

Prisms of History: Edward Said's Humanism

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Abstract

The long and winding history of the Israeli-Arab dispute along with divergent historical, geopolitical and theological interpretations should be complicated for one to make definite moral judgment. However, the cross-cultural dynamics between the Israeli Jew and the Palestinian Arab and between the West and the East in general provide a historical and political context in which the genesis and genealogy of Edward Said's entire critical practice should be understood. Said emphasizes the critical practice of secular humanism which comprehends the human world from a secular historical perspective. Said's secular humanism arises from a critical and political reaction to and resistance against the rhetorical, ideological and strategic appeal to religious authority by Israel and the USA. The Israeli Zionist movement derives from the biblical source to justify its reclamation of the "Promised Land" and its creation of the modern Jewish identity and nationality as members of the "Chosen People". Religious references and narratives appear to be indispensable in the formation of people and nation. It is partly as a reaction towards the Third World decolonization movement and domestic multiculturalist movement for the rights of cultural and social minorities. By deploying the justifications of European colonialism, Zionism effectively adopted the racial concepts of European culture. Zionism, therefore, has inevitably marked both Jews and Palestinians. For the latter, it is significant to recognize that despite a concerted effort to subsume them within the various parts of the Middle East, they have been persisted, retaining their culture, their politics and their uniqueness.

Keywords: Edward Said, humanism, postcolonialism, non-violent resistance, Zionist

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“Of course. I’m the last Jewish intellectual. You don’t know anyone else. All your other Jewish intellectuals are now suburban squires. From Amoz Oz to all these people here in America. So I’m the last one. The only true follower of Adorno. Let me put it this way: I’m a Jewish-Palestinian.”

-Edward Said, *Power, Politics and Culture*

Edward Wadie Said, a Palestinian-American academic and writer is one of the most influential thinkers in the 21st century. He is considered as a travelling theorist, situating himself in various theories. For instance, the trajectory of his interest takes him from structuralism to deconstructive theory, after which he moved on to philology and history (Davis, 2007). Consequently, he goes beyond rigid systems.

Said was born in Jerusalem in 1935. He was brought up and educated in British colonial schools in Cairo, Egypt. His father, Wadie Said, was a successful businessman with an American citizenship. Said’s mother, Hilda Said, was a Nazarene Christian. She was really fond of language, aesthetics and music. Both of his parents had been educated from either British or American missionary institutions. Obviously, Said and his family were members of Christian minority in the Arab world. When Said was a student in Cairo, he was really lonely. Therefore, literature and music were the only outlet for him to relieve his loneliness. However, Hilda, Said’s mother, had been his closest companion for his first twenty-five years of his life (Ashcroft and Ahluwalia, 1999). After that, he was sent to America for his secondary and tertiary education in 1951.

Later on, he started working as an English and Comparative literature Professor at Columbia University. However, Palestine was claimed to be a motherland for Said and his family because the exile and dispossession happened in 1947-1948 when he was only a young boy. Said acknowledged himself to the Jewish minority in American cultural and historical contexts as a matter of fact that the Jews are historically people of exile and dispossession. It is the condition of exile, an existential, cultural and geographical displacement and alienation from their own cultural and national existence and consciousness. Consequently, the tension among different cultures, religions, languages and identities has been in Said’s consciousness since then. It could be probably considered as the beginning of the paradox in his own identity, the US based Palestinian. For Edward Said, identity is included in his bicultural setting, bilingual name and mother tongues. This ambiguity has been at the heart of recent criticism of Said’s work.

Undoubtedly, Said gained an emotional, intellectual and cultural reflection on his Palestinian American identity. Moreover, the outbreak of Israeli-Arab war in 1967 brought such turning point in Said’s life and his intellectual formation. It was not only because he was an Arab but also what the Israeli-Arab war dawned on him was the ironic and tragic realization. In other words, the war underscored the combined religious, cultural, historical, national and especially political conflicts, highlighting existential, cultural, historical and political subjugation and anti-humanism on Palestine.

After the 1967 war, Edward Said dramatically started writing on the interrelating between literary criticism, politics and history. Moreover, Said was elected as a member of the Palestinian National Council (PNC) from 1977 to 1991, becoming the

most prominent advocate in the U.S. of the cause of Palestinian independence. Actually, there is a long history of the Israeli-Arab dispute, which is complicated; history, geography and theological interpretations are involved. Therefore, it is uneasy to draw a definite judgment. For the Israeli Jew, the Zionist movement derives from the bible to make a claim that this particular area is the *Promised Land*, the location for geography of Jewish national identity as members of the *Chosen People*. The Palestinian Arabs have no right in that land. According to Nicholas Bethell's article (The View from the West Bank, 1980), Arabs were driven into exile. Said met the political upheaval by constructing a secular Palestinian identity based on justice and equality. Then he began to write about Palestine after the Israeli-Arab war, his first work on Palestine was *The Question of Palestine (1980)*, portrays the Palestinian position via keeping in view an American audience. Because of his passion on the injustice that accompanied the establishment of the modern state of Israel, he put all his effort to create a counter narrative to the common western view that Arabs as terrorists and murderers of innocent victims. Correspondingly, his work gradually transformed the intellectual landscape of the humanities and the social sciences. Said wrote in "The Public Role of Writers and Intellectual" in *The Nation* (17 September 2001), "Still just as history is never over or complete, it is also the case that some dialectical oppositions are not reconcilable, not transcendable, not really capable of being folded into a source of higher, undoubtedly more noble, synthesis. I have always believed, cannot really be simple revolved by a technical and ultimate janitorial rearrangement of geography allowing dispossessed Palestinians the right (such as it is) to live in about 20 percent of their land, which could be encircled by and totally dependent on Israel..."

In terms of Palestine, the Zionist idea of a homeland, which eventually saw the establishment of Israel, was prepared for in advance by the knowledge accumulated by British scholars, administrators and experts who have been involved in exploring the area from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. It is this knowledge that permitted the Zionists to maintain arguments similar to the British imperial enterprise. By deploying the justifications of European colonialism, Zionism effectively adopted the racial concepts of European culture. While in *Orientalism* it was pointed out how anti-Semitism was transferred from a Jewish to an Arab target, Said argues that Zionism itself internalized such representations and rendered the Palestinian as backward and therefore in need of being dominated. As Nicholas Bethell points out in the article "The View From the West Bank" in 1980 that "The Palestinians, he tells us, have been reviled and rejected as a people their race and religion dismissed as backward and degenerate". In the last hundred years, hence Zionism has inevitably marked both Jews and Palestinians. For the latter, it is significant to recognize that despite a concerted effort to subsume them within the various parts of the Middle East, they have been persisted, retaining their culture, their politics and their uniqueness.

That is to say that the outburst of Israeli-Arab war in 1967 is Edward Said's political emergence. Edward Said wanted to make a statement on the existence of Palestine and the reality of the Palestinian people. In other words, he raised the questions on Palestinian national existence, land and human rights. According to Said, Israel was constructed as the Occident and Palestine as the Orient. As a result, the projection of Islam that is represented in the West has been one of the major themes in Said's work. In addition, it is a well-known fact that Edward Said was an intellectual who paid

close attention to the ethical and political effects of representation. In Said's work, especially in the book named *Orientalism* (1978), he was fascinated by how people of the Western world view people and things from different cultures, particularly from the East. Orientalism is a part of a trilogy, including *The Question of Palestine* (1980) and *Covering Islam* (1981) are not only about Palestine, but also about representations of Islam in the contemporary world (Ashcroft and Ahluwalia, 1999). Furthermore, Said made it crystal clear that Islam is not a monolithic entity, yet it is more complicated and diverse around the world as stated by Césaire (cite in Ashcroft and Ahluwalia, 1999), "No race has a monopoly on beauty or intelligence, or strength, and there will be a place for all at the rendezvous of victory."

However, the most influential book, *Orientalism*, was heavily influenced by Michel Foucault's discourse and its power over people theories. Said employed Foucault's notion of discourse to understand and analyze Orientalism as a discursive formation. Later on, Said moved away from Foucault's work because Foucault paid too much attention to power and domination. As a consequent, Foucault did not believe in any kinds of positive truths, ideas and ideals. Said, therefore, shifted to Antonio Gramsci's hegemony. Said made the sound of hegemony more like Rousseau's social contract, which agreed by both sides rather than by a dominant force. It is obvious that Said, unlike Foucault, takes great care to make a clear distinction between humanism and humanists (who are active practitioners of humanism). Furthermore, Said thinks that the same humanists who have some mistakes can be taught to be better humanists also. The reason is that the fault is not with humanism as a theory but the problem is with the specific historical ways humanism has been used to betray its promise (Radhakrishnan, 2007). It can be concluded that Vico showed that people make history; Gramsci showed that people could unmake history through a long war of position, which could be taken place in the press or even schools. Consequently, it shows his politicizing influence on literary.

Nonetheless, Said does not have any bias towards Western or Eastern sides as observed by a number of critics and scholars. Said is not anti-Jewish or an anti-American, his criticism stems from both exile Jewish intellectual and the historically created nation of America, which he is strongly attached. His consciousness is split between two perspectives, an analysis of the Western interpretation (Occident) of the East (Orient). With his Western education, Said has an understanding of Western history and literature. However, with his Palestinian roots, his inner tension needed to be compromised. It can be stated that Said is a US- based Palestinian literary critic, cultural commentator and political activist in a Western world.

In addition, Edward Said pays much attention to culture. For him, culture is considered as the most powerful medium of imperial hegemony both systematic and hidden ways in colonization, while imperialism in Said's definition is 'the practice, theory and attitudes of a dominating metropolitan centre ruling a distant territory' (cited in Ashcroft and Ahluwalia, 1999). Therefore, he wrote *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), a collection of essays that elucidated his deep understanding of those writers, like George Eliot, Austen, and Kipling. Culture is taken into account here because it keeps imperial power flourished over the colonized world. Moreover, power is strongly maintained through culture. Consequently, Said's *Culture and Imperialism* starts with this statement that political and economic operations of power are nothing without culture. In other words, his aim in this book is to shed some lights on the

relation between culture and imperialism that could be claimed that culture as imperialism. It is obvious that imperial discourse displays native people were subjugated. Therefore, it can be implied that European superiority is over others, people and culture. One of the clear examples in imperial culture is the novel. The novel seems like a message or a reflection behind imperialism. For instance, according to the British imperial policy throughout the nineteenth century, the novel supposed to actively depict Britain as an imperial centre. Moreover, one of the crucial functions of the novel is to keep the empire in a certain place, and not to question about the idea projected in that novel. Then Said found out that the roles of society, politics and power that play a major role on literature are the key concepts. In addition, he had highlighted the links between the literary world and political world (Irrera, 2014). Subsequently, it is explained about the relationship between cultural practice and political resistance. Later on, he had pointed out that how the continue references to the late tradition of late bourgeois humanism were extremely problematic since that tradition actually implied values suggestive of European superiority over other cultures and people.

Edward Said has identified his intellectual and political works with humanism. Consequently, Said referred Giambattista Vico, a philosopher, as his constant reference in order to define his “humanism” (Davis, 2007). He believed that a deep belief in the power of the individual, men and women, to think new things and make intellectual history actively and it can also be changed by human rather than God who works in history. In other words, humanism for Said is tied up to men. Moreover, there are always men who created great works that represented the human endeavor. Hence, it revealed his secular, nonreligious way of thinking. In other words, his works are well known because of secular critical idea.

Then what is humanism in Said’s view? Humanism for him is an intellectual and moral belief. It is the foundation of his critical, literary and political practice. In other words, his humanism is a historically specific and politically conscious resistance against cultural, political and intellectual oppression. Said as a critical intellectual. His literary criticism is secular and worldly because his criticism depends on the historical circumstances and political conditions under the period that the work is produced.

Said’s “Humanism and Democratic Criticism” (2004) is the comprehensible example of the shifting from post-colonial criticism to humanistic interpretation. In other words, this book is about the nature of and the need for humanistic studies in the present time (Irrera, 2014). According to Said’s Humanism and Democratic Criticism, “Humanism is about reading, it is about perspective, and in our works as humanists, it is about transitions from one realm, one area of human experience to another. It is also about the practice of identities other than those given by the flag or the national war of the moment...”, it shows that in Said’s view, humanism is a long dialogue between a reader and an author (Radhakrishnan, 2007). In addition, he illustrates that humanist starts from a societal and political horizon marked by conflict and power relation. Finally, he concludes that through philology the humanities can find themselves again. The reason is because the ones with patience and endeavor who devote their time for close reading of great books not only can find the way to understand a humanistic text but also achieve a massive front-loading of knowledge. As he stated in *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (2004) that, “What concerns me is humanism as a useable praxis for intellectuals and academics who want to know

what they are doing, what they are committed to as scholars, and who want also to connect these principles to the world in which they live as citizens”.

To summarize, Edward W. Said appeals to show how representation is inextricably linked to power related dynamics with a strong Eurocentric connotation throughout his works. Said, unlike other scholars, held to the idea that literature had meaning and anyone could discover the meaning by the extensive knowledge of world literature and philosophy. Edward Said, therefore, is not considered as a literary scholar, post-colonial critic, but also as a humanist.

Conclusion

For Edward Said, humanistic or historical knowledge can only come from criticism. What is humanism for Said? Why does he continuously advocate humanism as praxis for intellectuals and critics? Subsequently, how one understands humanism is consequent upon one's entire worldview. Said understands the human in terms of human existential activities: language, knowledge, criticism, theory and politics as historical. Each historical period or stage is understood as a whole in which all human activities intertwine with and interpenetrate one another. Said understands and judges a work of literature not just in terms of its cultural or national origin but in close relation to its historical knowledge of literature that Said practices his humanism. This study proposes to examine four major critical categories as classified by Said himself: literature, theory, politics, and aesthetics and attempts to show Said's humanism through his critical practice.

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