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IN MEMORY OF EDWARD SAID

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IN MEMORY OF EDWARD SAID

Abstract

Tim Brennan's recent biography of Edward Said entitled *Places of Mind: A life of Edward Said* (2022) is a tribute to a critic, musician, activist and humanist of world caliber whose life and work continue to inspire millions of readers. This review takes a look at Brennan's scholarly methodology in mapping Said's life and work, but also highlights the various domains in which Said the intellectual excelled. The review further calls attention to the intersection between literature and politics, between criticism and classical music, between philosophy and innovative literary theories in Said's legacy; a legacy so rich it continues to present material for new in-depth biographical expositions; a legacy that continues to resonate.

Keywords

Edward Said; Criticism; Postcolonialism; Tim Brennan; Biography

IN MEMORY OF EDWARD SAID

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In 2022, Bloomsbury published a ground-breaking study of the eminent Palestinian scholar-critic and activist, Edward Said (1935-2003). Tim Brennan's *Places of Mind: A Life of Edward Said*, which takes its place among twenty or so other biographies – some thoughtful explications of Said's work, and also some disparaging commentaries – stands out among these as an exceptional tribute, breaking wholly new ground in its approach. *Places of Mind* is not only nuanced, thorough and illuminating in what it has to say about its subject, but it also includes interviews with members of Said's family, with his friends and acquaintances, and his students at Columbia University, where he taught for roughly three decades. It is an outstanding example of how to go about such a work.

What also distinguishes Brennan's biography is the unfettered access he was granted to the complete archive of Said's writings. These include his subject's personal diary and unpublished correspondence, as well as his uncompleted projects for novels, drafts of poems, and his as yet uncollected letters. Brennan himself – now Professor of Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies at the University of Minnesota – was supervised by Said in the writing of his PhD. He remained in close contact with his mentor thereafter, until the latter's death in 2003. This trusting relationship has proved of benefit to the biographer.

In academe, Said was celebrated both as a teacher and as a seminal critic, whose works are still being taught in literature, politics and cultural studies departments, and read with interest by the wider public the world over. The world today knows him as a committed intellectual and a fervent believer in the justice of the Palestinian Cause.

Said was a guest lecturer at the State University of New York, Stony Brook, where, as a student of Brennan in the late 1980s, I had the honor of meeting and conversing with him. At his guest lectures on comparative literature – delivered to a very ethnically and culturally diverse student body – a new generation of students was made aware of his encyclopedic acquaintance with the literature of Europe in three languages, as well as in Arabic. In the Music department, he spoke authoritatively on Western opera. Many students of Arab descent, regardless of their specialization, came to attend these presentations out of respect for Said's work for the Palestinian Cause. In spite of derision and hostility from Zionist and pro-Zionist organizations and individuals on campus, it was a triumphant performance. He won the respect and admiration even of many of his critics, by his thorough knowledge of the history of Palestine, and the role played by British (and later US) imperialism in the founding and sustaining of the State of Israel, at the expense of its original inhabitants.

Said's original contributions in various fields, may be divided into four areas. As a critic and literary theorist, he was one of the earliest advocates of French poststructuralism, and of its potential for application to literary texts. Even before the appearance of Gayatri Spivak's pioneering translation of *Of Grammatology*, he early grasped the importance of Derrida's deconstructionist approach as a critical methodology. More importantly, perhaps, Said made fruitful use of the work of Michel Foucault – notably in *Orientalism* (1978), adopting his own appropriation of the concepts of Foucault's *Les Mots et les Choses* (1966), where the theory of knowledge is seen to be conditioned by the power of the speaker. Said identifies clear instances of this power-knowledge nexus in the Napoleonic combination of military force and scientific surveys during Napoleon's brief occupation of Egypt – both directed to means of investigating and representing Egypt in the interests of French power.

In his applied criticism, Said always put the literary work within its sociohistorical context. Although he built upon the work of major Marxist critics – Lukács, Raymond Williams and Gramsci, his was a more flexible approach to ideology than that of such earlier left-wing thinkers, drawing as it did on the work of the French critic Althusser, in particular Althusser's *Pour Marx*, and *Reading Capital*. It may justly be claimed that Said's *Orientalism* and *Imperialism and Culture* have laid the foundations of the contemporary field of post-colonial studies. One outcome of that

development has been the widespread interest in the work of creative writers from the so-called 'Third World' – Achebe, Salman Rushdie, Anita Desai and Monica Ali. It was Said's critical appreciation that introduced the world to the work of Nobel-prize winning novelist Naguib Mahfouz. As a creative writer, we may also include Said in the list of those whose critical writings – like those of Matthew Arnold, T.S. Eliot, or Taha Hussein – may be seen as works of literature in their own right.

Secondly, Said is perhaps better known outside the literary academy for his intellectual contributions in the field of practical politics. The Arab military defeat of 1967 proved to be a crucial turning point for him – the starting point for his adoption of the role of a politically committed intellectual. By becoming the spokesman for his own occupied nation in its quest for independence, and its struggle to regain at least a portion of its legitimate rights, he raised international awareness of the tragedy of a people. In this regard, he succeeded where all Arab ministries of foreign affairs over the space of thirty years, with their entire apparatus of communication and staffs of highly educated diplomats, had failed to get the message across. He was for a time a consultant to Yasser Arafat, head of the PLO, and a member of the Palestine National Council. Said was also responsible for the final English-language draft of Arafat's speech to the United Nations in 1988.

Thirdly, through the eloquence of his writing and speaking, Said came also to play a role as a prominent Palestinian voice in Western media. He was a regular guest on talk shows around the United States, whenever events in the Middle East were discussed. By speaking truth to power, he exposed the false rhetoric of George Bush and George Bush Jr, during the period of US direct military interventions in the Gulf and Iraq. He was one of those who helped to dismantle the US administration's bogus accusations that Iraq possessed 'weapons of mass destruction'.

In the field of Middle East politics, some have accused him of idealism – in that he always insisted on the possibility of an eventual peaceful resolution of the conflict between the Arabs and Israel. But it was a hope given credence for him by the peaceful transition to democracy and a multiracial political order, in South Africa.

Last but not least, it is sometimes overlooked by those more engaged with literature and politics, that Said also had a fairly distinguished track record as a music critic. His writing on classical music – on opera in particular – demonstrated, quite as much as his work on literary texts, his capacity for sensitive analysis. He was himself an accomplished pianist, who gave concerts around America and Europe. He collaborated with Daniel Barenboim on the founding of the East-West Divan Orchestra, designed to bring together young musicians from Israel and from the Arab world, including Palestinians. He was also instrumental in founding a music school – a conservatoire – on the militarily-occupied West Bank.

Several critics have found fault with Said's alleged cultural elitism – pointing out that he had little or no interest in popular culture. It is true that he lived and died a traditional humanist. In spite of his radicalism as a critic, who took a keen progressive interest in new trends in critical theory, in his literary and musical tastes, he remained a staunch conservative.

After he received a medical diagnosis indicating that the end of his life was near, it only increased his determination to persist to the very last in his chosen tasks. To the very end, he continued to write and speak for the cause of Palestine.

Over a lifetime of sustained, steadfast commitment, he had achieved a number of his aims – not least in awakening the conscience of the world. Like his intellectual peers, Bertrand Russell and Jean-Paul Sartre, his was a voice calling for justice and freedom. Like his co-worker, the linguist and political activist Noam Chomsky, Said remains one of the most significant contributors to thought and action of the twentieth century.

His legacy continues to resonate.

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