maintain and exercise domination through the means of force in capitalist societies ultimately to support capitalist class structures.

ISAs are the institutions that generate the fundamental belief systems and the commonsensical notions of a society to perpetuate the injustices that lie at the core of capitalist society and legitimize the RSAs. The most important ISA, according to Althusser, is the educational system. Each level of education prepares a section of the population to participate in specific roles with regard to the capitalist mode of production. Taking religious institutions as another form of ISA, Althusser discusses how the modalities of kneeling, the discourse of prayer, the sign of the cross and the gaze of the absolute, and so on, tame and discipline the consciousness of the individuals. These practices, maintains Althusser, also normalize and subjugate the body according to certain models of behavior.

The individual is interpellated or hailed, argues Althusser, by ideology in the same way he might be hailed by a police officer on the street. He responds to that hailing automatically, turning around as if acknowledging his guilt, and in doing so, assumes a certain subjectivity in relationship to prevailing social definitions and

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5 “[Althusser argues that] ISAs do more than create subjectivities/identities in the individuals whom they interpellate. They also aim to have such subjects imagine that their subjectivities/identities are internally self-generated” (Wolff 226).
categories. In this context, identification becomes a repressive act, rather than the recognition of a free subject. In other words, subjective recognition in Althusser’s account is an imposition from outside. Althusser seems to suggest that ideology deceives individuals into thinking things like ‘this war is a just war’, or ‘wealthy people worked hard to get where they are.’ Hence the creation of the subject is a phenomenon of repression than of liberation in Althusser’s conception.

However, it is to be noted that, Althusser was mainly concerned with the economic exploitation of subjects under capitalism, and so, his theory of ideology helps to understand how people are complicit in their own subjection to racist, sexist and other forms of oppressive ideologies. In other words, Althusser, like Gramsci in his Prison Notebooks, was seeking to explain and thereby to help overcome the organized working class’s inability to transform the recurring crises of capitalism into successful transitions to communism.

Althusser’s theory of ideology has been criticized both by humanists and by a few Marxists who deem it as unduly pessimistic in its view of the potentiality of workers and other oppressed groups to recognize and change their situation. Terry Eagleton goes to the extent of deeming it as the “political bleakness of Althusser’s theory” and he argues that, [for Althusser] “subjectivity itself would seem just as a form of self-incarceration; and the question of where political resistance springs from must remain obscure” (Ideology 145, 146). Tony Davies attacks Althusserian theory (and Lacanian theory too) for
it kicks away the twin pillars of humanism: the sovereignty of rational conscious, and the authenticity of individual speech. I do not think, I am thought. You do not speak, you are spoken. Thought and speech, which for the humanist had been the central substance of identity, are located elsewhere, and the self is a vacancy (60).

But critics such as Judith Butler consider his theory potentially emancipatory. She regards his theory as “exemplary and allegorical” (106), and argues that only by recognizing the seductive power of interpellation does the possibility of critique and other forms of agency arise. Butler in a way revises Althusser's notion of interpellation by arguing that it is interpellation that makes a limited agency possible. She argues that interpellation calls subjects into being, providing both the capacity for speech and the limits of that speech. Even though ideology is sometimes subtly oppressive through its interpellation, argues Butler, the individual becomes recognizable once called into social “being” and gains the ability to act in intelligible ways within it.\(^6\)

When Althusser considers the mechanism of interpellation as an imaginary form of misrecognition (drawing from Lacan) and pushes the problem of internalization of ideology to one side; Michel Foucault focuses upon the physical processes of subjection and on the body as the transmogrifying site of disciplinary power. Though Althusser recognizes the social diffusion of mechanisms of power and repression

stressed by Foucault, unlike the latter, he systematically maintains the
distinction between power and ideology as central to his argument
about capitalism’s reproduction. Foucault in his initial works such as
The Order of Things and The Archaeology of Knowledge focuses on the
discursive formation of the subject and analyzes how the individual is
constituted as an object of knowledge and as a knowing subject within
contingent discourses and practices. For him, it is the discourse that
offers the means to analyze the construction of the subject. And
discourse for Foucault is, “what the relations of productions are for
Marx, the unconscious for Freud, the impersonal laws of language for
Saussure, ideology for Althusser” (Davies 70). In other words, Foucault
understands discourse as a part of the social structure and a site of
power. If in his earlier works Foucault attempted to explore the difficult
relation between subjectivity and knowledge, in his later works such as
Discipline and Punish and The Birth of the Clinic, he tries to detail the
relations of power, which produce forms of subjectivity and seek to
contain and tame the subject through techniques of normalization.7 He
gives a disquieting historical account of the formation of modern
subjects and discusses how modern institutions such as the prison, the
schools, the hospitals, and so on are involved in the disciplining of
bodies through techniques of surveillance and interview. The all-
pervasive gaze of these new authorities transfixes the individual,

7 “[For Foucault] ‘subjectivity’ is not the free and spontaneous expression of our
interior truth. It is the way we are led to think that about ourselves, so we will police
and present ourselves in the correct way, as not insane, criminal, undisciplined,
unkempt, perverse or unpredictable” (Mansfield 10).
making him a subject with guilt and conscience. “[F]or Foucault, the subject is the primary workroom of power, making us turn in on ourselves, trapping us in the illusion that we have a fixed and stable selfhood that science can know, institutions can organize and experts can correct” (Mansfield 10). Several critics found fault with Foucault for the seemingly meager possibilities for agency in his writings. However, for Butler, there is an immense political dynamism in his theories:

For Foucault, the subject who is produced through subjection is not produced at an instant in its totality. Instead, it is in the process of being produced, it is repeatedly produced (which is not the same as being produced again and again). It is precisely the possibility of a repetition which does not consolidate the dissociated unity, the subject, but which proliferates effects which undermine the force of normalization (93).

Contemporary feminist theories also address the question of agency and selfhood. While giving an overview of twentieth century feminist theory, Toril Moi identifies Simon de Beauvoir as the greatest feminist theorist of our times and as the proponent of an aggressively constructionist approach to women’s subjectivity. Beauvoir’s much quoted statement: One is not born a woman; one becomes one, clearly sums up this. Beauvoir observes that “[woman] stands before man not as a subject but as an object paradoxically endued with subjectivity;
she takes herself simultaneously as *self* and as *other*, a contradiction that entails baffling consequences” (799). Subsequent feminist theories explore this area to find out the possibility of agency in the process of the re-construction of feminist subjectivity. Julia Kristeva, drawing largely from Lacan, argues for the dismantling of the Freudian ‘unitary subject.’ She instead posits subjectivity as always in the making and remaking, as desire is invested in ‘transformation itself.’ Catherine Belsey also follows Kristeva, arguing for the necessity of finding an agency and ability to resist received roles and definitions. Thus a focus on the process of social construction, in which the subject is unstable and fragmented as language itself, constitutes a specifically poststructuralist perspective on subjectivity. Commenting on the works of Kristeva, Helene Cixous, and others, Chris Weedon argues:

> Although, the subject in poststructuralism is social, constructed in discursive practices, she none the less exists as a thinking, feeling subject and social agent, capable of resistance and innovations produced out of the clash between contradictory subject positions and practices. She is also a subject able to reflect upon the discursive relations, which constitute her and the society in which she lives, and also to choose from the options available (125).

The concept of subjectivity that was once conceived as one-

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dimensional and knowable has now been transformed in recent theories, into various, fractured and indefinite. Donna Haraway in her *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* argues that in “the late twentieth century, our time, a mythic time, we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short we are cyborgs. The cyborg is our ontology; it gives us our politics” (150). Haraway maintains that the life of the individual is ontologically meshed with various non-human entities like computers, artificial limbs and organs, television, and so on. And hence, in this age of cyborg subjectivity the question of agency becomes even more important.

Thus, more than ever, questions of subject and subjectivity have been a topic of heated debate and analysis over the last few years. It is in this context, this project seeks to discover the possibilities of constructing *subjects of action* and *agents of representation and change* in the protocols of Edward Said.

**Situating Edward Said**

As pointed out at the beginning, most poststructuralist theories are regrettably at a political impasse, precisely at the point where the conditions of freedom (or of change) are posited. These theories often find fault with modern, emancipatory politics for mooting a stable and rational subject. Emphasizing the historical, cultural, ideological and socio-linguistic webs in which the subject is inescapably caught and positioned, poststructuralism attempts to portray an unstable and not
always rational agent. While abstaining from emancipatory politics, most poststructuralist theories have a tendency to reduce politics to mere critique and ‘resistance.’ Together with this, the decentring of power and the deconstruction of the subject tends to provide a weak and limited basis or justification for agency. In order for the subject to become an agent of change, this void would need to be worked on. Despite the many interpellations, individuals should realize that subjectivity is neither diachronically static nor synchronically one-dimensional. They can create at least the conditions of their own survival if not their own selves. Donald Hall in his analysis of contemporary subjectivity observes:

Subjectivity may never be under any firm or even measurable degree of control, however, what we do with our understanding of subjectivity is clearly susceptible to some degree of control...Postcolonial studies have taken the discussion of tendentious categories of race and ethnicity and explored how such classifications have led to terrible forms of exploitation among nations and regions of the world, and indeed, how subjectivity itself has been colonized (113).

There has been intense debate about the agency of the native and the ‘subaltern’ in the studies of subjectivity in colonial and postcolonial societies. As Amal Treacher observes, one of the stubborn strands of postcolonial theory is “a concern to understand the
subjectivity of colonized and colonizer, a wish to transform the political and psychological conditions of the countries that can crudely be termed the Rest as opposed to the West” (“Postcolonial Subjectivity” 282). Critics such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak emphasize the necessity of highlighting the oppressed subjectivity and warn against any sort of romanticizing or homogenizing of the subaltern subject. She further sees the subaltern female as “even more in the shadow” (28). Frantz Fanon and Homi Bhabha are the other two theorists who delved into the colonized consciousness. While Fanon explores the “inferiority complex” created in the colonial subject in his *Black Skins, White Masks*, Bhabha addresses the question of agency, relying on poststructuralist theories. Bhabha’s work on (postcolonial) agency, as Ilan Kapoor argues,

foregrounds discursive colonial authority and subjection, yet retrieves subaltern subterfuge. It reconstructs a critical politics despite and because of hegemonic and orientalist representational systems. And it demonstrates the (im)possibility of a stable, sovereign subject—thus problematising the subject, at least in the Enlightenment sense of the term—but still manages to assert creative and performative agency (561).

Bhabha, and to a certain extent Spivak, underlines the discursive instability of the discourse of Orientalism. Bhabha argues that Orientalism need not be homogenous to be hegemonic and though

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9 See Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”
Said is aware of this instability in his *Orientalism*, he leaves the idea “underdeveloped” (*Location* 73). In a certain way, Bhabha makes use of the tools of poststructuralist theory to counter its own limitations whereas Said to a great extent distances himself from the complexities of contemporary theories. He hardly sees any political space in these theories. Said was also of the opinion that these theories were most of the time talking about themselves. Unlike many other thinkers, Said regards his notions on subjectivity as a tool for praxis. It has to be said here that, though the question of resistant subjectivity is not enunciated by Said in all its complexity and variegated categories, the entire protocols of Said in a certain way deliberate on the construction of an anti-imperial subject capable of resisting even the contemporary forms of imperialism, globalization and its various discontents.

Though considered one of the major luminaries in the field of postcolonial theory, Said was often uncomfortable with the very term ‘postcolonialism’ because most postcolonial concepts drew energy from poststructuralist theories. In *Culture and Imperialism*\(^ {10}\) Said repeatedly expresses his great scorn for the main currents of contemporary literary theory for its dismissal of the human subject and consequently his later works emphasize the importance of humanism.

Given this, the attempt in this thesis is not to examine the category of subjectivity in Saidian protocols from any particular

\(^{10}\) Abbreviated hereafter as *Imperialism*. 
theoretical perspective, but rather to establish that Said has his own theory of subjectivity implicit in his writings. For this purpose, my approach will be rather selective and relational in attempting to conjoin and elucidate the colonial experience in the ensemble of Saidian protocols. By Saidian protocols, I mean the major conceptualizations, the set of rules and *modus operandi* adopted by Said in his prolific writings. For example, his critiques of discourses such as Orientalism and Imperialism; his reinvention of notions such as nationalism, secularism and humanism, and his incisive tools of political intervention and analysis such as contrapuntality, exile, worldliness, filiation, affiliation, and so forth can be broadly classified as some of the central Saidian protocols.\(^\text{11}\)

In trying to inventory the traces upon him as an Oriental subject, Said politicizes the notion of subjectivity. While poststructuralist critics such as Foucault and Derrida believed in the decentredness of the subject and thereby promoted a kind of apoliticism, Said crystallized his interventions with the construction of a resistant political subjectivity. Towards this aim, he absorbs many of the enlightenment assumptions on subjectivity and combines them with concepts within the humanist tradition and certain streams of Marxism. Analyzing these aspects, this study situates Said as a Left secular intellectual

\(^{11}\) For this term, I personally owe Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak who in her responses to one of my mails advised me: “Don't forget to add to the Saidian corpus by elaborating what we know of a secular world from the Indian experience. The trick will be to learn to use the *Saidian protocols* (emphasis added) to understand this new material in such a way that both protocols and material change.” Regrettably, limitations of time and institutional concerns have prevented me from following her suggestion.
who wanted to dissociate himself from all forms of reductionist and exclusionary politics. This project also sees Said as a transnational subject who tries to mitigate the sufferings of the world through his “agonistic dialectics” (Hussein, “A Copernican Revolution” 90). While trying to analyze the subject formation of Said, I take the entire corpus of his writings as an exegesis of his own experience as a colonial subject. Furthermore, it has to be said that Said’s theorization of the colonized/colonizer subjectivity is a pointer to all those who try to create a politics out of their being and existence.

Said is often characterized as an anti-Marxist because of his affiliations with Foucault and poststructuralist theories at one point of his career. But I argue that this is a sweeping categorization that overlooks his several subtle interfaces with humanism and Marxist thinkers. There is a sense in which one can argue that the entire career of Said was more influenced by Marxists or the Left than by poststructuralist critics. In other words, the Foucauldian influence on Said is often an overstatement as critics have overlooked the influence of Antonio Gramsci, Raymond Williams and Theodore Adorno, and definitely of Althusser’s theory of ideology in his various works.

Though Said utilizes insights from the Foucauldian discourse, the moment he realizes its growing apolitical dimension, he expressly abandons Foucault, principally because his life was typified by a

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12 The colonial experience was never unidirectional and so it had transformative effects both on the colonizer and the colonized. As Nick Mansfield observes, “subjectivity is primarily an experience, and remains permanently open to inconsistency, contradiction and unself-consciousness” (6). In a sense, the major corpus of Said’s writings stem from his colonial experience.
perpetual commitment to Palestinian politics. Said’s use of certain modes of poststructuralist critique so as to analyze cultural practices however does not make him apolitical as it does with many other critics. He wrote bitter diatribes against postmodern theses such as Francis Fukuyama’s ‘end of history’ and Samuel Huntington’s ‘clash of civilizations.’ When these postmodern theories sometimes amount to absolute relativism, they even make it possible to argue that the Holocaust was right for Hitler and wrong for others. It is in this context that Said upholds the necessity of speaking truth to power. Therefore, it has to be said for Said that while human rights are violated all over the world it doesn’t sound proper to speak simply of simulacrum and hyperreality and so on.

In a nutshell, my attempt in this thesis is to accommodate Said in the larger framework of secular politics. No doubt, his deep sense of personal and collective loss and his quest for universal alternatives to sectarian ideologies put him closer to the Left. I strongly presume that, it is highly desirable to view Said not merely as a postcolonial critic but as a radical critic of ideology of our times. As Abdirahman Hussein observes, Said “radicalizes…the responsibilities assigned to intellectuals in traditional left criticism” (Criticism 18)

The charge of ‘eclecticism’ often leveled against Said’s critical practice fails to take into account the primarily political nature of its assimilation of ideas ranging from Nietzsche to Chomsky. In a multicultural world, this sort of a ‘productive eclecticism’ points
towards the impossibility of making an extremely deterministic view of one’s politics that will amount to reductionism and exclusionary politics, neither of which Said promotes. In addition, the ambivalences and contradictions in Said that arise from his assimilative method have to be necessarily seen from a different perspective, as they have to do more with the way in which Said has been constituted as a hybrid subject by various ideologies. As Ashcroft and Ahluwalia maintain,

The paradox of Said’s intellectual and cultural identity, his intellectual work and its reception, raises the question of the link between consistency and coherence. If Said’s work is riven with contradiction and paradox, does this undermine what he says? The coherence of Said’s work lies in the very ways in which paradox and contradiction demonstrate his worldliness. For what these things reveal is that identity is a repeatedly articulated political act (30). Taking this observation as one of the reference points, this project seeks to examine the political implications of his major protocols.

In one of his essays, “Between Worlds” Said observes that in Orientalism and Imperialism, and then again in other major political works such as The Question of Palestine and Covering Islam,13 “[he] felt that [he] had been fashioning a self [that] revealed for a Western audience things that had so far been either hidden or not discussed at all” (Reflections on Exile 565-566).14 Given the fact that Said

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13 Abbreviated hereafter as Palestine and Islam respectively.
14 Abbreviated hereafter as Reflections.
formulates his protocols in the light of his colonial experience and subject formation, he never fails to recognize the dangers of identity politics and narcissistic self-evaluation: “Nothing seems less interesting than the narcissistic self-study that today passes in many places for identity politics, or ethnic studies, or affirmations of roots, cultural pride, drum beating nationalism and so on” (567). Said is equally against the exclusionary forms of politics being propagated from different quarters. It does not require one to become a member of a formerly colonized or disadvantaged minority group to talk about their plights and subject positions, according to Said. This will give an “insider privilege” to perpetuators of exclusionary politics and leads to “a sort of racism or nationalism by imitation” (xxxi). As Stathis Gourgouris argues, “Said is not content merely to posit a fragmented self, as is often nowadays fetishized. He has a definite grasp of authorial “I”” (71).

In order to fully come to terms with the major ideas of Said, or as Abdirahman Hussein says, “in order to understand what they entail to him not just ethically and politically but also epistemologically, historically and culturally, we must place them in the context of his career as a whole” (Criticism 226). Critics, who have not focused on this aspect while studying Said, misinterpreted his critical endeavors. In a way, therefore, an ontological inquiry is crucial to the proper understanding of Said. In other words, an investigation into the question of subjectivity in his protocols is more ontological than
epistemological. But studying Said thus, focusing on almost all his vast and thick body of writings is a huge task, and a treatment of works belonging to such a long span of time has *per force* to be selective, and hence this study has its own share of exclusions.

At this stage, it has to be said that the significant body of work that analyses Edward Said intriguingly fails to examine the notions of subjectivity in his protocols. Most of these works also do not focus on the possibility of a political subject evolving out of the ensemble of Said’s writings. In this context, this project serves to fill a significant gap in Saidian scholarship. While Said resists being compartmentalized and labeled, the fact remains that this study tries to place him along with the Marxist thinkers. The study also discovers that the entire protocols of Said entail a vision of emancipation and liberation of individual subjects. As Donald Hall says, “the textuality of the self as a system of representation has...become a singularly important arena of investigation and speculation. Thus in exploring subjectivity, we are in effect exploring the “self” as a text, as a topic for critical analysis” (5). Taking this as a template, this study explores and analyses the textuality of the Saidian subject which is hybrid, contradictory and fluid, but still capable of engaging in political action.

Chapter One titled “Orient, Occident and the Constitution of Subjectivity” primarily examines Said’s notions of subjectivity as they evolve out of his watershed work *Orientalism*. Almost all subsequent writings of Said are in one sense derivative of the premises of
*Orientalism*, a text in which Said tries to inventory the traces upon him as an Oriental subject. I call this work a manifesto of the colonized subjects as it theorizes the subjectivity of the colonized. Examining the power-knowledge equation and the pervasive ideology of Orientalism, the chapter seeks to investigate how the Oriental subject is constituted. For this purpose, the scholarly, scientific and geopolitical project of the West together with their ‘imaginative geography’ is scrutinized to look into the construction of the Orient and the Oriental. Chapter One closes by addressing some of the major criticisms against Said and *Orientalism*.

Chapter Two titled “The *Subject* in Overlapping Territories and Intertwined Histories” explores the theme of resistant subjectivity, particularly focusing on Said’s *Imperialism*. Touching upon Bhabha’s theory of subjectivity, the chapter proceeds to discover the influence of Althusser’s notion of ideology in Saidian concepts of subject formation. An elaborate discussion of contrapuntal methodology (a Saidian dialectical method) that resembles the ideology critique of certain streams of Marxism is done afterwards. The Gramscian idea of hegemony, though implicit in the Saidian notion of resistant subjectivity, is examined at length only in Chapter Five, for more theoretical clarity and coherence. And, since the resistant subjectivity is associated with the question of nationalism, an examination of ‘Saidian nationalism’ is also done towards the end of this chapter.

Chapter Three titled “Politics of Exile, Act of Memory and
Recuperation of the Subject” extends the arguments of previous chapters to a new dimension. Beginning with a discussion on the hermeneutics of exile, the chapter proceeds to examine the individual subjectivity of Said against the collective subjectivity of Palestinians mainly focusing on his *After the Last Sky* and *Out of Place*. It discusses how Said transforms his sense of exile and homelessness almost into an ontological category. Scrutinizing Saidian notions of filiation and affiliation, the chapter seeks to offer an analysis of the different strata of Said’s exilic subjectivity. It also looks into Erich Auerbach’s and Theodore Adorno’s influences on Said’s formulations of exile. As a final point, there is an attempt to link his ideas of exile to notions of ‘critical secularism’ so as to understand the political dimension of the concept of exile.

Chapter Four titled “Representation, Humanism and the Retrieval of the Subject” primarily examines Saidian notions of the responsibilities of intellectuals. Said’s incorporation of Julia Benda and Antonio Gramsci to formulate his notions on intellectuals, his idea of the intellectual as an exile and amateur, his proposals for ‘speaking truth to power’ and its cultural and political ramifications are analyzed in this chapter. Aspects of nationalism, representation, truth, criticism, solidarity and so forth are discussed with reference to the role of intellectuals. The Saidian concept of worldliness and its importance in the intellectual representation is another focus of this chapter. Since *agency* has always been at the centre of discussion of subjectivity, the

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15 Abbreviated hereafter as *Last Sky* and *Place* respectively.
chapter situates the Saidian intellectual as a human agent of representation. In the context of Said’s retrieval of the human subject in the postmodern juncture, the chapter, towards the end, discusses Said’s reinvention of the concept of ‘new humanism.’ His *Representations of the Intellectual, Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, and *The World, the Text, the Critic* 16 are central to this chapter.

Chapter Five titled “A Shift in the Trajectory: The Marxist Connection” gathers Said’s affinities and affiliations with a few Marxist thinkers such as Antonio Gramsci, Raymond Williams, Theodore Adorno and George Lukacs. The chapter starts with a discussion on the Foucault’s influences on Said and then examines the reasons behind Said’s disengagement with him. Next, there is a brief analysis of Saidian interface with Marxism along with a discussion of Marx and the Orient. Proceeding to examine the Gramscian impact on Said, the chapter seeks to find the materialist dimension of Saidian protocols. It also investigates the Williamsian insights that helped Said to expand his cultural analysis and the influence of Adorno in the formulation of his contrapuntal methodology and exilic subjectivity. The chapter concludes with a brief examination of Lukacsian theories that have exerted their influence on Said. Thus, by tracing Said’s great shift from the Foucauldian premises to certain modes in the Marxist tradition of analysis, the chapter illuminates further the subjectivity of Said.

The “Conclusion” titled “Towards a Saidian Model” draws

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16 Abbreviated hereafter as *Representations, Humanism* and *World* respectively.
together the observations of preceding chapters and deliberates on the possibility of making a political and emancipatory subject in the contemporary era through a Saidian paradigm.