

## The Strength of Edward Said's Critical Perspective

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To speak about the strengths, in the plural, of Edward Said as a theorist, cultural critic and humanist would be too big a project in terms of this paper. Therefore, I would single out one particular side of his criticism that has endeared him to a larger audience including people outside of the academy. Said's resistance to imperialism until the last days of his life remains the most talked about and sometimes the most controversial perspective in his theory.

For Said, literary texts are not merely important for their aesthetic value that provides pleasure to the readers. More importantly, Said connects a number of 19th and 20th century English novels, e.g., Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1861), Conrad's *Nostromo* (1904) and other works of Graham Greene, V.S. Naipaul and Robert Stone with the imperial process to which, Said argues, these works are integrally linked. In Dickens's novel, Said reads the banishment of Magwitch to Australia not as a penal act but an imperial attempt to deny "metropolitan space" to the subjects. This space can only be inhabited by those who regard themselves superior over the lesser people for whom their natural dwelling could be the down under and in other cases the Orient. In his introduction to *Culture and Imperialism*, Said writes:

By the end of the nineteenth century the empire is no longer merely a shadowy, or embodied merely in the unwelcome appearance of a fugitive convict but, in the works of writers like Conrad, Kipling, Gide, and Loti, a central area of concern. (xviii)

While defining Secular Criticism in *The World the Text and the Critic*, Said speaks about nineteenth-century European thought as replete with discriminations based on binary oppositions, between what is fitting for us (Europeans) and what is fitting for them (Orientals). Even Karl Marx, argues Said, regraded India with inferiority as manifest in his writings on India while describing the Indic Mode of Production (13). Said's most important work of theory analyzing this mode of

western thought that privileges itself, constructing for itself a sense of superiority over the Orient is *Orientalism* (1978). Critics have observed that:

His most important single contribution has undoubtedly been *Orientalism*, since without the impetus it provided (and continues to provide) Colonial Discourse Analysis and Post-colonial Theory might not have cohered or constituted themselves as an area of theoretical inquiry in the way that they did. (Childs and Williams, 97-98)

In *Orientalism*, Said addresses, among many other issues, how the West represents other cultures, societies and histories; the relationship between power and knowledge; the role of the intellectual and methodological questions related to the difference between texts and between text and history. One very important point made in this book is that one of the epistemological foundations of *Orientalism*, as a world-view, is historicism of which such diverse thinkers as Vico, Hegel, Marx, Ranke and Dilthey are subscribers.

This historicism propagates the idea that the one human history that connects all humanity is observed from the vantage perspective of Europe or the West. Said argues that there has never been an epistemological critique to unravel the nexus between a historicism that actually developed so much as to include critiques of imperialism on the one hand and the practice of imperialism on the other that has resulted in colonization and a homogenization of history itself. Said is opposed to a self-validating and universalizing historicism that stumbles into polarities and binary-oppositions. He advocates a new type of plural analysis that would embrace fragmentation, dislocation and decentering that contemporary Marxist-historicist thought has failed to accommodate. In his critique of the Orientalist world-view, Said argues on behalf of a plurality of audiences and constituencies. He is against one supervening Truth that allies itself with western reason and objectivity. Rather, he favours what he calls a "decentered consciousness":

The result [of this perspective] is that instead of seeking common unity by appeals to a center of sovereign authority, methodological consistency, canonicity and science, they offer the possibility of common grounds of assembly between them.



They [all those works that breed plurality and subvert notions of foundationalism] are, therefore, planes of activity and praxis, rather than one topography commanded by a geographical and historical vision locatable in a known center of metropolitan power. Second, these activities and praxes are consciously secular, marginal and oppositional with reference to the mainstream generally authoritarian systems against which they now agitate (*Reflections* 214).

It is Conrad who in Said's word is the "precursor" of the condescending attitude of the West shown to the third world by a range of novelists, theoreticians and film directors. Novelists like Greene and Naipaul and theorists like Hannah Arendt, posits Said, look at the non-European world only to satisfy the "exotic" taste of the Western audience. But Said argues Conrad is the one who began early in the 20th century this strange alliance with the imperialistic process by simply refusing to accept that India, Africa or South America could have cultures of their own and could prosper without the help of the white man. At this level, Said identifies Conrad as the early predecessor of the United States' claim of muscular, material, moral and spiritual superiority over all other nations. The attendant rhetoric of the "New World Order" upheld by Conrad and now the cornerstone of Bush's foreign policy was also used previously, suggests Said, by Spain, Portugal, Britain, France, Belgium, Japan and Russia. With the exception of Japan all other bastions of Imperialism remain in the West. But of course Imperialism is a state of mind, fueled by the arrogance of superiority that could be adopted by any other nation irrespective of its geographical location in the world. In his reading of Conrad, Said also discovers a criticism of imperialism, but Conrad's criticism ironically fails to locate any alternative to the imperial world order and reproduces the imperial ideology of his time.

Said's contrapuntal reading of novelists like Dickens, Conrad and Kipling exposes the varying patterns of superiority western culture has constructed for itself in relation to its understanding and knowledge of the East. However, in studying the history of imperialism and its culture, Said moves beyond the literary texts, relying on history to draw some of his most powerful conclusions:

I do not believe that authors are mechanically determined by ideology, class, or economic history, but authors are, I also

believe, very much in the history of their societies, shaping and shaped by that history and their social experience in different measure. Culture and the aesthetic forms it contains derive from historical experience. . . . As I discovered in writing *Orientalism*, you cannot grasp historical experience by lists or catalogues and, no matter how much you provide by way of coverage, some books, articles, authors, and ideas are going to be left out. (*Culture* xxiv-xxv).

Edward Said's sense of history had made him an outsider in the United States where he completed his graduate studies and taught in one of the most famous universities, Columbia University, where he was Professor of English and Comparative Literature until his death. His active and uncompromising support for the Palestinian cause came to the limelight after the 1967 war when Israel expanded its boundaries by further uprooting the Palestinians, and living in the United States Said felt that he was after all an exile:

During my lifetime, however, the parts of the Arab world that I was most attached to either have been changed utterly by civil upheavals and war, or have simply ceased to exist. And for long periods of time I have been an outsider in the United States, particularly when it was against, and was deeply opposed to, the (far from perfect) cultures and societies of the Arab world. Yet when I say 'exile' I do not mean something sad or deprived. On the contrary belonging, as it were, to both sides of the imperial divide enables you to understand them more easily. (*Culture* xxx)

Said lived in the United States but never did he belong to the side that benefited from the imperial divide. On the contrary, as a member of the Palestinian parliament in exile, Said openly confronted the deadly fangs of imperialism. His life long hatred for the imperial process was a result of his awareness that his roots were in Palestine, a land now grabbed by the Zionists in collusion with the imperial powers justified by a theological pretext. In a posthumous tribute to Said in *New Left Review* 24, November-December, 2003, Tariq Ali asserts that Said's writings on Palestine are different from his more renowned and scholarly works. Said's *The End of the Peace Process, Blaming the Victims*, his other books on Palestine, his *Al-Ahram* columns, his essays in the *New Left Review* and the *London Review of Books* have a different flavour, "Passionate and biblical in their simplicity":



He had helped a generation to understand the real history of Palestine and it was this position, as the true chronicler of his people and their occupied homeland that won him respect and admiration throughout the world. The Palestinians had become the indirect victims of the European Judeocide of the Second World War; but few politicians in the West seemed to care. Said pricked their collective conscience and they did not like him for it. (Ali 4)

As an intellectual committed to the creation of an independent Palestine, Said, of course, was far removed from the violent religious zeal that groups like the Hamas or Hizbollah espouse. He wanted the Palestinians and the Arabs to recognize the reality of Israel. He felt that Arabs should understand the vicissitudes of Jewish history as much as the Jews should recognize the pain and immorality involved in uprooting an entire nation from its homeland.

In spite of his outright opposition to the Oslo agreement, his lack of trust in Arafat's leadership and his uncompromising suspicion of any US-led initiative to solve the Palestinian problem, Said went on hoping for a lasting peace in the Middle East and an understanding between the two feuding peoples who, otherwise, belong to the same stock. "I'm the last Jewish intellectual," he declared. Turning to the Jews he says,

All your other Jewish intellectuals are now suburban squires. From Armos Oz to all these people here in America. So I'm the last one. The only true follower of Adorno. Let me put it this way: I'm a Jewish Palestinian. A humanist intellectual. (quoted in Howe)

Admirers of Edward Said in the Arab world and Muslim populated countries, particularly those who are outside the Academy, might regard him as a strong supporter of Islam. It is true that in many of his works like *Covering Islam*, and in his tens of hundreds of newspaper articles he has shown how the West looks at Islam and the people who subscribe to the faith with a jaundiced and discriminatory vision. However, Said's empathy with humanity transcends the boundaries of any particular religious faith; for, above all, he is an intellectual opposed to imperialism and the atrocities perpetrated by it on many nations in the past and the present throughout the globe.

Said's "exilic" consciousness has defined much of his critical theory. As an outsider to mainstream United Statesian culture, he developed himself to a position from where he thought freedom could be won by never really belonging to the center. His great faith in the power of creative art as a redemptive power and his outstanding advocacy against repression equates him with thinkers like Foucault, Derrida and Rorty. However, it is Edward Said alone who speaks openly against imperialism from a constantly shifting premise. Said had the greatest faith in the emancipation of humanity but he never cared for a foundation of any kind, be it epistemological or metaphysical. With his death, critical theory has lost a great contributor but humanity will become even poorer.

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