

Edward Said and exile: a gaze at counterpoint

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ABSTRACT

This article sets out to analyse the concept of exile as portrayed in the work of Edward Said. Our author's central idea of this term is that even if the term exile is inconsistent in the metaphorical sense he defends, it is enriching intellectually, given that from this perspective, it provides a different vision through which an "exiled" intellectual can analyse the historical experience. In other words, Said, believes that even authors who are not exiles in real terms and fully belong to their respective societies can adopt such a vision. In doing so, a distance is created, enabling critics to embrace a global vision that transcends ideological boundaries and facilitates the study of others and their culture within a humanistic context. The methodology followed in this work sheds a critical light on the interesting, albeit contradictory, concept of exile proposed by Said as a tool for cultural studies. In short, to a point, this essay aims to demonstrate how Edward Said's approach to the term of exile is relevant. Indeed, his own work is largely influenced by authors who have been exiles quintessentially speaking, and who somehow shaped the critique he put forward during his life.

Keywords: *Orientalism, Postcolonialism, Cultural theory, Comparative literature, Cultural Studies*

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INTRODUCTION

Edward W. Said (1935–2003), known worldwide as the author *Orientalism* and also for his staunch defence of human rights in Palestine, his country of birth, with which he identified himself lifelong. He was also a well-known literary critic, author in this field of books such as *The World, the Text and the Critic* (1983).

On reading Said's work, however brief it may be, we immediately grasp the complexity, richness, and even the controversy of the conceptual apparatus

underlying the author's theoretical framework. This terminology provides a key to perceiving his cultural theory and his work as a public intellectual and, as we will see later, poses complications for certain critics.

As stated above, this New York academic, of Palestinian origin, was the author of an interesting work in the cultural field, particularly within the scope of the orientalist theory that, along with other works, gave rise to a whole field of new studies — in spite of him, according to some critics. This was the case of post-colonialism: Young (2001); Kennedy (2000); Child

(1997); Spencer (2010). Without disregarding, indeed, his remarkable contribution to literary criticism, as he was — first and foremost — a professor of English literature and comparative literature at the renowned Columbia University in New York.

EXILE AS A STRATEGY FOR THE ANALYSIS OF CULTURAL STUDIES

Undoubtedly, many of the basic concepts developed by the American writer are closely related to his work as a literary critic. In this essay I will analyse one of the most common threads of his cultural theory: the concept of exile. I will place particular emphasis on the fact that, although this term harbours several contradictions, for Said it is an enriching concept that paves the way for cultural research on new dimensions and offers another vision, among other things.

To begin with, I should point out that although Edward Said's analysis of this concept stems from the social and political history of displacement, it delves deeper. For him, the term is both real and metaphorical. In other words, even intellectuals who fully belong to their respective societies can be considered as either integrated or marginal.

Therefore, Said believes that the rule governing the course of the intellectual as an outsider in his own society is that of exile, the perception of being dissatisfied in the community itself is to always feel out of place. It is this metaphorical sense of the word he advocates as a study tool — as we will clarify later — which gave rise to the special, and for many critics the ambiguous and confused, vision of the work of this intellectual in exile.

In this context, it should be noted that Said's approach to the issue of exile is not without proper support. His treatment of this issue is strengthened by his own personal experience. As he narrates in his autobiography entitled *Out of place* (1999), his life experience was marked by a crucial event. His whole family, he tells us, was forced to leave their

homeland, Palestine, after the Israeli occupation, and they took refuge in Egypt. Later, for other mundane reasons, he himself left the aforementioned Arabic country and headed for the United States.

As predictable, his first days in the USA were tough and he describes his arrival in the American continent as the saddest day in his life. In addition, the author himself has recorded in his writings that his own life experience was always conditioned by the circumstance of displacement and alienation with respect to his birth place. In this regard, he states the following in his above-mentioned memoir:

Along with the language, it is geography — especially in the displaced form of departures, arrivals, farewells, exile, nostalgia homesickness, belonging, and travel itself — that is the core of my memories of those early years. Each of the places I lived in — Jerusalem, Cairo, Lebanon, the United States — has a complicated, dense web of valences that was very much part of growing up, gaining an identity, forming my consciousness of myself and of others. (Said, 2000: Prefix p xii).

Likewise, Linda Anderson, in her article entitled "Autobiography and Exile: Edward Said's Out of Place", asserts that Said's own memoirs serve to shed light on Said's shifting, even contradictory, position on exile, the question for her being: How can we understand the position of our author on this subject? On the one hand he speaks of exile as a real and cruel experience; the dismemberment of a human being from his native country that can never heal. On the other hand, he insists on the metaphorical aspect of such an experience. Following this line of reasoning, the writer asserts that this contradiction remains unresolved in Said's theory of exile. For her:

Said has written about exile in a similarly paradoxical way, invoking it as a metaphor for intellectual's desired condition of marginality and continual journeying, and as a real historical event (Anderson, 2009: 165).

In our opinion, even admitting the aforementioned author's point of view, the contradictions that lie at the heart of Said's approach to exile, his analysis of this point, imply a new way of seeing; a lens through which one can perceive both historical experience and human relations. In this respect, exile would be a strategy rather than a vital dismemberment in the life of intellectuals: "it is a means not an end; it is above all a way of thinking" (Spencer, 2010: 389). It is — in Said's opinion —

... an *alternative* to the mass institutions that dominate modern life. Exile is not, after all, a matter of choice: you are born into it or it happens to you. But provided that exile refuses to sit on the sidelines nursing a wound, there are things to be learned: he or she must cultivate a scrupulous (not indulgent or sulky) subjectivity (Said, 2000: 183).

From this perspective, the above would mean that, although it may seem paradoxical to speak of the advantages and the pleasures of exile, by seeing through the exile's eyes, an intellectual embraces originality because, as Said points out, as opposed to most people who have knowledge of a single culture, a foreigner is always aware of at least two cultures. Thus, by crossing cultural borders, apart from having his or her own culture, the "exiled" intellectual adapts to the culture of the receiving country. This range of views, which such an intellectual has appropriated, helps him or her to have a contrapuntal awareness, a concept which Edward Said defines in the following terms:

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. (Said, 1993: 59–60)

Furthermore, Said's proposal of exile as a research strategy for writers who feel hemmed in by the

cultural and national barriers of their native countries also implies that that open themselves up to the opportunities afforded by seeing through the gaze of an outsider and an outcast. This critical approach enriches our view of the other and his or her culture, and enables us to actually travel to other humanistic conjunctures and judge them according to the worldly conditions in which they were born.

In short, this concept of exile does not exist in a stable state, on the contrary, for Said such a term would imply: intellectual restlessness, dissatisfaction with established norms, and rupture with tribal loyalties. Thus, in the words of the American professor Exile:

... exists in a median state, neither completely at one with the new setting, nor fully disencumbered of the old, beset with half-involvements and half-detachments, nostalgic and sentimental on one level, an adept mimic or a secret outcast on another (Said 1994: 48).

In any event, it should be noted that when reflecting on the experience of exile, Said bore in mind the experience of the many exiles that influenced his intellectual work. Among these authors, noteworthy is the presence of Joseph Conrad, on whom Edward Said's first book, *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* (1966), was based, and to which he returns repeatedly throughout his work, such as *Cantus firmus* and as a future stamping ground.

For Said, there is an account in Conrad's novel *Amy Foster* (1901) that seems to exemplify the fate of the exile. In this story, the novelist tells the tale of a young man named Yanko, who left his home country to settle in England where he endured the hardships of exile. The young man does not know the language, nor does he know how to communicate with anyone. Only a young plain peasant girl called Amy tries to communicate with him. They marry and have a son but when Yanko falls ill, the young British woman tears their son away from him and flees.

In this account, Yanko's fate is described as a supreme disaster of loneliness and despair. In Said's words, Conrad took the exile's neurotic fear and turned it into an aesthetic principle. For him:

Each Conradian exile fears, and is condemned endlessly to imagine, the spectacle of a solitary death illuminated, so to speak, by unresponsive, uncommunicating eyes. (Said, 2000: 143).

In this respect, and as one critic pointed out, might we believe that Said himself feared a similar death?

But when our author speaks of exile, he does not refer to something sad and helpless, even though he recognizes that one of the paradoxes of an exile is his or her feelings of happiness with the hint of unhappiness. On the contrary, he tells us that his book *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) was mostly written in New York City, city of the exile par excellence. Moreover, belonging to both sides of the imperial experience enabled him to understand them better and more easily. For Spencer, all Said's work — from his first book *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography* 1966 to his last writings on the Iraq war and his impression of the late style — was distinguished by his awareness that personality, identity and perspectives are not static, but can be enriched by exposure to new experiences, strange encounters and thought-provoking reflections (Spencer, 2010).

CRITIQUE

As stated above, the concept of exile portrayed in Said's work poses a problem for certain critics. In a way, Said's treatment of these writers in exile is abstruse and skeptical. Abdul Jan Mohamed describes this as speculation, since he only places them in other cultures to track the policy of the inroads made into those cultures.

The best example for this critique is Said's analysis of Eric Auerbach's work. It is true to say that the latter author wrote his monumental book entitled *Mimesis* (1942) when he was a refugee in Istanbul, fleeing from

Nazism. But the problem for Abdul is that Said attributes the very existence of this book to his Eastern exile. This argument does not appear to convince Jan Mohamed at all, given that there is no clear indication that the East had a decisive influence on Auerbach's ideas to the point of changing them. Furthermore, for him, the German author writes as a Western intellectual and for a Western audience just as if his book were to see the light anywhere other than the East. In this context Abdul states that:

Said's specular appropriation of Auerbach for defining the value of exile seems to overlook some fundamental differences between the two men. While Auerbach writes about and for Western cultures, Said does not write principally for or about Middle Eastern cultures; he writes in the main for and about the West. Even The Question of Palestine is addressed, at least in part, as Said explicitly acknowledges, to a Euro-American audience. Thus, while Auerbach is an exile in the weak sense, that is, a subject who always belongs to his home culture in spite of, indeed because of, a circumstantial and temporary alienation, Said, who is neither quite an exile nor quite an immigrant, is able to develop, out of his more complicated border status, an enabling theory of "exile" an "ascetic ode of *willed* homelessness" (Abdul Jan Mohamed, 1992: 221)

CONCLUSIONS

In short, and to conclude, it is worth pointing out that the academic and intellectual evolution of our author demonstrates a mind already matured by the experience of exile, a person who prefers not to be ascribed to fixed ideas or geographically restricted worlds. His own identity is not geographically determined but rather his self-perception is of a cluster of flowing currents. These are of transcendence because they are not static, quite the reverse, they are in constant movement. Besides, Said prefers this to a solid and ahistorical identity. Anyway, the author states that: "With so many dissonances in my life I have learned actually to prefer being not quite right and out of place" (1999: 295).

Thus Said's writings imply we should consider the whole world, including ourselves, as a strange land, from whence to spread human love to geographies worldwide and never hold on to one as our own. Here, it seems fitting to end this article with a fragment quoted by Said throughout his work:

“It is therefore, a source of great virtue for the practiced mind to learn, bit by bit, first to change about in visible and transitory things, so that

afterwards it may be able to leave them behind altogether. The person who finds his homeland sweet is still a tender beginner; he to whom every soil is as his native one is already strong; but he is perfect to whom the entire world is as a foreign place. The tender soul has fixed his love on one spot in the world; the strong person has extended his love to all places; the perfect man has extinguished his” (Hugh of St. Victor, 1961: 101).

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