

EDWARD SAID IN RETROSPECTIVE

Jarmila DROZDÍKOVÁ
Záhrebská 6, 811 05 Bratislava, Slovakia

The death of professor Edward W. Said on September 25th this year, after a decade of struggle with leukaemia, was met with an unusually broad reaction both on the part of the Western intellectual community and among those engaged in the sphere of the Middle Eastern politics. The views cover the whole range from highly positive through various degrees of criticism to total rejection. This fact itself shows the impact Said's work had far beyond his own scholarly field of a university professor of English and Comparative literature. Looking back at Edward Said's career as a distinguished scholar, one of the greatest intellectuals and public activists of our time, the task of providing a balanced account of his work is not easy.

Most of those who have chosen to devote their lives to the study of the humanities, and above all those who study non-Western cultures, will remember Said as the author of *Orientalism*. The book, published in 1978, has appeared in several editions and has been translated into 35 languages. The size of the response was surprising. Neither the author nor the publisher expected that the study of the ways in which the scholarship and imagination of the orientalist tradition in the West produced its accounts of the Middle East and the Arabs, could attract such a large readership. *Orientalism* caused a major upheaval not only among scholars working within the framework of the discipline it attacked, but in the humanities in general. Rejected outright by some, severely criticized, but also positively, even enthusiastically accepted by others, the work was so influential that "orientalism" has become a generic term for a particular, suspect type of anthropological thought. Many Western scholars began to feel uncomfortable about the ways in which they (and those before them) had spoken for, rather than listened to those they referred to as inhabitants of the "Orient".

The discussions of the cultural encounter between the West and the Rest were subsequently recast in radically new terms. Among those, whose imagination was stirred by Said's work, were scholars of and from the ex-colonies, who gained a twofold critical perspective: for their colonial past and national past and present. Thus the Indian scholar Partha Chatterjee spoke for many, report-

ing on the first time he had read the book, at the end of 1980s: "For me, child of a successful anti-colonial struggle, *Orientalism* was a book which talked of things I felt I had known all along, but have never found the language to formulate with clarity. Like many great books, it seemed to say for the first time what one had always wanted to say. The force of the argument made its impact in the first few pages, and halfway through the book I found my thoughts straying beyond the confines of Said's discussion. I was struck by the way orientalism was implicated in the construction not only of the ideology of British colonialism which had dominated India for two centuries, but also of the nationalism which was my own heritage" (Chatterjee 1992: 195).

Orientalism did not come out of the blue. It landed in the midst of a dispute over orientalism which had been going on for some time in the *Review of Middle East Studies* and in Middle East Research and Information Project (MERIP), and as a result of which orientalism, once synonymous with any scholarly study of Asia, began to be used to refer to older European scholars who combined the old-style methodology with what was felt to be a contemptuous and prejudiced attitude towards people of the East, especially the Middle East (Malti-Douglas 1979:724). At the same time the *reflexive turn* of the 1970s and 1980s in literary studies, anthropology, and history formed critical audience that could debate the complex of practices underlying global relations in a more general way than before. Said's critique of *Orientalism* was part of a more critical conjuncture facilitated by the theoretical developments of poststructuralism, neo-Marxism and feminism (Breckenbridge 1993:3).

Nevertheless, it was above all the political climate that was decisive. In the early 1970s a major world crisis occurred, centred on the oil embargo and the unprecedented leap in crude oil prices following the Arab-Israeli war in October 1973. The way the crisis was interpreted by the mass media in the West laid the basis for the profound metamorphosis of the transcultural relations between the West and Islam. "It is quite clear . . . that the Saidian critique reacts to the added dimension acquired by *Orientalism* through the expansion into a new media discourse, although the theoretical tools of the critique are drawn from the general repertoire of the intellectual discourse of crisis" (Salvatore 1997:140). The atmosphere of distrust and hostility towards the Arabs and growing Islamophobia awakened Said's self-awareness as a Palestinian and mobilized his enormous intellectual potential. Here was the "native" who talked back with poignancy and knowledge of European culture so intimate and erudite that most of his opponents could only wish to attain it.

In his work Said defines orientalism in three interdependent ways. The first designation is an academic one: anyone who teaches, writes about or researches the Orient is an orientalist. Second, orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and "the Occident". The third meaning is "the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short orientalism as Western style of dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said 1979:3).

The last definition clearly points to Said's indebtedness to the French post-structuralist philosopher Michel Foucault. By combining Foucault's ideas on the discursive formations with Gramsci's thoughts on hegemony, Said constructed a powerful critique of Orientalism. He rejected its claim to be a neutral scholarly activity that studied the languages and cultures of the East. He contended that orientalism was made possible by the imperialist expansion into the Muslim world, and at the same time made such an expansion possible. In this way orientalism was bound up with Western domination over large parts of the Muslim territories.

Said's critique of the orientalist enterprise takes two forms. First, he sees it from the perspective of the sociology of knowledge: it shows how Western scholarship was subverted by its complicity with imperialism, and how the reality of the Orient was distorted by orientalism. The other form theorizes orientalism with regard to how orientalism actually constitutes the Orient. In this case the problem with orientalism is not just that it distorts the "real" Orient, but that the Orient itself becomes a creation of orientalism. Both positions raise a number of questions. The former raises more general issues about the representation of the other for which the book does not provide adequate theories. The problems connected with the latter are even more serious. If Islam is constituted by the orientalists, what happens when orientalism dissolves? "This paradox, by which the dissolution of orientalism leads not to "liberating interpretation of Islam" but to its dissolution, calls into question the limit of Said's text. Is it really possible for *Orientalism* to go beyond orientalism? For Said, to deny Islam as a meaningful entity would be to threaten his project: how can there be a counter-writing when that which you counter does not exist?" (Sayyid 1997:35).

Said's book has been the subject of critical analyses and close scrutiny, often with the same scholarly rigour as his own. Said was criticized for being ahistorical, inconsistent and nativist. According to reviewers and critics his concept of orientalism shows inclination to reductionism, a tendency to ignore much of the richness of the discipline. Most critics focused on the power/knowledge equation. By collapsing the entire history of orientalism into a consistent discourse, Said neglects the precise relations between the origins and uses of the particular forms of knowledge and their immediate historical connection, obscuring the intricate relations between the pursuit of knowledge and governmental pursuits. The particulars that connect the histories of imperialism and knowledge are missing (Ludden 1993:250).

Salvatore (1997:156) sums up: . . . "the pamphletistic character of Said's work, his plain mistakes, wholesale judgements, and finally his lack of competence in analyzing Orientalism, might have rightly pointed to a constitutive weakness of this book. These accusations do not diminish, however, its value in consecrating an epistemic rupture. The innovative strength of Said's fresh problematization of Orientalism is to be seen, within the post-crisis climate, in its capacity to reduce to a common denominator the scattered elements of former critiques of Orientalism, and thereby grounding a virtually new tradition of discourse." And Norman Daniel evaluates Said's work in connection with the tra-

dition of Arab anti-orientalist writings: "Arab writers in Arabic customarily attack the imperialist bias of Western scholarship, as do Muslims the imperial and missionary distortions seen to characterize European Islamic studies. When the one culture gives the impression of sneering from a position of assumed superiority, the other can only protest loudly, but until now the protest has gone unheard by those who sneer. Now that Edward Said made it in English – and it is his originality to have done so in an academic idiom – many people in the West are listening for the first time" (Daniel 1982:212).

Said's work after the publication of *Orientalism* was prolific and diverse. *The Question of Palestine* (1979) and *Covering Islam* (1981), with the characteristic subtitle *How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*, coming in quick succession, were written as volumes in series with *Orientalism*. Some years later *After the Last Sky* (1986) and *Blaming the Victims* appeared, continuing the original project inaugurated by *Orientalism*. Equally extensive are Said's publications in the field of literary and cultural studies. *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (1983) contains essays written between 1969 and 1981.

In his voluminous *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) Said decided to include what he left out in *Orientalism*: the response to Western dominance. He stresses two factors informing his book, namely a general worldwide pattern of imperial culture, and a historical experience of resistance against the empires. Said sees old divisions between colonizer and colonized re-emerged in what is often referred to as the North – South divide, which has entailed defensiveness, ideological combat and much hostility, that can bring about devastating armed conflicts. On the other hand he agrees that blaming the Europeans in general for the destitute condition of their countries at present is not an alternative. He believes there is a possibility for development: "Using the perspectives and methods of what might be called a comparative literature of imperialism, I shall consider the ways in which a reconsidered or revised nature of how a post-imperial intellectual attitude might expand the overlapping community between metropolitan and formerly colonized societies. By looking at the different experiences contrapuntally, as making up a set of what I call intertwined and overlapping histories, I shall try to formulate an alternative both to politics of blame and to the even more destructive politics of confrontation and hostility" (Said 1993:19). Instead of partial analysis of national or systematically theoretical schools Said recommends what he calls contrapuntal lines of global analysis, where texts and secular institutions are perceived together, with simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts (Said 1993:59).

Edward Said was born in Jerusalem, son of a well-to-do businessman. He grew up in Cairo and later moved to the United States where he studied at the most prestigious universities. Most of his academic career was spent as a professor at Columbia. There are suggestions that he over-dramatized his own background in order to enhance his credentials as a Palestinian spokesman. Said was a leading member of the Palestinian Parliament in exile for 14 years, step-

ping down in 1991. He broke with Arafat over the PLO's signing of the 1993 Oslo Accords. Said advocated a single-state solution whereby Jews and Palestinians would live jointly in a nonsectarian nation. He reprimanded the PLO leaders for their lack of attention to the daily deprivations, humiliations and indignities of the Palestinian people under Israeli occupation and at the same time reminded the Palestinians that they were the "victims of victims" in acknowledgement of the suffering of the Jews in anti-Semitic Europe. In 1984 Said wrote an article for the London review of books entitled "Permission to Narrate". These three words described what Said felt was most denied to the Palestinians by the international media, the power to communicate their story to a world which had accepted the narrative of an empty Palestine.

In 2002, Said together with pianist Daniel Barenboim, was named the winner of Spain's Prince of Asturias Concord Prize for his effort toward bringing peace to the Middle East. Said and Barenboim had run summer workshops for young musicians from Israel and Arab countries.

REFERENCES

- CHATTERJEE, P. (1992): "Their Own Words? An Essay for Edward Said." In: M. SPRIKLER (ed): *Edward Said: A Critical Reader*. Blackwell, Oxford and Cambridge, MA.
- BRECKENRIDGE, C.A. and PETER VAN DER VEER, eds.: (1993): *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- DANIEL, N. (1982): "Edward Said and the Orientalists". In: MIDEO 15, 211- 222.
- MALTI-DOUGLAS, F. (1979): "Re-orienting Orientalism", *Virginia Quarterly Review* 55. 724-733.
- LUDDEN, D. (1993): "Orientalist Empiricism: Transformations of Colonial Knowledge." In: BRECKENRIDGE, C.A. and PETER VAN DER VEER eds.: *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- SAID, E. (1979): *Orientalism*. New York: Random House. (1993): *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- SALVATORE, A. (1997): *Islam and the Political Discourse of Modernity*. Reading, Berkshire: Ithaca Press.
- SAYYID, B.S. (1997): *A Fundamental Fear*. London & New York: Zed Books Ltd.