

Edward Said: Agent Provocateur.

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And this role [the intellectual's] has an edge to it, and cannot be played without a sense of being someone whose place it is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than to produce them) to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations, and whose *raison d'être* is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug. Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, p9

Were I to use one word consistently along with criticism, (not as a modification but as an emphatic) it would be oppositional. Edward Said, *The World, the Text and the Critic*, p29

One of the most acclaimed writers in the latter part of the last century, Edward Said, who had a distinctive, irreverent approach to literature and criticism—not to mention politics—propounds a re-invention of reading against the grain. Disaffiliating from almost all orthodox literary traditions, this *homme de lettres* is an authentic epitome of an intellectual in opposition. In this paper, we subscribe to the premise of Edward Said as a figure of dissent. Far from claiming comprehensiveness, our task here is to critically trace some of the ideas conducive to Edward Said being the oppositional intellectual, the *agent provocateur* in postcolonial literary theory and practice, of which he is an indisputable progenitor.

Our concern will be, in the main, focused on *Orientalism* (1978) as a discursive strategy that manufactures, and hence (mis)represents the Oriental Other; the complicity of culture in European imperialism; 'contrapuntal reading' as a 'counter-narrative'; the interrelation between 'affiliation' and 'worldliness' and 'secular criticism' being a strategy of intellectual interference.

With a subversion of the role of aesthetics in colonialism and imperialism as one of its most salient features, *Orientalism* has granted Edward Said a “foundational place in the growing school of postcolonial studies.” (Ashcroft & Ahluwalia, 2001:1) To address the issue of Orientalist texts operating to construct and dominate the Orient, the book posits that at the heart of this process of setting up the Orient as a textual construct lies the application of Michel Foucault’s theory of knowledge/ power (Foucault, 1980). In *Orientalism*, Edward Said avails himself of the dialectics of knowledge/power to repudiate the ‘purity’ and ‘disinterestedness’ of the Orientalist scholarship. His distrust of an ‘innocent’ European discursive field pertinent to the East is instructive. So is his seminal disclosure of “how Orientalism’s classification of the East as different and inferior legitimized Western intervention and rule.” (Lewis, 1996: 16)

Perhaps this can be clarified by a passage early in *Orientalism* in which Said defines the ‘Scope of Orientalism’:

With such experiences as Napoleon's the Orient as a body of knowledge in the West was modernized ... From the outset of the period I shall be examining there was everywhere among Orientalists the ambition to formulate their discoveries, experiences, and insights suitably in modern terms, to put ideas about the Orient in very close touch with modern realities. Renan's linguistic investigations of Semitic in 1848, for example, were couched in a style that drew heavily for its authority upon contemporary comparative grammar, comparative anatomy, and racial theory; these lent his Orientalism prestige and--the other side of the coin--made Orientalism vulnerable, as it has been ever since, to modish as well as seriously influential currents of thought in the West. (43)

Here and throughout his study, Said regards philology as essential to the discipline of Orientalism properly speaking.

Said's concern stems from the fact that as an Oriental who grew up in Egypt, Palestine, and Lebanon, all subject to the domination of the colonizing West, he found it important to define the impact of the United States, where he later received his education and which has had such a profound effect in his own life and that of all other Orientals. As he says in the introduction, he writes from the perspective of an Arab/Palestinian with a strong

concern and empathy for the region.(25) This identification is obvious from such statements as this: “*Orientalism* is written out of an extremely concrete history of personal loss and national disintegration,” recalling that Golda Meier's "notorious and deeply Orientalist comment about there being no Palestinian people" had been made only a few years before he wrote the book. (337).

At the most basic level, what Said delineates are those manifestations of prejudicial thinking--undocumented blanket postulations coupled with a rhetoric of manipulation--which denote a significant impulse to contrive an image of the ‘Orient’ in alignment with Western views of the Islamic Arab world. In his own highly original way, Said marshals a thorough repertoire of European stereotypical stances contingent upon a binary opposition where the ‘West’ denotes such traits as enlightenment, progress, reason and ‘civilization’ while the ‘East’ is a typical embodiment of a negative inversion of these traits.

In his introduction to *Orientalism* Said writes “I have found it useful here to employ Michel Foucault’s notion of a discourse...to identify Orientalism.” (1978: 3) One cannot help perceiving Said’s debt to his, then, *maitre a penser*; a debt evinced through his use of such Foucauldian concepts as ‘discourse’, ‘field’ and ‘archive’ as tightly related to the history of Western thought (Foucault, 1980). Notwithstanding, the inclusion of Foucault’s theory of ‘discourse’ has engendered criticism.

The crux of the claim against Said relates to his belief that “[a]ll representation is misrepresentation of one sort or another,” echoing the Nietzschean dictum that ‘truths are illusions’ (Said, 2001:237). Germane to this discussion at this point is Said’s taking on board two antithetical strands in his thesis. While he has spared a great deal of space to disprove any correlation between the Orient as reality and the one contrived discursively by the guild of Orientalists, Said maintains that the former kind of reality is textually contorted by these selfsame Orientalists, thus implying the possibility of representation. However, it makes perfect sense to note that the insidious paradox inherent in Said’s vacillation between representation and misrepresentation of the Orient has brought forth

another opposing critical perspective paradox amongst his critics in that while “he is criticized by Porter and others for implying a real Orient, he is criticized by Ahmad for not invoking an Orient that is real enough.” (Ashcroft & Ahluwalia, 2001:76)¹

Apropos of Said’s clinging to the Foucauldian discursivity and power dialectic, he is arraigned for imaginatively constructing a holistic, monolithic and homogeneous Orientalist discourse. James Clifford found a reason that impels and inbreeds a critique of Said’s book as it “sometimes appears to mimic the essentializing discourse it attacks.” (1988:262) The interpretation is suggestive of censuring Said for producing an Orientalism – in – reverse. A corrective to such misconception is perhaps best instantiated in Said repudiating “Foucault’s downgrading of the role of individual agency.” (Young, 1990:134) We see it fit to argue that Said had always been conscious of the existence of disorientation and resistance within Orientalism:

Yet, unlike Michel Foucault, to whose work I am greatly indebted, I do believe in the determining imprint of individual writers upon the otherwise anonymous collective body of texts constituting a discursive formation like Orientalism. (1978: 23)

This is a Saidian dual gesture of parting company with Foucault and also a positioning of himself at a dialectical vantage point to substantiate--much against the arraignments of some of his critics--the heterogeneity of Orientalist discourse as long as it comprises a space “ for the play of a personal—or at least non-Orientalist--consciousness.” (1978:158) Said’s prime example to attest to his view is the French poet and essayist Gerard de Nerval, whose “Orient untied itself from anything resembling an Orientalist conception of the Orient, even though his work depends on Orientalism to a certain extent.” (1978:183)

Said has been castigated by his critics for his obliviousness to the narratives of resistance. It should be noted, however, that nowhere in his thesis is Said explicit about Eastern resistance to the coercive structures erected by Orientalism. In the critical work itself, he

¹ See also Ahmed, Aijaz In *Theory Classes Nations, Literatures*. London: Verso, 1992.

writes about Louis Massignon in glowing terms to reveal the prospect of dissimilitude and resistance from within the realm of Orientalism itself. Despite his incontestable affiliations with French Orientalism, Massignon is an Orientalist whose “personal style, [and] individual genius, may finally supersede the political restraints operating impersonally through tradition and through the national ambience.” (271)

The rationale behind Said’s dialectical strategy—to perceive colonial discourse as commuting between a consistent, homogeneous totality and an inconsistent, heterogeneous formation—now becomes patent. Said is, however, still relentlessly censured for his “theoretical and methodological inconsistencies.” (Kennedy, 2000:145) We wish to argue that Said had deliberately designed *Orientalism* to be theoretically inconsistent so that it could testify to the determinism inherent in Orientalist discourse itself. In an interview with Imre Salusinszky, Said admits that “*Orientalism* is theoretically inconsistent, and [he] designed it that way.” (1987:137)

The broader point to emerge out of this is the interrelatedness of resistance and individual agency as a substantial constituent of Said’s critical enterprise. This is predicated upon Said’s prescription for the intellectual as an oppositional figure who revels in transgressing the official lines of power, as

someone whose whole being is staked on a critical sense, a sense of being unwilling to accept easy formulas, or ready-made clichés, or the smooth, ever-so-accommodating confirmations of what the powerful or conventional have to say, and what they do.(1994:23)

It is, then, left to intellectuals—including Said himself—to wield their critical consciousness in a way that withstands Western imperial discourse and, to borrow a phrase from Eqbal Ahmad, the ‘pathologies of power’ that continue to sway such discourse. It is this critical consciousness which is pivotal in Said’s conception of resistance and oppositionality.

Despite critics chiding *Orientalism* for its ‘inconsistencies’, heedlessness to gender, and remissness to incorporate in its dissection of Orientalist discourse the Maghreb and parts of East Asia, Said’s thesis has impeccably evinced the powerfulness of amateurism in the realm of intellectuality. Thanks to his analysis, we have become cognizant of how Western linguistic conventions and epistemologies underpin global cultural relationships.

If the effectuality and forcefulness of colonial discourse reside in its capability to disguise its institutions and divert attention away from its materiality, then, unveiling such camouflage is the work of postcolonial intellectuals whose role it is to act as a reminder of colonialism and its machinations. Antithetical to the Kantian contention that aesthetics and culture are in fact fenced off from the worldly realm, Said’s *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) provides an insight far more suited to the task of better disentangling the complicity between European imperialism and high culture.

Synoptically presented, Said’s thesis can be stated as follows: the European imperialist project in the non-Western world was consolidated by European high culture with the collusion of rarefied intellectuals who have rationalized and concealed the use of moral power to achieve what Said has called an ‘ideological pacification.’ (Said, 1994b:67) Functioning in exact conjunction with hegemony, Western imperial discourse corroborated the pretence that, because of European supremacism, the Europeans were destined to rule and the inferior races to yield to that rule. In this spirit, Said’s attempt to bring to the fore the subscription to the imperial enterprise of intellectuals embracing universalistic, humanistic ideals and egalitarianism is both instructive and illuminating. According to Said, these intellectuals had broken faith with their very own ideas when they committed themselves to the belief that there was a hierarchy of peoples (1994b).

For the sake of brevity, it is possible to say that by way of upending a received wisdom about the “seemingly impartial, objective academic disciplines,” Said has accentuated their involvement in the process of colonial subjugation (Young, 159). His most pioneering effort to demystify the essence of this involvement is his evocation of a radicalized mode of reading he calls ‘contrapuntal method’. The concept of

‘contrapuntality,’ is a literary manifestation of “the great culture of resistance that emerged in response to imperialism.” (Said, 1994a: 64) With an intent to unmask and deconstruct the imperial mindset, Said’s ‘contrapuntal method’ is both a reading against the grain and an endeavor to blur the lines demarcating the centre and periphery in Western academia. Doubtlessly, Said’s argument owes something of its cogency to his dual command of extensive narrative structures and Western classical music.

This approach seems to be in keeping with the spirit of Edward Said's life work. He tries to show that what Samuel Huntington called "a clash of civilization" (1998) was actually a "clash of ignorance." (Said: <http://www.thenation.com/doc/20011022/said>) It is this kind of complete brutal ignorance that Said tried to ameliorate in all his work, striving to replace ignorance and contempt with understanding and appreciation. His work has consistently striven "to cross rather than to maintain barriers". (1978:336) In a series of books distinguished for their inclusiveness and what Thomas Hardy called "meliorism," (Duffin, 2000:256) Said presents a profound and nuanced analysis of this conflict (i.e. Western imperial discourse vs. resistance discourse), following Vico's conviction that human culture, since it is man-made, can be positively shaped by human efforts. (1982)

In *Culture and Imperialism* Said, contrapuntally, manages to draw parallels between disparate episodes as “coronation rituals in England and the Indian durbars of the late nineteenth century.”(1993:36) A colonial sugar plantation in the Caribbean perceived to be sustaining a sumptuous life style in England is another case in point. It is in this respect, in the intersection between all aspects of polyphony / polyvocality that a ‘counter – narrative’ “bring[s] the stage of modern imperial history ... to life for a late twentieth – (and early twenty- first-) century audience that is no longer purely Western.” (Hussein, 263) Said’s unflinching attention to the convergence of the ‘imperialism of ideas and nations’ (Hussein, 2002) and the resistance to it accounts for his ‘contrapuntal method’ as a way of a ‘reading back’ to the cultural archive of high European imperialism. Said detects an outstandingly revealing affinity between contrapuntal reading and the hybridity of culture. In this vein, hybridity signifies ‘worldliness’.

Disenchanted with poststructuralism and its renunciation of 'meaning', Said formulated a new historicist interpretation of literature whose function it is to bring the domain of literary criticism back to 'the mundane, the quotidian' hence, insure its 'worldliness'. Consequently, the text is no longer conceived to be confined to the book. Instead, it has become part and parcel of the world. This Saidian interpretive approach to literature has made it all the more challenging for the oppositional, postcolonial intellectual to intervene and alert us to "the perdurable inequalities of the contemporary world." (Hussein, 165) For this to be attained, Said argues, intellectuals / critics ought to act 'affiliatively.' (Said, 1983:19-20)

With literary modernism in full swing, affiliation (as opposed to filiation) has signified a withdrawal from the stringency of literary theory. In this sense, one could argue that affiliation, being a hallmark of 'worldliness,' is meant to emancipate the critic and broaden his / her critical perspectives. Narrative horizontality has brought the world closer for investigation in a way that transcends the precincts of European canonicity. The correlation between 'affiliation' and 'worldliness' has brought forth a dystopian approach that "releases the text from its isolation and imposes upon the scholar or critic the presentational problem of historically recreating or reconstructing the possibilities from which the text arose." (Said,1983:175) Such critical concepts as 'contrapuntality', 'affiliation' and 'worldliness' have contributed to the uniqueness of Said in the contested field of postcolonial criticism. There is, however still an urgent need for books, courses, and lectures which encourage what Said called for so eloquently in *Culture and Imperialism*: "the possibility of a more generous and pluralistic vision of the world." (230)

One reason for this need is Said's scepticism about the narrow functionalism that besets many contemporary theoretical approaches. The trouble with these approaches is that they "retreated into the labyrinth of textuality."(1983:3) For the text to be connected to its worldly reality, Said puts forward 'secular criticism' as a way to bring theory back to practice and the intellectual work back to its constituency. "Criticism," he writes in *The*

World, The Text, and The Critic, "must think of itself as life-enhancing and constitutively opposed to every form of tyranny, domination, and abuse; its social goals are noncoercive knowledge produced in the interests of human freedom." (21) Moreover, secular criticism

insists upon the possibility of emancipation even as it expresses profound skepticism about the transparency of all such claims. Secular criticism does not imply the rejection of universalism per se. It implies a scrupulous recognition that all claims of a universal nature are particular claims. Furthermore, and most importantly, it means rescuing the marginalized perspective of the minority as one from which to rethink and remake universalist (ethical, political, cultural) claims, thus displacing its assignation as the site of the local. (23)

For him, "texts are worldly, to some degree they are events, and, even when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless a part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted" (1983:4)

The net effect of Said's approach is to do away with the specialization of theory which has severed ties between the contemporary critic and his / her audience. Because of the 'worldliness' of texts and their interconnection with societies, politics and other human realities, intellectual 'quietism' and political inaction have become problematic for a secular intellectual like Said who considers texts as "practices, rather than as reified objects" (Marrouchi, 2004: 57) Any withdrawal of contemporary literary theory from the real world is a "triumph of the ethic of professionalism." (Said, 1983: 3)

Instead, he propounds 'amateurism' as a strategy of intellectual intervention to 'write / speak back' to neo-imperialism, address authority, raise moral issues, reveal injustices and 'speak truth to power.' (1994b) Seen from a revisionary stance, there is no denying the force of Said's theoretical dissent, especially when read against the current orthodoxy of postcolonial discourse.

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