

On Edward Said, Scholar and Public Intellectual

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**Abstract:** In her paper, "On Edward Said, Scholar and Public Intellectual," F. Elizabeth Dahab pays tribute to Edward Said, 1935-2003. Dahab discusses selected aspects of Said's trajectories as a scholar and Palestinian-American activist including aspects of Said's numerous activities and work as a musician, an ardent political polemicist, a music critic, a Columbia University professor of comparative literature, a humanist, President of the Modern Language Association of America, and an exiled Palestinian as evident in the vast corpus of this eminent scholar's publications over the course of almost four decades (twenty-four books and hundreds of articles and interviews). Said's work elicited debate and controversy while his activities as a public intellectual who lead a life of thought "in-between" the difficult and multiple borders of the historic battle fields of the Middle East won him a great number of supporters and enemies alike. Said's life and work prove exemplary for all who believe in integrity in thought and practice.

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## F. Elizabeth Dahab

### On Edward Said, Scholar and Public Intellectual

Edward W. Said's intellectual trajectory took him from his first book, *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (1966) to his latest book, *The Relevance of Humanism in Contemporary America* to be published posthumously by Columbia University Press (in addition to two collections of magazine articles). In the course of over three decades, Said produced twenty-four books including three collections of interviews of which *Culture and Resistance* (2003) is the most recent title. His latest critical work in book form -- it deals with questions of unresolved identity related to Freud's relationship to his Jewishness and the bearing of those issues on contemporary Zionism -- is *Freud and the Non-European* (2003). He also contributed hundreds of columns in Arabic and English in *Al Ahrām* and *Al Hayat* as well as to newspapers all over Europe, Asia, the US, and the Middle East (for a selected bibliography of Said's works and studies about his work, see Callaghan <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol5/iss4/7/>>).

Although Said has been often vilified or dismissed by some on account of his advocacy of the Palestinian cause, he has achieved a tremendous level of recognition and influence on the landscape of current humanities. He won a number of awards and honorary doctorates (for example, in 2001 he was awarded the Lannan Foundation Literary Award for Lifetime Achievement) and he delivered lectures at over two-hundred universities around the world. The corpus of his works has permeated a number of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, including comparative literature, English, cultural studies, history, anthropology, sociology, psychology, political science, music, linguistics, philosophy, the study of religion, and communication studies. Many of his books are turning points in the history of Western literary criticism and landmarks in the history of ideas; they are infused with the tendency to study constructs and institutions from a polyphonic point of view, with the premise that culture and politics, power and the arts are intimately linked.

Said's first book, *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography*, the subject of his Ph.D. dissertation at Harvard, introduced and developed the idea that rather than being a career, becoming a writer was a project, one that involves pouring oneself into a series of works which come to define who one is. It is a laborious, methodical study of the interplay between the fiction and the correspondence of the exilic Polish writer who was in Said's eyes "an example of someone whose life and work seemed to typify the fate of the wanderer who becomes an accomplished writer in an acquired language, but can never shake off his sense of alienation from his new ... home" (*Reflections on Exile* 554). His second book, *Beginnings* (1975), is a working out of Said's political *prise de conscience* spelled out and transposed into literary terms, through the explorations of masterpieces of modernism (Conrad, Proust, Thomas Mann), with the contention that beginnings are instrumental in grasping how authors handle the constraints of authority, convention, and the limits of narrative form. In 1976, *Beginnings* won its author the prestigious Columbia University Lionel Trilling Award. A prolific writer, Said published homilies, essays, articles, criticism and, fortunate for us, a memoir, for when he was diagnosed with leukemia in 1991, he considered the idea of leaving behind a subjective record of his life in the Arab world and in the United States (*Out of Place* xi). Thus, in *Out of Place* (1999), he comes scrupulously to terms with his past, from shortly before his birth up to his graduation from Harvard in 1964. Despite and perhaps aided by the controversy this book has occasioned when Said was accused of fabricating his origins in order to elect himself spokesman of the Palestinians, *Out of Place* saw four printings in less than six months and won three major awards.

Edward Said was born on 1 November 1935 during a short trip from Cairo to Jerusalem to Christian parents, in West Jerusalem. His father, a Palestinian who held American citizenship, had fought in World War I before returning to his native Palestine. His mother was born in Nazareth and was half-Lebanese. In 1929, the family moved permanently to Cairo where the father set up a branch of his successful stationary business, with frequent visits to Lebanon and, until 1947, to Palestine. The

young Edward grew up mostly in Cairo in British and American schools where he learnt more about British and American history than Arabic history and where he felt constantly like a misfit: "England was the center of the world and the rest didn't matter" (Coles 1). In 1951 he was sent to the United States to Mount Hermon, a puritanical boarding school in New England where he excelled. He then spent his undergraduate years in Princeton on a scholarship, graduated Phi Beta Kappa and received his Ph.D. from Harvard. In 1963 he accepted a position as instructor at Columbia University where he remained all his life as a professor of comparative literature.

The recurring theme of *Out of Place* is feeling, wherever he was and for much of his life, *not quite right*, not only on account of his being a displaced Palestinian, but also because of the Protean nature of his identity and talents that were to exfoliate into the multiplicity of persona we have come to know: the global public intellectual, the (formalist) literary critic, the musician, the ardent political polemicist, the music critic, the fine wordly gentleman, the Columbia professor, the humanist, the friend, the Orator, the Arab, the American, the president of the Modern Language Association of America, and the exiled Palestinian. At the end of his autobiography, Said comes to accept this "cluster of flowing currents" that make up his identity and extols its virtues (*Out of Place* 295) as opposed to the advantages of a rigidly defined self.

Edward Said is perhaps best known for *Orientalism* (1978), the book that has changed the course of Middle Eastern Studies, becoming a cornerstone text for the field of postcolonial studies which it founded, so to speak. It covers various phases from the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt, through the imperialist European expansion in the nineteenth century, to the aftermaths of World War II and the emergence of American hegemony. Said observed that Middle Eastern Studies in the West, or Orientalism, one of three meanings he attributed to the word, colluded with imperialism by digesting and then reproducing about the Islamic Arab world common stereotypes and prejudices (laziness, sensuality, corruption, effemininity, violence, lack of intelligence, etc.) that are divorced from the realities on the ground. He demonstrated how the encounter between the Orient and the Occident was caged in a so-called scientific discourse by which European culture, represented in great part by novelists and poets, perceived the Orient. We find eloquent and incisive pages about Lane's scholarly works as well as Nerval and Flaubert's travel notes -- they "saw the Orient as a locale requiring Western attention, reconstruction, even redemption" (*Orientalism* 206) -- and the rapport between those writings and the formally esthetic, historical reconstructions in their novels. Said was interested precisely in those "Western perceptions of the Orient and in the transformation of those views into Western rule over the Orient" (*The Pen and the Sword* 63). Said's critics attacked him for not having told us what the Orient was and for having only alluded to what it was not. This is a question he addresses in one of his interviews with Barmasian (*The Pen and the Sword* 39-62). As a colleague at Princeton remarked recently: "For a long time couldn't understand why Edward didn't say more about the actual people living in the so-called East, then I realised it was a matter of scruple, even austerity. He could point to the gap between these people's lives and what Orientalists have often made of them; but he couldn't step in and talk for the silenced without becoming an Orientalist himself" (Higgins 2).

It was the first time in the history of American academy that such daring views as Said's, marrying "the two things [Said] was most interested in: literature and culture, on the one hand, and studies and analyses of power, on the other" (*Power, Politics and Culture* 210) were exposed judiciously. Despite the unpopularity of these ideas amidst eminent scholars such as Bernard Lewis, the Princeton historian of the Orient whom Said attacked, as well as his half-witted colleagues (to borrow a pertinent phrase I chanced upon recently) from other disciplines who were "enraged ... and appalled ... at [Said's] presumed insolence of subjecting white Europeans to an oriental gaze" (Massad 2), *Orientalism* fired the imaginations of students all over the world and established Said's reputation as cultural critic. Moreover, "it opened the floodgate of post-colonial criticism that breached the authority of Western scholarship on non-Western societies" (Prakash 3). Translated into over twenty-four languages and sometimes pirated in the process, it unwittingly became, as Said himself remarked, a

"collective book" that superseded unexpectedly its author (*Orientalism* 330). When the 25th anniversary of *Orientalism* was celebrated at Columbia University in April 2003, uppermost on Said's mind was the war on Iraq, as expressed by Prakash in his remarkable tribute to Said: "it was no comfort to Said that the events after 9/11 confirmed his reading of what he called 'the knitted together' strength of Orientalism in its ability to maintain close ties to ruling institutions" (4).

The invention of the East by the West and "the affiliation of knowledge with power" is a thesis explored further in two books that came to be part of the Orientalist trilogy (*Power, Politics and Culture* 171): *The Question of Palestine* (1979) and *Covering Islam* (1981). In the introduction to *Covering Islam*, Said brings to the fore the affiliation between language and political reality, a fact many Orientalists continue to deny. Written on the occasion of the coverage in the American media of the Iranian hostage crisis in 1979, the book deconstructs the false representations of Islam as being the religion of violent, doomed, incompetent, and fanatic people, and shows in what ways those unjust representations are yet another aspect of support for imperialist foreign policy and interests, an observation Said continued to maintain and to demonstrate: "his principled analysis was not shaken by the events of 11 September. He continued to defend Islam as religion and culture" (Massad 2). In the words of Zaineb Istrabadi: "He himself felt that even though born into a Christian family, he very much was part of Arab-Islamic civilization. It distressed him that Arabs and Muslims, and that Islam itself were presented in negative terms in the mass media and he wrote many articles criticizing their portrayal in newspapers, magazines, and film... he would sometimes shake his head saying that things have gotten worse not better over the years" (2).

In *The Question of Palestine* (1979) published two years after Said joined the Palestinian National Council (a fact which banned him from going to Israel) as an Independent -- he remained a member, choosing not to ally himself to any party and taking orders from no one, until 1991 when his health ailed and when the chasm with Arafat became pronounced -- Said exposes the savage practices of the successive colonialisms that have beset Palestine and the Palestinians. In disagreement with the PLO, he advocates a two-state solution although years later he came to change his stand on this issue in favor of a binational state with equal rights. The book was written with the aim of giving "Americans a sense of what the dispossession and the alienation of Palestine meant from the Palestinian point of view" (*Power, Politics and Culture* 171). Said deals here with the psychology of Zionism that dismisses the reality and the existence of the Palestinians, witness Golda Meir's 1969 statement "there are no Palestinians," a statement that had set the young Columbia professor the task of taking on "the slightly preposterous challenge of disproving her, of beginning to articulate a history of loss and dispossession that had to be extricated, minute by minute, word by word, inch by inch" (*Reflections on Exile* 563), a task he undertook until his death, urged as he was by the necessity of narrating the Palestinian experience relentlessly and despite the "betrayal of history" (*The Pen and the Sword* 145). In the process, Said produced four books devoted entirely to the Palestinian question, *After the Last Sky* (1986), written in collaboration with Swiss photographer Jean Mohr, engaging with visuals in what W.J.T. Mitchell called "a marvelous, many layered reflection on images of the Palestinian people" (2), *The Politics of Dispossession* (1994), *The Struggle for Palestinian Self-Determination 1969-1994 Peace and Its Discontents: Essays on Palestine in the Middle East Peace Process* (1996), and *The End of the Peace Process: Oslo and After* (2000).

Said saw in the Oslo agreement a capitulation on the part of the PLO leader Arafat whom he called on to resign: "he conceded everything to Israel's occupation on the basis of a very slender recognition by Israel of the representativity of the PLO, and nothing else" (*The Pen and the Sword* 146). The Israel/PLO accord was thus, in Said's eyes, a "betrayal of history" (*The Pen and the Sword* 145-70) because in it "not a word" was said about the occupation or about the reparations of the ravages of occupation for those who have suffered from it (*The Pen and the Sword* 161). Equally absent was the issue of those who live outside the West Bank and Gaza and that constitute over 50% of the Palestinian population. So, when invited by President Bill Clinton to attend the ceremony, Said

declined, considering that it "wasn't an occasion for celebration but an occasion for mourning" (*The Pen and the Sword* 110).

A sequel to *Orientalism* (1978), *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) covers the same time period, from the end of the eighteenth century to the present. However, it focuses on parts of the world other than the Middle East, such as India, Africa, the Caribbean, and Latin America, where there were major Western investments in the form of empire or direct colonialism. It expands the scope of *Orientalism* in that it studies instances where the natives talk back and retort. In Said's own words: "Unlike *Orientalism* where I only looked at European and American writers and policies, in this case I look at the great culture of resistance that emerged in response to imperialism and grew into what in the twentieth century is called nationalism" (*The Pen and the Sword* 64). In *Culture and Imperialism* Said deals with writers and theoreticians such as Austen, Conrad, Dickens, Forster, Camus, Memmi, Fanon, and Sartre. Said was often criticized for having politicized such a seemingly apolitical novel as *Mansfield's Park* (*Representations of the Intellectual* xi). His objective, however, was to allow for a polyphonic voice of history to be heard, one that makes it possible "to read *Mansfield Park* from the point of view of [slavery and the British-owned] Antigua plantation of the Bertrams, instead of reading it exclusively from the point of view of *Mansfield Park*" (*Power, Politics, and Culture* 211), and in so doing, establishing what he called a reading which is based on counterpoint, "many voices producing a history" (*The Pen and the Sword* 70). Similarly, Said's "against the grain" interpretation of Camus's "The Adulterous Woman," a story that takes place in the South of Algeria, one which has always been read as an existential parable, found under his incisive eye and much to the disagreement of many who found the shift uncomfortable, a contrapuntal reading at odds with that of a whole generation of literary critics who failed to see in the climax of the story that what was supposedly the staging of a deep communion between the protagonist, Jeanine, and the earth, was actually and quite plausibly -- after all, Camus was known for his refusal to give up the idea of *l'Algérie française* -- "an assertion of a colonial right of French people, because Jeanine is French, to the land of Algeria, which they think is theirs to possess" (*The Pen and the Sword* 75).

Said had one artistic passion throughout his life, music, to which he turned as a serious pianist and to which he devoted several books after he began writing a music column for *The Nation* in 1987. *Parallels and Paradoxes: Explorations in Music and Society* (2002) is the outcome of a series of conversations with Israeli conductor Daniel Barenboim with whom Said had been collaborating since 1991. The book is a summary of their discussions on music and a testimonial to the collaboration of these two men in bringing the power of music to the service of divided peoples. It is informed with the ardent friendship between Said and Barenboim who wrote: "The Palestinians have lost a formidable defender, the Israelis a no less formidable adversary, and I a soul mate" (2003 <<http://electronicintifada.net/v2/article1987.shtml>>). In August 1999 with Barenboim and Yo-Yo Ma, Said conducted a workshop for young Arab and Israeli musicians in Weimar, Germany, as part of a celebration of the 250th anniversary of the birth of Goethe. The previous year Said had participated in a new production of Beethoven's *Fidelio* for which he wrote a new English text replacing all the spoken dialogue, with Barenboim and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Together they founded in Weimar the West-Eastern Divan which provides a musical forum for young musicians from Israel and Arab countries. The project had prodigious success and in 2002 Barenboim and Said won the Prince of Asturias Concord Prize awarded by Spain for "their generous and laudable work for peace and harmonious living" (*Fundación Príncipe de Asturias* <<http://www.fpa.es/ing/2002special/01/2002concordia771.html>>).

*Musical Elaborations* (1991) is an outcome of the prestigious René Wellek Library Lectures in comparative literature where Said accompanied his talks by his own piano performance. The book draws an account of musical developments since Beethoven and reflects on the place of music in society. The chapter entitled "Performance as Extreme occasion" contains eloquent pages on Glenn Gould whom Edward Said admired greatly amongst other things for his embodiment of the tendency

in the mid-twentieth century for the concert musician to exercise his prerogative by helping himself to selections from the repertoires of operas and orchestras and establishing them in "a new, highly specialized environment" (*Musical Elaborations* 6). His reflections on Gould's contrapuntal technique found application in his cultural and literary criticism especially in his *Culture and Imperialism* where he advances explicitly the notion that literary works should also be studied contrapuntally, allowing the balance of power between the dominant and the dominated to be taken into consideration.

Perhaps an underlying feature at the heart of Said's critical writings is a constant awareness that things -- novels, plots, cultural and political events -- are wordly: they occur in a given time and place. In *The World, the Text and the Critic* (1983) with its celebrated papers "Traveling Theory," "Roads Taken and Not Taken," and "Criticism between Culture and Systems," Said bemoans the worldlessness and the cult of professionalism that threaten to transform scholars into myopic and highly specialized individuals: the worldliness he advocates, a constant feature of his own work, entails reading texts in their historical context with an awareness of the circumstances that play on readers, writers, and texts. His constant "operating assumptions," he writes, are that "fields of learning... are constrained and acted upon by society, by cultural traditions, by worldly circumstance, and by stabilizing influences like schools, libraries, and governments" (*Orientalism* 201-02). With a bend of mind that ultimately characterizes Said as an optimist, he believed that the American university, despite its being "in cahoots with the corporate world and the military," is the last possible utopia and "the last remaining protected space" (Bayoumi and Rubin 436). In an article entitled "On Defiance and Taking Positions," we find his formulation of the ideal role of the true intellectual: one who commands a vast knowledge of his/her discipline; who is rigorous in the analysis of literature; who views being an intellectual as a vocation; the intellectual who considers it necessary to step into the public sphere and to speak truth to power, namely to question, interpret, and understand authority rather than consolidating it; to step out of the boundaries of the academy "to connect oneself, to affiliate oneself, to align oneself with an ungoing process or contest of some sort" perhaps with the aim of improving the lot of the oppressed (*Reflections on Exile* 504); the intellectual who functions as a kind of public memory "to recall what is forgotten or ignored," "to make the connections that are otherwise hidden," and "to provide alternatives for mistaken policies" (503). Recommendations that have all been part of the activities and profile of Professor Said -- the scholar-activist. Speaking of Said's own vocation as "an academic iconoclast," the following statement was made in the *Times Higher Education Supplement*: "He broke two of the main taboos of institutionalised academic study. The first of these was the unspoken rule that forbade the making of direct connections between the ideals of culture and the reality of past and present political life. ? The second was the refusal of disciplinarity and specialisation, which he believed tended to weaken and depoliticise the intellectual strengths of academic writing" (Higgins 3).

Precisely so! *Representations of the Intellectual: The Reith Lectures* (1994) is devoted to the tasks of the contemporary intellectual and links Said's political and cultural writings. The book contains his famous phrase, the title of one of the chapters, "Speaking Truth to Power," a mode of action which applies to those "intellectuals with an alternative and more principled stand that enables them" to oppose (97). In this work, Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, amongst a host of protagonists created by Flaubert, Turgenev, and Genet, with his impeding desire to express himself as freely as he possibly could, and his refusal to "serve that in which [he] no longer believe[s] whether it call itself [his] home, [his] fatherland or [his] church" (17) holds a central place. In the chapter entitled "Intellectual Exiles: Expatriates and Marginals," Said uses the notion of metaphorical exile as opposed to actual exile to characterize the role of the intellectual as an outsider, the nay-sayer at odds with his society: "Exile for the intellectual in this metaphysical sense is restlessness, movement, constantly being unsettled, and unsettling others" (53). In this context, writing becomes one's true home, and he quotes Adorno whose exile in the US was actual and who had been in metaphysical exile in his native Germany.

Said has had to come to terms with his own condition of displaced intellectual exile living in between two cultures (Arabic and American) at odds with each other, feeling totally at home in neither,

a fact which, instead of bemoaning and lamenting, he resolves and elevates to a positive condition of enlightened existence in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (2001), a spectacularly diverse array of fifty literary and cultural essays: "Most people are principally aware of one culture, one setting, one home; exiles are aware of at least two, and this plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions, an awareness that -- to borrow a phrase from music -- is contrapuntal. ... There is a unique pleasure in this sort of apprehension" (186). Which is not to say that Said was not aware of the pathos of exile and its predicament. Far from that. His is a contrapuntal awareness of the agonies and ecstasies of this mode of existence that many of us in today's world are acquainted with. In a moving passage of "Reflections of Exile," Said sums up "the achievements of exile" in the following terms, strangely evocative and containing a latent lyrical dimension that points to the possible genesis of his own colossal endeavors as a writer: "Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place ... and while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile's life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement" (173). Estrangement, yes. Crippling? In his case a powerfully liberating crippling!

Edward W. Said died on 25 September 2003. Numerous articles of praise and appreciation of his life and work appeared in the media everywhere (see, e.g., *Edward W. Said Obituaries* at <<http://home.att.ne.jp/sun/RUR55/J/Obituary.htm>>). In compliance with his expressed wishes, Said's ashes were buried in Lebanon where he used to spend the summers as a youth ten miles East of Beirut in a mountainous resort town overlooking the Mediterranean. A choice that may evoke, perhaps with a painful twitch, the poetry and beauty of a life, his life lived "out of place."

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