

Resisting Colonial Discourse: Edward Said and Speaking Truth to Power

Rehnuma Sazzad

Nottingham Trent University

I am for dialogue between cultures and coexistence between people: everything I have written about and struggled for has pointed to that as the goal. But real principle and real justice have to be implemented before there can be true dialogue (Said, Quoted in Bove, 1).

Every time he puts pen to paper, Said takes up scholarly, moral and political responsibilities of one kind or the other. Said's intellectual commitments, in fact led him towards developing groundbreaking methodologies in *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism* in order to resist narrow cultural compartmentalisation and to advance 'coexistence' and 'dialogue' among peoples from different cultural backgrounds. In *Orientalism*, Said's methodology is a re-appropriation of the Foucauldian one so as to conduct a cultural debate surrounding a worldly identity, that is 'the Other', and also to put forward a strategy to oppose the cultural domination of 'the Other'. Said conjoins Foucault's textual theory with Gramsci's analysis of hegemony to shore up an intellectualism ready to affront an unjust and overwhelming Orientalist power-mechanism that has created 'the Other'. In fact, Said's background, to borrow the title of his book, is 'Out of Place'; he is a Palestinian living in the West, a fact that adds earnestness to his argument against Western formulations of 'the Other'. That is why Said cannot be at one with Foucault's methodological ambiguity about resistance against power. He is against following Foucauldian *theorization* to the letter in order to pursue a definite argument for a well-determined purpose: 'I am an Oriental

writing back at the Orientalists, who for so long have thrived upon our silence' ('Interview' 47). His mission in *Orientalism* is, therefore, to expose how 'real principle and real justice' are self-contradictorily shorn off the portrait of 'the Other' in Western humanist discourse. In *Culture and Imperialism*, he strives with humanistic conviction to make 'the Other' break out of hegemonic constraints and invalidate Otherness through an intellectualism *par excellence*. Said emphasizes intellectual responsibility, as opposed to operating as unassertive reservoirs of impressions. This is how he creates his counter-discursive model of *thinking anew*, which accentuates connection between cultures, rather than fostering domination. Ultimately, resistance to injustice is made synonymous with intellectualism through Said's effort.

As a post-Enlightenment philosopher, Foucault was concerned with establishing two facts in textual analysis: first, philosophy cannot be separated from the history of critical thought and second, our analytical and ratiocinative faculties cannot ignore politics. He tried to transgress orthodoxies to *know and make known* the nature and limits to the philosophy of our *subjectivity*. For that reason, he investigated the Western archive of epistemology by critically evaluating Western methods, positivities and discontinuities. As he has noted:

As for what motivated me, it is quite simple... it was curiosity... what is philosophy today— philosophical activity, I mean— if it is not the critical work that thought brings to bear on itself? In what does it consist, if not in the endeavour to know how and to what extent it might be possible to think differently, instead of legitimating what is already known? (Foucault 2000)

Foucault himself failed to think 'differently' in at least one respect (though he was remarkable for doing so in most cases), as he cut off the Orient from his map of knowledge. Indeed, Said redirects Foucault's legacy of critical thinking towards the right track by using the French intellectual's method in critiquing the Western archive from a peripheral point of view. Said declares: 'history is not a homogenous French-speaking territory' (*The World* 22). Foucault was not directly concerned about the impact of Orientalist discourse as hegemonic domination, though his power/knowledge theory helped Said to prove that such "anthropological imperialism" exist ('Interview' 46). But Said felt the need to reverse the practice of distorting 'the Oriental as human' ('Interview' 44). *Orientalism* proves that power is not only a self-existing cobweb but also a network where the relationships between the ruler and ruled, privileged and

In the counterpoint of Western classical music, various themes play off one another, with only a provisional privilege being given to any particular one; yet in the resulting polyphony there is concert and order, an organized interplay that derives from the themes, not from a rigorous melodic or formal principle outside the work (*Culture* 59-60).

To translate this musical method in reading, Said imparts to the peripheral intellectual a tremendous responsibility. S/he has to enter Western discourse and insert his or her suppressed viewpoints to create a harmonious admixture of colonial and colonised standpoints within it. According to Said, such a 'voyage in' will create a brilliant polyphony of interpretations of texts instead of replaying the unthinking refrain of dominant Western point of views.

This is how to bridge the 'We-You-They' divide, as Said famously puts it (*Orientalism* 47). This is how one must combine geographies and histories of cultures imaginatively, the lack of which he had deplored in *Orientalism*. The book revealed the problem of monochromatic understanding and gestured towards an alternative intellectualism to critique simpleminded-ness, the consequences of which are far from simplistic. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said completes his project to initiate a true 'critical consciousness', which is sceptic and sensitive enough not to stay eye to eye with discourse. He wants a paradigm shift in thinking to resist forms of cultural domination and control. The change becomes possible if individuals know 'how to read... and not detaching this from the issue of knowing what to read. [One has to believe that] [t]exts are not finished objects' (312). The transformation occurs as the reading of a canonical Jane Austen text is combined with, for example, a non-canonical, C.L.R. James narrative. It is not about depreciating Jane Austen but about admiring her with an awareness of the colonialist assumptions present in her writing for obvious historical reasons. This is the kind of intellectualism that rides out hegemony; the lack of this was lamented and protested by Said on many occasions.

That true intellectualism promotes 'coexistence' between cultures and the absence of it is enervating is established in *Orientalism*. This is the point of Saidian departure from Foucault. Foucault thinks hegemonic monochromatism to be supreme.³ Said takes in quite the opposite tack: it can be destabilized to promote harmony and coherence between cultures. For him, cultural hegemony is not simply given to mechanized manipulation. Rather, cultures are, he claims, 'possessing possession[s]' (*The World* 7). Individuals are not merely caught up in their culture but also belong to it with an owning sense of the horizon which 'is broad enough to include quotidian elaboration as well as complex and sundry

intellectual activity...' (Monroe, 'The World' 457) In other words, culture does not simply denote structures contributing to unseen suppressions of individuals. Individuals can also critique its unjust aspects from *within* the field. Cultures cannot ever be so monolithic that their unmerited features can go unquestioned. That opposition to the unjust is also part of culture in the pluralistic sense is what Said tries to centralize all throughout. He thus talks about

... modes of reconciliation where you can reconcile (without reducing) histories. That's why, for example, the contrapuntal approach is very interesting: you can reconcile the history of the colonizer with the history of the colonized without an attempt to "be impartial", because there's always the question of justice ('An Interview' 21).

Said argues that intellectual endeavour to establish counterpoint is the way to work in favour of justice and that can never be unimportant.

Yet unlike Michel Foucault, to whose work I am greatly indebted, I do believe in the determining imprint of individual writers upon the otherwise anonymous collective body of texts constituting a discursive formation like Orientalism (*Orientalism* 23).

At this point, Gramsci provides Said with the means of negating the systematisation of hegemony through an 'anonymous collective body of texts'. In the ultimate analysis, Foucault himself exercised intellectual power by deconstructing the disciplinarian world. His exposure of the way it works was nothing but placing an obstacle before its apparently impenetrable ways. Therefore, despite distancing him from Foucault's 'theoretical overtotalisation' that undermines resistance to power, Said discovers the *unspoken* adversarial position of Foucault vis-à-vis the power-network (*The World* 246). And so he can say:

... my whole point is to say that we can better understand the persistence and the durability of saturating hegemonic systems like culture when we realize that their internal constraints upon writers and thinkers were *productive*, not unilaterally inhibiting. It is that idea that Gramsci, certainly, and Foucault and Raymond Williams in their very different ways have been trying to illustrate.

(*Orientalism* 14).

Ultimately, Said appears to be a great believer in the kind of Gramscian non-impartial, politically committed intellectualism that challenges hegemonic affiliations. For Gramsci, ideas, philosophies, and ideologies find their ways to the minds of common people through discourses. The ruling class then maintains a

hegemonic control over the masses through embedding their interpretation of ideas etc in discourses. Said claims that Orientalist writers were effectuating a convenient picture of 'the Other' that justified the colonial perspectives by exercising hegemony. Said analyzes the so-called strength of the typical Orientalist writer:

In short, having transported the Orient into modernity, the Orientalist could celebrate his method, and his position, as that of a secular creator, a man who made new worlds as God had once made the old (*Orientalism* 121).

The Orientalist assembles information on the Oriental from previous writings and formulates an image of him, 'a *topos*, a set of references, a congeries of characteristics' by joining all the pieces of citations (177). The illustration of 'the Other' is thus achieved by ignoring the 'the complex dynamics of human life' to reach 'the level of accepted truth' (247, 250). The Orientalist writer is then canonised in the Western archive. S/he earns renown for completing the view of "'the Oriental" as a kind of ideal and unchanging abstraction' that gets transformed through discourse into hegemonic 'truth' (8). Said thus connects Foucault and Gramsci, since they are both theorists with well-developed notions of discursive knowledge formation. But like Gramsci and quite unlike Foucault, Said's criticism is *openly* un-relinquishing against such a nexus.

Said is relentless in his exposure of such hegemony:

Knowledge no longer requires application to reality; knowledge is what gets passed on silently... Ideas are propagated and disseminated anonymously... they have literally become *idées reçues*: what matters is that they are *there*, to be repeated, echoed, and re-echoed *uncritically* (116).

So much so, that the Oriental is denied 'the right to be generated, except artificially in the philological laboratory' (148). And so, 'The Oriental he [the Orientalist] studied became in fact *his* Orientals, for he saw them... as monumentalised objects in his account of them' (233). Said reveals how 'To know the Orient... is to know it because it is entrusted to one's keeping, if one is a Westerner' (256). Hegemony seems to give 'Orientalism the durability and the strength' so that 'European suzerainty... is extended effectively over Asia' (7, 256). However, Said makes it clear that unlike Foucault's ambiguous renunciation of the power-knowledge nexus,

My objection to what I have called Orientalism is not that it is just the antiquarian study of Oriental languages, societies, and peoples, but that as a system of thought it approaches a heterogeneous, dynamic, and complex human reality from an *uncritically essentialist standpoint*... (My italics 333)

Valerie Kennedy confirms Said's Gramscian stance on resistance: 'Finally, Gramsci like Raymond Williams sees power as "not invincible, not impervious to dismantling, not unidirectional", which means that there is at least the possibility of theorizing resistance' (*Edward Said* 31). Gramsci's ideological commitment then becomes the means through which Said sees the possibility of resistance to reductive 'essentialist' discourses.

Inspired by Gramsci, Said modifies Foucault's methodology of the power-knowledge structure. He denotes the possibility of a twofold resistance: to insist that the Oriental is a distorted construct and to oppose 'how the cultural domination is maintained' (*Orientalism* 324). This is a consistent inconsistency that Said justifiably uses in bringing together the ambivalently anti-humanist Foucault with the humanist Gramsci. As Said notes:

Orientalism is theoretically inconsistent, and I designed it that way: I didn't want Foucault's method, or anybody's method, to override what I was trying to put forward. The notion of a kind of non-coercive knowledge, which I come to at the end of the book, was deliberately anti-Foucault (Salusinszky, *Criticism* 137).

Orientalism blows away every kind of satisfaction of putatively designating 'a distinct culture' of any type: either the 'self-congratulation (when one discusses one's own) or hostility and aggression (when one discusses the "other")' (325). Contrary to Foucault's theoretical portrayal of the impossibility of resistance, Said opposes Orientalism by upholding a form of 'critical consciousness' that nullifies Foucault's theoretical absolutism in promoting a 'non-coercive knowledge'.

Said concretises what has been called an 'oppositional version of Western humanism' in order to resist coercive Orientalist discourse (*Edward Said* 35). Said's point is that Western humanist ideals of equality cannot be a universal doctrine in theories since in practice they are applicable to a privileged few, namely Westerners, as is the case with colonialism. That is why he melds Foucault's idea of power being everywhere with Gramsci's notion of power not being absolute so as to argue against the deceptions of Western humanism. He protests against non-humanistic race prejudice evident in Oriental scholarly treatises: 'The very possibility of development, transformation, human

movement—in the deepest sense of the word—is denied... the Oriental' (208). Thus he is at war against Western dominion of the colonial 'Others'. However, his ultimate belief in Western humanist ideals is never lost. And so, he is against being portrayed as 'a defender of the downtrodden and abused, whose mission was to engage Western authorities in a kind of epic and romantic *mano-a-mano*' (335).

Put differently, rather than obliterating Western humanism, he wants to reform it. Therefore, he fights against the discrepancies in Western humanism by combining the two different value systems of Gramsci and Foucault to *assail* inhuman power. The fight is for 'real justice' and 'real principle', ideals that are ultimately derived from Western humanism. This is Said's way of standing up for a humanistic 'coexistence' between colonial and colonised cultures through advancing non-aggressive knowledge for *all*. Said observes:

I believe *Orientalism* as a book shows it, especially when I speak of humanistic study as seeking ideally to go beyond coercive limitations on thought towards a non-dominative and non-essentialist type of learning (336-337).

As an intellectual then, Said is an exponent of the type of knowledge in the formation of which intellectuals have an immense responsibility. To him, individual writers are not simply instrumental to discursivity but also, essentially, forces that can bring in new outlook and introduce resistance whenever injustice overwhelms humanity.

Thus each individual contribution first causes changes within the field and then promotes a new stability, in the way that on a surface covered with twenty compasses the introduction of a twenty-first will cause all the others to quiver, then to settle into a new accommodating configuration (*Orientalism* 273).

For Said, an intellectual receives information from a particular discourse and then remoulds it to create a place for his/her insights inside it. Hegemonic discourse is made up of efforts from scholars who have merely reshaped previous ideas while remaining affiliated with dominant presumptions. In other words, these contributors' delineations have only reinforced old proclamations. Arguably, intellectuals can perform in the opposite way too. While reconstructing an archive, they can deny hegemony by refusing to harmonise with the customary intonation. For Said, it is imperative for intellectuals to take a stand whenever they find 'the seductive degradation of knowledge' governing their field (328).

The 'quiver' created by their new 'configuration' will be 'accommodated' in their field because of its novelty/originality; however, it should be invariably directed against injustice. Rather than joining voices with hegemony, Saidian intellectuals should, therefore, become radical, revolutionary and resisting forces by challenging 'systems of thought like Orientalism, discourses of power, ideological fictions—mind-forg'd manacles—[which] are all too easily made, applied, and guarded' (328). Said thus argues that resistance and reformation are possible from *within* an archive through original thinking and unconventional 'configuration(s)' that favour truth and justice.

That is why Said believes that intellectuals need to subject every presumptive *idea* to critical scrutiny. They have to be 'on guard against *idées reçues* all too easily handed down in the profession'; because their allegiance is to truth and justice, not to ready-made ideas in a pre-existing archive (*Orientalism* 326). Said adds:

What I tried to preserve in my analysis of Orientalism was its combination of consistency *and* inconsistency, its play, so to speak, which can only be rendered by preserving for oneself as writer and critic the right to some emotional force, the right to be moved, angered, surprised and even delighted (341).

Said contributes to the opposition to *idées reçues* through creating a counter-image of the resources that exist in the Orientalist discourse. He examines general dogmatic views on 'the Other' and various writers' endeavours to throw light on the Oriental. He is 'angered' at the way 'the Other' is always given a clichéd appearance in both cases. Finally, his 'delight' is to invalidate the flawed discourse by forming its counter-image that reveals the fatuity of such stock representations.

Inspired by Gramsci, Said opposes the ideas regarding 'the Other', despite working within a Foucauldian framework. As he observes,

In the *Prison Notebooks* Gramsci says: "The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is "Knowing thyself" as a product of the historical process to date, which has deposited in you, an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory." The only available English translation inexplicably leaves Gramsci's comment at that, whereas in fact Gramsci's Italian text concludes by adding, "therefore, it is imperative at the outset to compile such an inventory." (*Orientalism* 25)

Having considered the Orientalist texts, Said creates 'an inventory' (in Foucault's terms a discourse) so that he can form a consciousness of the identity manufactured for 'the Others' like him. And after protesting against the flawed portraiture, he proves that even though he as an 'Other' is a construction, he as an intellectual possesses the power to resist such subjugation. This is how he uses 'the master's tools' (Western humanism is meant here; but why not Foucauldian or Gramscian theories as well, especially when he intermingles them?) to 'dismantle the master's house' (*Edward Said* 34). Needless to say, Said's revolt thus makes truth and justice persist in our perception.

That is why, the example of individual authors like Erich Auerbach is so important to Said. Auerbach advocates viewing Western culture from an impartial perspective so that the judgement does not navelly tune in with the authoritative Orientalist tenor. To Said, intellectuals like Auerbach can successfully introduce an attitudinal alteration to the way cultures are traditionally interpreted. Said explains how this is brought about:

Rather than alienation and hostility to another time and a different culture, philology as applied to (Auerbach's) Weltliteratur involved a profound humanistic spirit deployed with generosity and, if I may use the word, hospitality. Thus the interpreter's mind actively makes a place in it for a foreign Other. And this creative making of a place for works that are otherwise alien and distant is the most important facet of the interpreter's mission' (Said, 2003).

Following Auerbach, Said claims that an intellectual can uphold truth not jejune formed to serve a pre-existing vision, if his/her 'mind actively makes a place in it for a foreign Other'. For this to happen, intellectuals need both to involve themselves with and maintain distance from indigenous and foreign cultures in order to accomplish non-discriminatory judgements. This is 'to lead to an enlargement of the scholar's awareness', to a 'synthesis', to a 'contrapuntal' revelation through endorsing 'the universality of certain principles of human behaviour', that is truth and justice (261). Only in that case can an intellectual judge his/her own culture critically and the 'other' culture sympathetically and vice-versa. That is what Said later calls the 'exilic' vision:

Not for nothing, then, did Auerbach end autumnal reflections with a significant quotation from Hugo of St. Victor's *Didascalicon* ... 'but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign land.' The more one is able to leave one's cultural home, the more easily is one able to judge it, and the whole world as well, with the spiritual detachment *and* generosity necessary for true vision (*Orientalism* 259).

Viewing 'the entire world as a foreign land' makes the 'exilic intellectual' oppose, negate and transform unjust disciplinary techniques like 'the Other'. Said provides us with examples of intellectuals like Chomsky and/or Fanon, who took up such maverick projects.⁴ Influenced by Fanon, Said's 'contrapuntal' method nullifies 'Otherness' in a critical but humane way. Like Fanon, Said wants the colonial self to scrutinize itself with a consciousness of its pre-imperial and colonial past so that an ideal self can be worked out by believing, of course, in universal humanism and emancipation. Said, therefore, juxtaposes Fanon as an emblem of political resistance and liberation with Foucault as the theorist of the imprisonment of a *subject*. He explains that Fanon's work is very significant as it

programmatically seeks to treat colonial and metropolitan societies together, as discrepant but related entities, while Foucault's work moves further and further away from serious consideration of social wholes, focusing instead upon the individual as dissolved in an ineluctably advancing "microphysics of power" that is hopeless to resist (*Culture* 335-36).

Said's vision of an oppositional critical intellect should be fully comprehensible now. He wants an intellectual

to be sensitive to what is involved in representation, in studying the Other, in racial thinking, in unthinking and uncritical acceptance of authority and authoritative ideas, in socio-political role of intellectuals, in the great value of sceptical critical consciousness (*Orientalism* 327).

In the end Said rejects Foucault because he is a paradox as far as his theoretical boundary goes. In a zeal to distance himself from Marxism, Foucault had created an incongruous claim on the individual and the system that holds him/her. Said minimises the incongruity by re-appropriating Foucault's theory for the emancipation of individuals. As a great believer in 'critical consciousness', he cannot be one of the Foucault acolytes who prefer to be encircled by the walls of the latter's totalitarian theory. Rather, Said's critical cognisance makes him declare that '*Orientalism* is a partisan book, not a theoretical machine' which contradicts colonial subjection by confronting its machinery critically so that human freedom remains the book's main focus (340).

Unlike Foucault, Said ultimately valorises intellectual opposition, which challenges a panoptical (the system of power imprisoning individuals through symbolic panoptic structures) society, to use the Foucauldian idea of control. Said believes that however totalised a discourse/system is, an intellectual is always powerful enough to penetrate it. Said is, therefore, against Foucault's *theoretical*

stamping out of resistance and assessment of systematization on the basis of a preoccupation with only half of human history. 'The parallel between Foucault's carceral system and Orientalism is striking' (*The World* 222). Indeed it is, especially when Said uses the parallel to point out the defects of Orientalism through Foucault's own method. A big 'but' remains, though:

The problematic of the relationship between subjectivity and ideas of justice, for example, or the category of the aesthetic as a negation of power... all these... remain for [Foucault's] students, like ourselves on such occasions, to expose and if possible to resolve (Said, 'Foucault and the Imagination' 245).

As we have seen so far, Said did 'expose' the problem of Foucault's aesthetics and 'resolve' it through his iconoclastic methodology that resists unjust power by upholding humanist ideals. Said declares that:

Humanism is centred upon the agency of human individuality and subjective intuition, rather than on received ideas and approved authority... And lastly, most important, humanism is the only—I would go so far as saying the final—resistance we have against the inhuman practices and injustices that disfigure human history (Said, 2003).

In order to highlight a universal humanism, Said adds a significant dimension to intellectualism: *commitment*. This is the ultimate reason why Said retains a strong hope for the triumph of humanistic ideals, despite acknowledging the presence of inhuman power games. Said believes that human belief in 'connections' between cultures will ultimately overrule the 'unbridgeable chasm separating' them (*Orientalism* 352). Although such a project may face many obstacles, committed intellectuals like him continue to create the valued connections through exercising their critical faculties. As Dutton observes so succinctly,

Said's wide-ranging concerns and marshalling of diverse archives, the generalising and beguiling simplicity of many of his statements, arguments and conclusions, his attempts to identify connections between worlds and texts and critics, between cultures and imperialisms, among other things, qualify him for nomination as a great synthesiser in an era of forbidding complexity: the general intellectual and critic as exemplary individual, as committed intellectual and cultural nomad (Dutton, 'Translating Theories' 119) .

We owe it to Said that intellectual commitment to 'critical consciousness' and universal humanism become the key issues of culture studies of our time.

Notes

1. The article is based on a chapter of my MA dissertation written in 2004 at the department of English and American Studies in the University of Manchester. I am thankful to my supervisor, Dr Anastasia Valassopoulos, for her support with the writing.
2. Through *Discipline and Punish* Foucault (and later on Said) *places* the theory of an object formation into the power/knowledge network. Foucault proves that power is not simply 'a set of physico-political techniques' (*Discipline* 223). It has a cyclical relationship with the production of knowledge. He then projects the discursive field as 'an epistemological "thaw" through a refinement of power relations' (*Discipline* 224). In other words, for Foucault (and for Said), knowing and power go hand in glove. Because we know the world through our knowledge of it being piled up in an archive in a certain way, knowledge always belongs to the group who has the power to authenticate their version of information in *there*, argues Foucault and Said. Discourses thus become weapons of a power-knowledge yoke.
3. Foucault claims that visible knowledge is naturally put 'into political investment' of subjugation (*Discipline* 185). Individuals become "'specific" features... under the gaze of a permanent corpus of knowledge' (190). This documentation marked the unseen coercion of power over individuals in modern society as every man becomes 'a "case"' for power to study and control through knowing (191). Consequently, *resistance from individuals could be controlled despite its ability to disrupt the normalcy from time to time* [emphasis added]. In this way, power no longer remains prohibitive. Rather, the ever-present, ever-working, positive power 'produces reality... [And] [t]he individual and the knowledge that may be gained of him belong to this production' (194). Said also shows this kind of subjection to be present in colonialism; but he is never willing to submit to such a domination in a passive way.
4. Said finds in Noam Chomsky another model of opposition by proving that Foucault's methodology is not totally exemplary. Unlike Foucault, Chomsky is in favour of both exploring the power-mechanism and unceasingly battling against it. His invincible courage to speak against US policies, conscience generated intellectualism, and staunch support for justice are the qualities which exemplify for Said an image of the kind of intellectual needed in today's world. Talking about a Dutch Television discussion in which Chomsky appeared with Foucault, he reflects on their disagreement. Whereas Chomsky emphasises justice and intellectual tasks

In the historical perspective of Foucault, one no longer seeks to identify the innovators and their specific achievement or the obstacles which stand in the way of the emergence of truth, but to determine how knowledge, as a system independent of individuals, modifies its own rules of formation (*Language* 76)

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