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Fazila-Yacoobali, V.

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Edward Said and Eqbal Ahmad

Anti-Imperialist Struggles in a Post-Colonial World

VAZIRA FAZILA-YACOOBALI

In a series of interviews with David Barsamian when Eqbal Ahmad was asked to comment on Edward Said's intellectual contributions, he summed it up as follows: 'I think the singular achievement of Said, as a literary critic, beginning with *Orientalism*, has been to put imperialism at the center of Western civilization.... He put therefore the whole issue of Western expansion, domination and imperialism as central forces in defining the nature of civilization itself.'¹ Reflecting, in turn, on why he dedicated his book *Culture and Imperialism* to Eqbal Ahmad, Edward Said wrote that 'it was because in his activity, life and thinking Eqbal embodied not just the politics of empire but that whole fabric of experience expressed in human life itself, rather than in economic rules and reductive formulas. What Eqbal understood about the experience of empire was the domination of empire in all its forms, but also the creativity, originality, and vision created in resistance to it. Those words—"creativity", "originality", "vision"—were central to his attitudes on politics and history.'² The relationship between these two men was an important one—a Palestinian scholar extraordinaire and a charismatic activist intellectual from Pakistan—for they came to share a profound understanding of the relationship between knowledge, power and resistance, and leave us a legacy of challenges for drafting an anti-imperialist politics.

End of colonialism

They were born around the same time (Ahmad in 1933/4 and Said in 1935) in two parts of the world which were under British colonial rule (India and Palestine), and both experienced the violence of decolonization as a formative experience of their childhoods. In a BBC documentary on his life,³ Ahmad traveled along the historic Grand Trunk Road which once stretched the breadth of the Indian-subcontinent from Calcutta to the threshold of Afghanistan. On the way he revisited the village in Bihar where he grew up, recounting his father's murder because of his pro-Congress leanings, the decision of his elder brothers to migrate to Pakistan because of their pro-Muslim League leanings, and his mother's refusal to leave their familial home. Torn asunder, the 'moment of arrival', independence from colonial rule in the Indian subcontinent was constituted by the very experience of Partition. Almost thirty million people were displaced in the violence that ensued, one of the largest forced migrations of modern times, and Eqbal and his brothers walked with the massive caravans of the uprooted along the G.T. Road into what had become the state of Pakistan.

Said also experienced a series of displacements as the state of Israel was carved out of British Mandate Palestine. He moved from Jerusalem to Egypt, and then, alone, to the United States while the rest of his family went to Lebanon. After being diagnosed with cancer, Said wrote a memoir, 'Out of Place' (1999) in which he reflects on what the loss of 'place' meant to him and his family. However, it was not the personal losses associated with displacement, but rather the profound and shared dispossession of a people from both their land and from history that moved him to write as an act of resistance.

On hearing statements by the likes of Golda Meir who, in 1969, declared that there are no Palestinians, Said felt compelled 'to articulate a history of loss and dispossession that had to be extricated, minute by

minute, word by word, inch by inch, from the very real history of Israel's establishment, existence and achievements... This was the world of power and representations, a world that came into being as a series of decisions made by writers, politicians, philosophers to suggest or adumbrate one reality and at the same time efface others.'⁴

The 1967 war drew Said into Palestinian politics. Ibrahim Abu-Lughod asked Said to write an article on the war for *Arab Affairs* and that article, 'The Arab Portrayed', became the starting point for his path-breaking book *Orientalism* (1978).⁵ The article so impressed Ahmad that he asked Abu-Lughod to convey his appreciation to Said. The two men met each other in 1968 at a meeting of Arabs in the United States where Ahmad was a keynote speaker. Ahmad had already earned a reputation for fighting against French colonial rule with the National Liberation Front in Algeria. He was also an eloquent civil rights and anti-Vietnam war campaigner in the United States. In his address Ahmad argued, as a veteran of guerilla warfare in Algeria, that the success of an armed struggle lay not in its ability to 'out-fight' the adversary, but rather to 'out-legitimize' or morally isolate it. He thus concluded that armed struggle would not work for the Palestinian cause because it would simply reinforce the Israeli state's proclaimed legitimacy as a homeland for those who had suffered, for it would allow Zionists to continue to portray Jews as victims of Arab violence instead of confronting the dispossession and suffering of Palestinians.⁶ Although Ahmad's advice against armed struggle disappointed most Palestinians there, particularly as their hopes came to be tied to the emergent PLO's armed struggle for liberation, Said was so impressed that he introduced himself to Ahmed after the lecture. Of their initial meeting Ahmad said, 'I knew from his article that I was meeting someone who had a very fresh and original mind. Since then we have been very close friends'.

Comrades-in-arms

Through the ensuing years Said saw Ahmad as a comrade-in-arms, and turned to him for advice and help in negotiating the challenges of advocating the Palestinian right to national self-determination. When in the late 1970s Said served as a member of the Palestinian National Council, the Palestinian parliament in exile, he invited Ahmad to Beirut to meet Yasir Arafat and other Palestinian leaders. He noted that '[t]hose leaders sensed about Eqbal that he was a real friend in the struggle and his sincerity and commitment could not be gainsaid, despite the fact that he wasn't a native'.⁷ Ahmad notes that he repeatedly advised Arafat to engage in non-violent strategies of civil disobedience, of the Mohandas Gandhi or Martin Luther King kind, rather than armed struggle. Although Arafat often took notes, his advice went unheeded.⁸ Said too, in *The Question of Palestine* (1979), questioned the PLO's use of violence, and later both became critics of the PLO and the Oslo Accords.

Politics and poetry

For Ahmad, a poem by the communist Pakistani poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz, 'Dawn of Freedom', captured the bathos of decolonization. In 1980 Ahmad introduced Said to Faiz who was in exile in Beirut, and

their oft-recalled evening of poetry recitation inspired Said's essay, 'The Mind of Winter: Reflections on Life in Exile'.⁹ In politics and poetry the two men developed their critiques of power and expressed their faith in people's capacity to resist through creativity. Yet, although they shared a great deal, the two men's contributions differed enormously in substance.

Said was a professor of English Literature at Columbia University and wrote a large number of books in literary criticism, music, the Middle East and Palestine. Certainly the impact of *Orientalism* has gone far beyond the study of the Middle East, so much so that some have claimed that he founded the very field of 'post-colonial studies'. He also regularly wrote articles on contemporary politics as they pertained to the representation of Islam, the Middle East and Palestine. Although he also participated in political discussions, his pen was his most vital sword. In comparison, and although Ahmad was a professor of politics at New Hampshire College, he left his mark wherever he went through his very person—his 'supernally accurate analysis',¹⁰ perceptiveness, compassion and oratory—and became a friend of people's struggles in many different parts of the world. Said described Ahmad's contributions as 'essentially performative achievements,' 'stylists of the uttered word, pluri-lingual, generous with ideas and stories.'¹¹ On his retirement from New Hampshire College, Said urged his friend to publish his ideas, telling him, 'you shouldn't leave your words scattered to the winds or even recorded on tape, but they should be collected and published in several volumes for everyone to read.' Unfortunately, Ahmad died on 11 May 1999, before compiling such works. While Said leaves us a legacy of written words, their friendship offers reminders of some of the challenges that lie ahead.

Pluralizing and humanizing

Ahmad conceded that '[i]n literary criticism and historical writing there [we]re two times: before *Orientalism* and after *Orientalism*', yet he felt the work's impact, although centered on the Middle East, didn't have enough influence on the study of Islam. He argued that the book had had a far more decisive impact on histories of other parts of the world, particularly on writings of colonial Western expansion. As far as the study of Islam was concerned, the outcome was two-fold: there were writings that had absorbed and deepened some of *Orientalism's* insights, but there were also established Orientalists like Bernard Lewis and polemicists like Harold Bloom who continued to demonize Islam and Muslims.¹² Certainly since post-11 September 2001 a large number of books and articles have reproduced a threatening and monolithic Islam for public and political consumption. As Joseph Massad pointed out at *Orientalism's* Silver Jubilee meeting in New York, the conditions for the production of an abstract 'Orient' remain unchanged. Said, although battling his own illness, repeatedly took the now best-selling author Bernard Lewis and others to task, and argued that '[t]o understand anything about human history, it is necessary to see it from the point of view of those who made it, not to treat it as a packaged commodity or as an instrument of aggression. Why should the world of Islam be any different?'¹³ With the passing of Said, this task of pluralizing and humanizing the diverse parts of the Muslim world now takes on a certain urgency.

Further, Said reminded us through Joseph Conrad that the distinctions between civilized London and 'the heart of darkness' quickly collapsed in extreme situations, and that the heights of European civilization could instantaneously fall into the most barbarous practices without preparation or transition.¹⁴ Ahmad also quoted Conrad's statement, in a lecture entitled 'Culture of Imperialism' that self-evidently drew upon Said's work, that '[t]he conquest of the earth, which means

the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much.' Ahmad went on to argue that 'an enlightened civilization' could engage in 'not a pretty thing' only on the condition that it did not 'look into it too much'.¹⁵ This 'not look[ing] into it *too much*'

requires an abdication of rigorous enquiry, and the complicity of intellectuals, which in turn provides the foundations of actual violence and aggression. It was with this awful awareness of the implications of scholarship that Ahmad proposed taking Karl Marx's statement seriously, that the function of knowledge is to comprehend in order to change—'think critically and take risks' to question the cultural, social and political norms that we live with.¹⁶

Said was often attacked by his detractors who argued that by focusing on the complicity of Western knowledge and power he provided an easy escape for Muslims who could place all the blame for their problems on Western shoulders. However, Said wrote regularly for the Egyptian Weekly *Al-Ahram* and the internet based *Palestine Chronicle*, and Ahmad for the Pakistani *Dawn*, in which they criticized the leaders and their abuse of power in the Muslim world and their repeated betrayal of the aspirations and needs of ordinary

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people. Particularly since the end of the Cold War, a recurring theme of Ahmad's lectures to Muslim audiences was the failure of education in the Muslim world in promoting creative and humanist thinking. 'This is the dark age of Muslim history', he wrote to his Pakistani readers, 'the age of surrender and collaboration, punctuated by madness. The decline of our civilization began in the eighteenth century when, in the intellectual embrace of orthodoxy, we skipped the age of enlightenment and the scientific revolution. In the second half of the twentieth century, it has fallen.'¹⁷ Rhetorical, scholarly, incisive, thoughtful, they used their critical arsenal strategically in addressing different audiences, but remained clear in delineating the power of the powerful and the struggle of the disempowered. At the Silver Jubilee of *Orientalism*, arguing against a simple reading of the book as about the West versus Others, Said emphasized that 'All great civilizations are plural civilizations. The terms "Orient" and "the West" have no ontological stability.' In a time when such dichotomized abstractions are gaining discursive hegemony in not just Europe and the United States, but also in the increasingly angry Muslim world, the challenge to speak to multiple fronts becomes more and more difficult and necessary. As Said reminded us, 'there is no real Orient to argue for, only the gifts of people of that region for the struggle to survive.'

Notes

1. Eqbal Ahmad, *Confronting Empire: Interviews with David Barsamian* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), p. 39.
2. Edward Said, 'Foreword: Cherish the Man's Courage', *Ibid.* p.xxii; *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993) p.v; 'A Tribute to Eqbal Ahmad', New Hampshire College, 4 October 1997, <http://www.southendpress.org/books/eqbalSaidexc.shtml>.
3. *Stories my country told me: With Eqbal Ahmad on the Grand Trunk Road*, BBC, 1996.
4. Edward Said, 'Between Worlds', *London Review of Books*, 7 May 1998, p.10.
5. Edward Said, 'My Guru', *London Review of Books*, 13 December 2001, p. 4.
6. *Confronting Empire*, p.29-30.
7. *Ibid.*, p.xxi.
8. *Ibid.*, p.33-34
9. *Ibid.*, p.38. 'The Mind of Winter: Reflections on Life in Exile', *Harpers*, Sept. 1984, p.49-55.
10. *Confronting Empire*, p.xiv.
11. 'My Guru', p.8.
12. *Confronting Empire*, p.39-40.
13. Edward Said, 'Impossible Histories: Why the Many Islams Cannot Be Simplified', *Harpers*, July 2002. In this essay Said particularly attacked Bernard Lewis' *What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response*.
14. Edward Said, 'The Clash of Ignorance', *The Nation*, 4 October 2001.
15. Khulduia On-Line, http://www.geocities.com/CollegePark/Library/9803/eqbal_ahmad/imperial.html
16. *Confronting Empire*, p.66.
17. Eqbal Ahmad, 'The hundred hour war', *Dawn*, 17 March 1991.

Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali is a post-doctoral fellow at ISIM
E-mail: v.zamindar@isim.nl