

Editorial

Remembering Professor Edward W. Said: *An Occidental Par Excellence*

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Edward W. Said, Professor of English and Comparative Literature, who succumbed to the dreaded leukemia after a gallant 12-year battle, died in New York on Thursday, September 25, 2003 at 6:45 a.m. Born into a Christian-Palestinian family in 1935, Said went first to Princeton and then moved to Harvard University, from where he obtained his Ph.D. in 1964. He joined Columbia University as an Assistant Professor in 1963 and his first book *Joseph Conrad and the Fictions of Autobiography* was published in 1966. Said was a true intellectual who, to use his own words, spoke “the truth to power, ... denounced corruption, defended the weak (and) defied imperfect or oppressive authority.” In his lifetime, he received honorary doctorates from 13 Universities around the world. He twice received Columbia’s Trilling Award and the Wellek Prize of the American Comparative Literature Association. He was also the author of several groundbreaking and influential studies.

The passing of Edward Said is a great loss not only to the independent-minded global fraternity and those interested in *Orientalism* as a field of study, but also to students of *Occidentalism*, a subject that investigates the internal workings of Western civilization.

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He was, of course, famous for his magnum opus, *Orientalism*, which was translated into 26 languages.¹ This was a book that changed the face of critical theory and shaped the emerging field of post-colonial studies. He was also noted for his controversial journalism on the Palestinian political situation. What most of us forget and rarely mention is that his *Orientalism* was the result of his deep understanding of the Occident and the complex nature of *Occidentalism* because he himself, as a student of Western language and institutions, was an *Occidentalist par excellence*. His enormous contribution is, therefore, celebrated simultaneously by those interested in *Orientalism* and *Occidentalism*.

Said had established himself as an undisputed world-class cultural theorist in two areas: his foundational place in the growing school of post-colonial studies, through his *Orientalism*; and his insistence on the importance of “worldliness” or material contexts of text and the critic. No other cultural critic has revealed so powerfully how “down to earth” theory really is, for theory comes into being in some place, for a particular reason, and with a particular history. This is no truer than Said’s own theory.

In the field of identity studies, Said made a lasting impact too. His identity as a Palestinian was extremely paradoxical, and he was able, through his own experience, to demonstrate to us as how paradoxical and constructed identity is, particularly that of people scattered throughout the world away from their homeland. Said’s paradox of identity was indicative of the complex identities of diasporic and post-colonial peoples throughout the world today.

His book, *Culture and Imperialism*, provides us with two significant ideas towards a more informed and involved understanding of the relationship between culture and imperialism.² First, it is about “culture as the instrument of imperialism.” He argued that we cannot really understand the power and the pervasiveness of imperialism until we have understood the importance of culture. Culture is the power which changes a colonized people’s view of a world without the coloniser needing to resort to full-fledged military control. What, for instance, had enabled the British in India to rule a society of hundreds of millions with no more than 100, 000 people? It is culture that provides the kind of moral power, namely, the pursuit of a civilizing mission organized in a most systematic manner, not a simple greed of loot and leave, which enabled the British to become the undisputed ruler of India for

nearly two centuries.

Second, just as important as the need to develop a way of reading and understanding the imperialist cultural project, is the need for the colonised and formerly colonised to develop an effective response, a kind of resistance to imperialism. Said is adamant that adopting “the politics of blame” approach, including condemning and rejecting the coloniser and blaming the colonised/victims, as a strategy of resistance, is backward-looking and self-defeating. Instead, he suggests that post-colonial people may resist most effectively by engaging in dominant culture, by embarking on “a voyage in” through a variety of hybrid cultural works, which counter dominant culture without rejecting it. This includes directly studying first-hand the Occident and its culture and civilisation.

If *Orientalism* provides a detailed account of how the dominant culture of the Occident operated, *Culture and Imperialism* examines the historical experience of resistance against imperialism that had spread throughout the various European empires. Written into the narrative of the latter is a strategy of resistance which Said calls “a voyage in.”

With these powerful contributions that changed forever the global “knowledgescape” of *Orientalism* and *Occidentalism*, it was no great surprise that, in 1999, the *New York Times*, in its summary of the century’s achievements, declared Said to be “one of the most important literary critics alive.” Clearly, Said has crossed the apparent divide between academic scholarship and public recognition. The *New York Times* accolade reflects his impact on the contemporary cultural terrain, but it also demonstrated how relevant the concept of “worldliness” has come to our consideration of creative and intellectual work.

Said’s influence can be discerned in virtually all disciplines of the humanities, social sciences and well beyond. In particular, the term *Orientalism* is now linked inextricably to his work. A quarter of century after its publication in 1978, *Orientalism* remains an important, albeit, much debated book. So, too, is his *Culture and Imperialism* which was published in 1993. Said has emerged as a controversial figure who was both revered and reviled, but could not be ignored.

The impact of his work on scholars the world over had resulted in the proliferation of academic articles and books published since

Orientalism. The methodology of *Orientalism* has been appropriated by various authors who have deployed it in various geographical locations, in many different contexts of cultural relations and power struggles. Motivated and inspired by Said, Western accounts of representation have been challenged in such disparate works as V.Y. Mudimbe's *The Invention of Africa*, Zawiah Yahya's *Resisting Colonialist Discourse*, Reina Lewis's *Gendering Orientalism*, Mary Quilty's *Textual Empires*, Sankaran Krishna's *Post-colonial Insecurities: India, Sri Lanka and the Question of Nationhood* and Ronald Inden's *Imagining India*.³

We must not ignore the fact that Said had a whole troop of detractors too. For example, Said was labelled by Edward Alexander as a "Professor of Terror" in his essay published in *Commentary*, an American right-wing journal.⁴ More recently, an Australian right-wing magazine, *Quadrant*, published an essay that denounced *Orientalism* more than two decades after it was published.⁵ The author, Keith Windschuttle, an Australian academic historian, was clearly bothered that Said had such a tremendous impact on the curators and patrons of an exhibition themed *Orientalism and Works of Art* at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1998. Windschuttle noted that the catalogue of the exhibition was full of quotations from Said's *Orientalism*. As a result, the people who came to see the exhibition were queuing up at the Art Gallery's bookshop, each trying to obtain a copy of the prominently-displayed, recently revised Penguin edition of Said's celebrated book, *Orientalism*.

That Said's work has penetrated the inner sanctum of the occidental's cultural institutions was, for Windschuttle, "unacceptable" and "threatening." In other words, Windschuttle's criticism revealed that Said's *Orientalism* is as much about Orientalism as it is about the *Occident*, *Occidentals* and *Occidentalism*. Thus, Said is an *Occidental* *par excellence*, indeed, its best critic ever to grace Planet Earth.

It is a rather fateful coincidence that in the wake of his passing that an Institute of *Occidental* Studies (Institut Kajian Oksidental or IKON) is being established at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Is IKON going to be a vehicle for that "voyage in" that Said proposed? That, we all have to wait and see! Perhaps IKON's first professorial chair should be named after Said, namely "Edward Said Chair of Occidental Studies," with an expressed aim and focus on studying the Occident using Said's methodology, thus keeping his contribution alive long

after he has gone. It is definitely a befitting intellectual gesture and a most appropriate way to honour and remember eternally the man and his knowledge-conquering and knowledge-renouncing work.

Notes

1. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978).
2. Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf/Random House, 1993).
3. V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988); Zawiah Yahya, *Resisting Colonialist Discourse* (Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 1994); Reina Lewis, *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation* (London: Routledge, 1996); Mary Catherine Quilty, *Textual Empires: A Reading of Early British Histories of Southeast Asia* (Clayton, Vic., Australia : Monash Asia Institute, 1998); Sankaran Krishna's *Post-colonial Insecurities: India, Sri Lanka and the Question of Nationhood* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1999); Ronald B. Inden, *Imagining India* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2000).
4. Edward Alexander, "Professor of Terror," *Commentary*, 88, no. 2 (August, 1989): 49-50.
5. Keith Windschuttle, "Edward Said's 'Orientalism' revisited," *Quadrant* (January-February 2000).