

Voice of Palestine

Edward Said's Life and Labours

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In a way, it's a sort of fate of Palestinians not to end up where they started, but somewhere unexpected and far away." This is what Edward Said, legendary literary critic and public intellectual, had to say about the circumstances of his parents' death in the 1998 BBC documentary *In Search of Palestine*. This "uniquely punishing destiny" was to be true of his own death as well. Born in Jerusalem in what was still then the British mandate of Palestine in 1935, Said would pass away in New York City in 2003, after battling leukaemia for over a decade.

Celebrated and vilified in equal measure throughout his life, he had made peace with the lonely condition of exile over "a gregarious tolerance for the way

Edward Said: A Critical Introduction by Jaydeep Chakrabarty, Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2023; pp xi + 197, ₹375 (paperback).

things are." According to his great critic Aijaz Ahmad (1992: 160–61),

Said's most enduring contribution will be seen as residing neither in *Orientalism*, which is a deeply flawed book, nor in the literary essays which have followed in its wake, but in his work on the Palestine issue.

In a recent critical introduction to Said, Jaydeep Chakrabarty argues that these contributions were one and the same.

Eclectic and Exiled

Belonging to a generation where that epithet of part derision and part admiration—

"scholar-activist"—was yet to gain currency, Said's academic work (especially since the Six-Day War of 1967) and political advocacy were mutually constitutive. The Palestinian cause provided him with intellectual and political propulsion. It was not something he "also" wrote and spoke about. His troubled childhood—solitary, defiant, and underappreciated—was perhaps formative to his critique of authority and its deceptions of benevolence—in West Asia and elsewhere. Hesitating to call the enemy by its name was not in his nature. Neither was complacency.

Said trained his guns on not just Israeli apartheid and Zionism but also Anglo-American complicity in the settler-colonial project of dispossessing Palestinians. Notwithstanding his unflinching commitment to the Palestinian cause and 14-year-long involvement with the Palestinian National Council (PNC), Said did not desist from criticising Yasser Arafat for his myopic capitulation in Oslo (1993). What enabled him to assume such righteous but unpopular positions time and again

was not self-professed neutrality but the uncompromising intellectual honesty to re-examine one's assured beliefs. As an exile who represented Palestine through his life, all his life, Said knew that while homes were provisional, values were not.

Chakrabarty has structured this book chronologically, offering sweeping but grounded overviews of Said's published writings in Chapters 2 through 7. The major books take up greater space in discussion, but lesser-known and read works are also given due coverage, especially while locating Palestine at the heart of Said's scholarship. Chapter 1 is distinctly biographical and enumerates the dominant intellectual influences—both acknowledged and unacknowledged—on Said.

This is a helpful exercise. For someone who regarded “Marxist criticism” as an oxymoron, the list is strangely populated by Marx himself, Antonio Gramsci, Raymond Williams and Theodor Adorno. The others who find a place in this eclectic but non-exhaustive inventory are the humanist scholar Giambattista Vico, the philologist Erich Auerbach, the novelist Joseph Conrad, the philosopher Michel Foucault and the linguist Noam Chomsky. It is a curious fact that this book has been brought out as part of a series on literary and cultural theory. The other thinkers who have been critically introduced in it are Freud, Lacan, Fanon, Bakhtin, and Periyar. Said, it would seem, is in good company after all.

Said's admitted eclecticism of method and his refusal to be intellectually pigeonholed did not arise at the cost of his political commitment. He was acutely aware of the “worldliness” of literary texts and other cultural products. His books were often personal responses to contemporary political crises—organic, not unambiguous. In fact, the running theme across the Saidian oeuvre is an intimate duality of feeling—a love-hate relationship with the Western canon, with the European novel form, and with Joseph Conrad.

This braided approach of simultaneous identification and refutation—complicating what could otherwise be construed as an easy and obvious filiation—is integral to Said's idea of the “anti-dynastic” intellectual. It is this lifelong discomfort

with discipleship (without denying the reality of it) that becomes immanent in Said's analysis of the novel form and its conformist role. The novel creates its own reading public and seeks to wield authority over it, too. He would go on to bring a similar charge against Orientalism. This is why Chakrabarty insists that Said's early works¹ ought to be regarded as preparation, oiling of the wick as it were—to be eventually set ablaze by the critical flame of his later interventions on the cultural politics of representation.

Orientalism and Beyond

Orientalism, for Said, is a discipline, a discourse, and a style. Its congealed prejudices are held together by the desire of acquiring power and authority over the “oriental subject” through the textualisation, (mis)representation, domestication, and eventual domination of the Orient. The purpose of this hall of mirrors is to aid and abet harm—to provide an alibi for imperialism. One might, however, be forgiven if they find Said to be arguing precisely the obverse in his book: since Orientalism preceded European colonial expansion by over a millennium, surely the structuring of multi-ethnic empires was an effect of that pernicious discourse and not the other way round? The broad temporal sweep of Said's argument does not resolve this problem fully, despite his mastery over the texts he marshals as evidence and the acute persuasiveness of his prose.

Chakrabarty draws our attention to the 18th-century mooring of the book instead. Uncovering Orientalism as an authoritative and unilateral restructuring of the Orient, as a keystone in the arch of Western intellectual heft, and as a silencing regime of philological taxonomy and hierarchy is said to be Said's vital contribution. Said told us a story of complicity—between Enlightenment humanism and European colonialism—and of the incremental intertwining of colonial knowledge and colonial power. He, however, refused to concede that the “enabling conditions” for these were provided by “histories of economic exploitation, political coercion, [and] military conquest” (Ahmad 1992: 164). Chakrabarty does not enter this debate, but he does quote

Naipaul by way of consolation:

The empires of our time were short lived, but they have altered the world for ever; their passing away is their least significant feature. (p 77)

Despite his long career at a metropolitan university in the West and high visibility in American public life, as an Arab intellectual and a Palestinian exile, Said was himself frequently at the receiving end of Orientalist stereotyping. This prolonged experience of hostility, Chakrabarty contends, was the guiding force behind Said's increasing emphasis on the “worldliness” of literature and the need for literary theorists to take that into account. In a way, this was an exercise in course correction whereby Said gradually moved away from Foucauldian post-structuralism and began pivoting towards secular criticism in the 1980s, leaving greater room for human agency (than Foucault would allow) and self-reflexive amateurism.

To be an amateur, for Said, is not to lack in competence. It is to take a general interest in and care for all that is worldly, beyond one's immediate affiliations. It is to substitute veneration and navel-gazing with principled curiosity about the way things are and ask why must they be so? Since the publication of *Orientalism*, Said anchored his thoughts on literature, the university, and society more and more on what he had to say about the intellectual as a politically honest and strategic interventionist—qualities he himself embodied throughout his lifelong advocacy for Palestinian freedom.

This freedom, Said (1994: 224) suggests, cannot be achieved through conventional nationalism: “both insufficient and crucial, but only as a first step.” It is

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to be realised in a project of liberation that is post-nationalist and non-nativist. Even while mounting an uncompromising critique of imperialism, he refused to underestimate the possibility of many post-imperial states lapsing into irredentism of one kind or the other. His solidarity with the demand for restoring Palestinian statehood never blinkered him against the pitfalls of statism itself.

Said read empire books—texts that made empire palatable, nay even desirable for cultural consumption, wittingly or unwittingly—contrapuntally. This was a reading strategy that foregrounded a text's suppressed engagement with its backdrop—more often than not occluded colonial underpinnings—that determined its very conditions of narrativisation.² By making apparent these absent presences and unstated assumptions, he exposed a relation of domination—instrumentalised through widely circulating caricatures and tropes—and attended to the possibility of resistance. According to Chakrabarty, it is this insistence on opposition and the explicitly literary objective of particularising “universal” texts and their authors that makes *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) not just a continuation, but a consolidation of the arguments proffered in *Orientalism* (1978).

The Political Is Personal

Even though Said wrote extensively and separately on the Western representations of Islam, Arabs, and Palestine, “the dispossession of Palestinians and their struggle for autonomy,” Chakrabarty reminds us, “have been the central motifs of almost all of [his] works, overtly or covertly.” For him, the political was personal. At a time when Hamas's attack on Israel on 7 October 2024 and the subsequent and ongoing genocide by Israel on the Gaza Strip are repeatedly framed in the West as a balancing act between anti-Semitism and Islamophobia,³ reading Said helps us de-emphasise the role of religion. Himself a Protestant Christian turned agnostic, Said blamed the continuation of the Israel–Palestine conflict on the synergy between Zionist settler-colonialism, us imperialism, and a persistently dehumanising Orientalism. He was

not one to mistake symptoms for the cause.

Ever since he was diagnosed with leukaemia in the early 1990s and especially since the Oslo Accords of 1993, Said's works were tinged with an awareness of death and disillusionment. This, however, did not imply withdrawal or retreat. He continued to critique Eurocentrism, posit an agenda for inclusive humanities, and intercede in the real world of politics at great personal cost. Said's late style was characterised by a harmonious contradiction of “acknowledging defeat” while “resolv[ing] even more firmly to stand with a rejected people.” As Pankaj Mishra (2021) notes,

To the question of “what one really is,” he ultimately gave a defiant reply: I am a Palestinian. It is a measure of his nobility that, among the many selves available to him, Said assumed the one that caused him the most pain.

Edward Said: A Critical Introduction could just have been a book for university goers. However, it can serve as a gateway to Said's life and thoughts for anyone, really. Its readability is as much its strength as the learning aids—informative and accessible “short takes”—that punctuate it throughout. The casual asides that Chakrabarty occasionally indulges in were perhaps best avoided. Suggestions like the recourse to Palestinian midwifery for Said's birth prefiguring his intellectual agenda (p 5) or, for that matter, the rise of Nazism in Germany being predominantly a discursive phenomenon (p 64) are neither advanceable on their own merit nor do they aid the overall argument in any meaningful way. Minor slips like calling the historian Anil Seal “Aniket Seal” (pp 112 and 133) ought to have been wished away at the editorial stage.

The only major insufficiency of this otherwise robust critical introduction is the unwillingness to engage with the reception of Said's scholarship by his sharpest critics at any length. Only Bernard Lewis's diatribe is considered synoptically. Other criticisms are cursorily listed towards the end of Chapters 3 and 5. Chakrabarty would have done well to remember what Aijaz Ahmad (1992: 160) had to say about registering one's many disagreements on substantive issues

while admiring Said's courage: “[s]uppression of criticism ... is not the best way of expressing solidarity.” Said was never able to grow a thick enough skin against his detractors. That hardly mattered because he did not fight his intellectual and political battles for self-aggrandisement. He fought them because few others were willing to.

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NOTES

- 1 These are *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (1966) and *Beginnings: Intention and Method* (1975).
- 2 It would perhaps not be out of place to attribute the recent academic and public interest in investigating the links between English country houses and proceeds from the trans-Atlantic slave trade and plantation economies in America to Said's pioneering contrapuntal reading of Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park*. Despite materially propping up the Bertram family estate, Antigua is only allowed to lurk in the penumbra of the novel's canvas—a representational choice that can hardly be regarded as ideologically innocuous.
- 3 It is a curious fact that universities in the US and the UK (including my own) keep condemning anti-Semitism and Islamophobia in the same breath while euphemistically referring to the ongoing genocide in Gaza as “the situation in the Middle East.” Had Said been alive today, he would surely have written on the BBC's current editorial policy of reporting the loss of Palestinian lives exclusively in the passive voice.

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EPW Index

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EPW would like to acknowledge the help of the staff of the library of the Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research, Mumbai, in preparing the index under a project supported by the RD Tata Trust.