

It's in your hands:

Reflecting on the passing of Edward Said

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Consider the words of Edward Said's daughter, Najla, writing about his funeral arrangements:

In his last days my father wept openly for Palestine and his loss of articulacy and energy to write and write and write. He encouraged me, from his bed, to "continue the struggle, continue...get over your petty personal differences with your colleagues and write and perform and continue unceasingly. It's in your hands"

This was meant for our entire generation and it is important for me to convey this to you because I certainly can't shoulder the burden myself.

I am amazed that this is coming out so articulately, as I am weeping as I write.

(http://www.palestinemonitor.org/special%20section/edward%20said/najla_said.htm)

Edward Said, to the last, was an intellectual who believed that all human beings are entitled to expect decent standards of freedom and justice from world powers. He said that "deliberate violations of these standards" needed to be testified and fought courageously. Intellectuals had an obligation to be activists, Said said in the 1993 BBC

Reith lectures:

...the intellectual is an individual endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, a philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, the public. And this role 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 be easily co-opted by governments and corporations, and whose *raison d'être* is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug. (Said.1993)

Edward Said was born in Jerusalem in 1935 where he lived in a house, which his family later lost to the Israelis. He attended St George's Anglican Jerusalem School before beginning a life of exile, in Egypt where he went to high school, and the United States where he went to university. As his daughter said, he wrote and wrote and wrote. He became a formidable academic; the author of 17 books, published in 19 languages, was on the Board of twenty journals and had lectured at more than two hundred universities. He was Professor of Literature at Columbia University, but had also been a distinguished visiting Professor at Harvard, Yale, John Hopkins and Toronto universities..

Edward Said became the most articulate international spokesman for the Palestinian cause. In doing so, he conflicted with the national interests of the Israeli government and its sponsor the United States.

In one of many attempts to discredit Said's core authenticity and thereby sweep him under the rug, even the basic facts about his life were disputed. It was claimed that Said was not even a Palestinian refugee at all. Said was characterised as a rich boy who grew up in Cairo and who had fabricated or at least exaggerated his origins. In a short, unsourced article, "The false prophet of Palestine", an Israeli academic, Justus Reid Weiner described Said's self-definition as an "archetypal exile" as a "tissue of falsehoods". (*Wall Street Journal* 26.8.99)

Said responded by referring to his own autobiography, *Out of Place*, which was commissioned in 1989, a decade before the Weiner article was published and which was completed in 1998, the year before the Weiner article appeared.

There, I scrupulously record the facts of my early life spent between Jerusalem, Cairo and Dhour el Shweir (Lebanon), making clear that being the member of a privileged class I was spared the worst ravages of the nakba. I have never claimed to have been made a refugee, but rather that my extended family, all of it -- uncles, cousins, aunts, grandparents -- in fact was. By the spring of 1948 not a single relative of mine was left in Palestine, ethnically cleansed by Zionist forces. (Said. "Defamation Revisionist style" 1999)

Said responded that Weiner failed to understand that he was moved to defend the refugees' plight precisely because he did not suffer and therefore felt obligated to relieve the sufferings of Said's people, less fortunate than himself. Weiner's aim was propaganda, he claimed. "If someone like Edward Said is a liar, runs the argument, how can we believe all those peasants who say they were driven off their land? Said wrote. (Said 1999)

The Weiner article continued to reverberate in the world's media, irrespective of Said's detailed refutation. Conservative American columnist, Ronald Radosh, last year dismissed Said's criticism of the Bush Administration because he claimed "Said was exposed as having lied in his own memoir". (Radosh 2002) Reference to the Weiner article even appeared in Said's obituary in the *Weekend Australian*, which in turn quoted the British *Daily Telegraph* which claimed Said had "exaggerated details of his childhood to strengthen his identification with Palestinian refugees". (Australian 27.9.2003)

Said meanwhile paid a price for his high profile on the Palestinian issue. He was vilified as "the professor of terror." The Jewish Defense League called him a Nazi. His office at Columbia University was set on fire, and both he and his family "received innumerable death threats," (Barsamian, 1998)

Perhaps more than most, Said understood the tangible impacts of propaganda and the widening ripples of misinformation it created. In his seminal work, *Orientalism*, he explained how Western writers framed their reports of Asia within their own political and cultural assumptions, in doing so underpinning the exploitation of Asia and Asians.

In my own research on the work of foreign correspondents, Said helped me understand why so much international news was misreported, slanted or otherwise ignored by journalists who thought they were reporting the truth. Indeed, Edward Said's arguments in *Orientalism*, suggested that Western journalists' "truth" about Asia might merely be representations founded in someone else's fact, fiction and ultimately fantasy:

Every writer on the Orient (and this is true even of Homer) assumes some Oriental precedent, some previous knowledge of the Orient, to which he refers and on which he relies. Additionally, each work on the Orient affiliates itself with other works, with audiences, with institutions, with the Orient itself. (Said, 1978, p 20)

Said examined the work of those who wrote, taught or researched the "Orient", "whether the person was an anthropologist. historian or philologist". The "Orient", according to Said, was both a geographical and cultural entity. It was almost a European invention, and had since antiquity been a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences. The "Orient" derived from a confrontation of

politics, economics, cultures and ultimately ideas which dated back beyond the fall of the Eastern Roman Empire and the sack of Constantinople in 1452. It had its genesis in the struggle between Eastern and Western powers and helped define notions of the "West". As European peoples engaged in colonialism, the "West" transcended mere geographic locations, transforming into an intellectual tradition as well as an expression of power. Orientalism, in Said's view, was intertwined with notions of Western superiority which were used to justify colonial regimes in the "middle east", Africa and Asia.

This intellectual white man's burden, loaded with unacknowledged and increasingly unconscious assumptions, dominated international discourse and justified Western interventions in the affairs of what were depicted as morally, politically and economically inferior peoples.

Orientalism helped demolish these mythologies and in doing so, created Said's international reputation as a scholar. His intellectualism was interwoven with his activism. Daniel Barenboim, a musician with whom Said later played music for Arab Israeli reconciliation, said that Said's very curious mind allowed him privileged glimpses into the subconscious of people. Barenboim said these insights combined with Said's "very unrestrained courage of utterance" earned him the admiration, the jealousy, and the enmity of many:

Many Israelis and Jews did not want to tolerate his criticism, not just of the present Israeli government, but of a certain mentality that he identified in Israeli thoughts and deeds-namely the lack of empathy with the fact that the very same war of independence of Israel in 1948, which brought about the acquisition of a new

identity for the Jewish part of the population, was not just a military defeat, but also a psychological catastrophe for the non-Jewish population of Palestine. And therefore he was critical of the inability of Israeli leaders to make the necessary symbolic gestures that have to precede any political solution. (Barenboim 2003)

Barenboim said that meanwhile many Arabs were unable to accept his sensitivity toward Jewish history, limiting themselves to repeat their innocence as far as the suffering of Jewish people was concerned.

Said coined the idea that Palestinians became “victims of the victims”. (Said 1997)

Said served for more than a decade on the Palestinian National Council but later broke with Yasir Arafat over the latter’s acceptance of the Oslo peace accords. Said subsequently described Arafat’s Israeli sanctioned regime as a “Vichy government”. After his death, Hanan Ashrawi, an elected member of the Palestinian Legislative Council, described Said as “a brother, mentor, close friend”.

He had a raging thirst for the recognition and validation of a human narrative to vindicate the almost unbearable suffering of the Palestinian people and to render them part of an inclusive human experience. He had the integrity and compassion to extend recognition to the horrific suffering of the Jewish people and the unspeakable pain of the holocaust, and simultaneously to demand of Israel recognition of its own culpability for the plight of the Palestinian people. (Ashrawi 2003)

Ashrawi said that Edward Said, who was her former teacher, was a great scholar, a brilliant mind, a creative artist, an ardent nationalist, an advocate of justice, a free spirit, an unrelenting force for integrity, and an uncompromising fighter on behalf of human dignity.

Yet these superlatives may neglect the way he touched many otherwise ordinary people with his ideas. Said after all saw himself as an intellectual who served the public rather than government representatives.

In conclusion. We might reflect on a letter to the Melbourne *Age*, written in response to his passing. The sub-editor had titled it, “My Inspiration”:

Thank you Edward Said for the decades you championed our struggle for independence and freedom with such dignity, eloquence and courage. Your books recreated me. Each word you spoke and wrote gave me, as a young Palestinian, the strength and spirit to hope.

May you rest in peace.

(*The Age*, 27.9.2003)

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