

Bringing Saidian insights into the Critical-Pedagogic Practices of English Studies in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Edward Said's fresh and unique approaches with regard to the interpretation of texts and history have played a significant role in bringing about, what we may call, a decisive paradigm shift in the exclusivist, bit supremacist or prejudiced reading habits of western theoretical practices. Said foregrounded the notion of historical contextualisation, the idea that texts must be seen in terms of their correlations with lived human experiences, unveiled diverse ramifications of power, and brought along the unsung voices from the margins and so on in our interpretivescapes. The concepts that are central to Saidian interpretive system— such as, the metaphor of exile, the motif of intransigence or transgression, the notion of nomadism in criticality, or the idea of counterpoint cohabiting widely discordant notes in an interpretive universe— can hardly be regarded as mere interpretive toolbox; they rather resonate and embody the author's insights for the creation of a better and just world contours of which may involve reenvisioning the idea of solidarity, pursuit of justice, ideas of coexistence, and dismantling the status quo of hatred, revenge, and violence, that is, continuing with the struggle for an equitable existence for all. This paper would thus show how a reorientation of Saidian interpretive devices in the pedagogic practices of English Studies in Bangladesh can forward a deep sense of criticality grounded on an ethico-moral intellectual premise that would pave passages for plural and inclusivist visions regarding life and literature, finally, creating a space for an equitable world order: such criticality would encourage, no doubt, a combination of intellect and empathy— in other words, a deep concern for the “unconsoled” of the earth.

The subject of this paper is to introduce Edward Said's interpretive insights into the pedagogic practices of English Studies in Bangladesh. In the mainstream interpretive arena of Language and Literature Studies in our part of the world, Said happens to be, to a certain extent, a marginal figure, hardly occupying a predominant space in our interpretive landscape. We bring on and teach Said's discourse on Orientalism, politics related to the issue of representation and elaborate on the relationship between culture and hegemony in our classrooms, consciously, or perhaps unconsciously, overlooking the wide range of interpretive precepts that we may deduce from Saidian oeuvre; and the fact as well that how these interpretive frameworks cannot be seen as 'mere' theoretical toolkit rather resonate the author's worldview and reflect his understanding of diverse human maladies. The primary objective of my paper is thus to situate Saidian insights into the very context of our pedagogic practices of English Studies, and thereby demonstrate how such insights can shape our everyday pedagogical exercises.

As practitioners of English language and literature studies our primary task revolves around the act of interpreting texts. One of the fundamental questions that this paper thus raises is that how are we going to shape or fashion our teaching strategies, our pedagogical operations? What should be the intellectual and philosophical premise, the guiding force or principle of our pedagogic enterprises, as professional interpreters of literary texts? Is it to inculcate and mindlessly reproduce the norms and cultural values of the West? Or to acquire a mastery over English the language? My proposition is that that we should not confine ourselves to any specific disciplinary parameter, to mere language acquisition or familiarity with western knowledge

traditions or canons, for example, rather our professional expertise should enable us to go beyond, as Edward Said's theoretical work suggests, the narrow confines of our own discipline and engage in issues that concern the larger humanity.

Indeed, Edward Said occupies a distinctive space as one of the finest thinkers in the contemporary, critical, interdisciplinary arena of Cultural Studies and Literary Theory; a keen observer of life and literature, culture and politics, Said's unconventional and unbiased approach to interpretation of texts and history has brought about a definitive paradigm shift in the centrist, essentialist, bit prejudiced reading strategies of western scholarship. Throughout his oeuvre, Said raises a number of significant questions regarding the act interpretation and its pedagogical implications: for example, how should we conceive the trajectory of criticism or literary criticism *per se*, against a kind of historical backdrop that is plagued with the memories of ravages of empire, narratives of displacement and disillusionment, of religious conflicts, sectarian violence and communal divisions, and the contemporary "lit-crit" trend, that is characterised by the overarching post-structuralist and postmodernist claims of logocentrism, media-driven events, random sensations, and schizoid human entities, where reality is rendered 'invalid' and made available to us only through surfaces and simulacrum? Placed against such tragic catastrophe and memories of past, which continue to impinge upon the lives of the multitudes, and the authoritarianism of theoretical glib, or the domination of a radical techno-scientific attitude which tends to reduce even the gravest forms of tragedies into 'mere' events, what pedagogic role, we may ask, should academicians and critics play? How should they engage with texts and fashion their interpretive exercises? Are they going to deal with the mere aesthetic or linguistic aspects of a text, a "lit-crit" practice that culminates in an adherence to smug professionalism and academic specialisation? Or should they transcend their normative, habitual disciplinary engagements to pay close attention to what lies not only within but *outside* the world of academia? This 'outside' for Said, in fact, entails, as Abdirahman Hussein aptly points out, a way/formula of criticism that would make room for definitive interventions,¹ generating, for instance, a scathing critique of the unjust killing and maiming of unarmed Palestinians in the name of Jewish interest or the quest for a mythical Jewish homeland; or unveiling, in some other instances, the way hegemonic systems manipulate language or narrative, exploit notions of difference, thereby preventing voices of the marginalised or the oppressed to emerge.

Indeed, one of the predominant and abiding contributions of Saidian oeuvre lies in the way he has inspired or guided us to view criticism as an *interventionary and transformative*² point of entry into the world, as a mode of thinking, acting and being in the world that is not habitual or customary, or circumscribed by disciplinary diktats, rather is informed by a critical attitude or consciousness that is de-centered, nomadic, eclectic and investigative in character. In his 1984 essay "The Future of Criticism," Said sheds light on this interventionary aspect of criticism and contends how the very act of doing criticism entails a commitment to the future, and making a contribution, be it through a decisive intervention into the discriminatory structures, or through the emphasis on the non-coercive and non-totalising modes of knowledge and life practices as essential elements of the "desired future." Said asserts in this regard:

No matter how rarefied the type of criticism, it seems to me incumbent on critics not to lose or efface but clarify the social traces of their work. This is so in the end because as a social and rational intellectual activity criticism is, properly speaking, an interventionary and, in Gramsci's phrase, a potentially *directive*, phenomenon.³

Said's understanding of interpretation as a radical and subversive act geared towards intervention and transformation of received realities and texts, his compulsive quest to bring forward alternative voices from the fringes of the society and so on, are definitive of a democratic, de-domesticated, and interventional pedagogy in humanities. Thus, I argue here, as Maswood Akhter reiterates in a similar vein in one of his writings, that our pedagogy must be interventional in character;⁴ we need to engineer our pedagogic infrastructure in such a way so that we be able to construct counter/resistance narratives, unsettle the hegemonism of unjust and discriminatory structures, and reenvision ideas of coexistence that would be endowed with principles of insaf, with inclusive and empathic vision of contemporary realities.

The key concepts and categories that constitute the nodes of Saidian interpretive-matrix—concepts including the indispensability of intransigence or transgression, the sincere quest to preserve pluralities in an interpretive universe, the desire for an ethics of alterities and epistemological pluralism, or the resistance against purist discourses and filial modes of scholarship—could offer us an ethico-political-ideational paradigm, a unique pedagogical framework indeed, that would help us rehabilitate humanities from its sacred, apolitical enterprises and restore it to unsettling, secular beginnings, and imagination of alternatives.

Said's contrapuntal framework, founded upon musical contrapuntality, for example, allows divergent/discordant narratives to play along each other; it inspires a reading away from the text's universal and timeless value and opts for a comparative, historically contextualised approach that concentrates on the political resonance and undercurrents of aesthetics, and pays subaltern/micro narratives an adequate importance. Taking Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814) as a case in point, Said demonstrates how mainstream interpretations of the text tend to elide the correlation between overseas imperial domination and the economic sustainability of empire, silencing the fact that it was continued economic exploitation and unjust oppression of the slave labourers— toiling awfully in overseas imperial plantations— that was responsible, to a great extent, for maintaining the order, comfort, “domestic tranquility”, and economic stability of Lord Bertram's estate called Mansfield Park in England; and was also responsible for consolidating the capitalistic enterprises of empire.

Again, if we take the example of texts like Adib Khan's *Seasonal Adjustments* (1994), a novel that I would like to describe as ‘counterpoint’ in motion, ensures the cohabitation of contrapuntal perspectives: along with the West Pakistani oppression and the dehumanisation of human lives, both prior to and during the 1971 war, Khan brings into his narrative the other side of the picture, the not-so-glorious acts of Bengali nationalists or patriots, especially, the indiscriminate killing of, or the brutalities they exerted upon the Biharis, after their victory in December 1971. Such an architecture of counterpoints emphasises on the reconciliation of contending points of view and underscores the congregation or confluence of and interface between contradictory viewpoints. The trope of counterpoint or polyphony thus could offer us a framework of engaging with texts, a socio-aesthetic means of exploring the world, and could illustrate as well a vision of an equitable world order, a contrapuntal human community, where people can cohabit and voice solidarity despite their differences.

Another significant precept/column that comprise Saidian interpretive architecture is the notion of exilic, nomadic and transgressive components of criticism, characterised by a roving, unhomed, in-betweened critical consciousness, central to Saidian interpretive ecosystem. In the introductory chapter of their book, *Edward Said: A Legacy of Emancipation and Representation*, Adel Iskandar and Hakem Rustom define Said's critical and intellectual positionality— informed by the “untidiness” or unsettledness of exile and a skeptic attitude to filial ties— as “the pedagogy of nomadism.”⁵ This pedagogy of nomadism, embodying a sense of out-of-placeness, is as much “theoretical and epistemological” as it is “political and existential”⁶; it shapes Said's fashion of doing criticism and elaborates his intellectual *dharma* or vocation. This “critical nomadism” that Said elucidates in his writings and considers a responsibility of the intellectual is rooted in, according to Iskandar and Rustom, an “irremediably secular and unbearably historical” exilic consciousness that uncovers the intersections of power and knowledge, disrupts “the silence of consent, [demystifies] the instruments of control and [stimulates] voices of dissent.”⁷ It demonstrates on the one hand the subversive or trans-tending potentials of pedagogy, and on the other casts light on its transformative underpinnings. Such a formula of critical pedagogy, informed by deep politico-ethical sensibilities, could destabilise the authority of orthodox and grand narratives, dismantle received interpretations of texts and history, and unsettle hegemonic operations of diverse state machinery and media establishment.

What is important to note here is that such nomadic currents, embedded in a pedagogical system, provides one with an opportunity to transcend the conventional or formal rituals of intellectual

performance and look for uncharted, unconventional modes of doing criticism. For Said, the exilic consciousness— which tenaciously nourishes his nomadic shifts in flow— comes to embody, as Timothy Brennan rightly observes, a “less literal than positional, less filiative than political,” and also an “ideational” state.⁸ The blessing of such intellectual disposition— that is critically distanced from all purist essences— is that it could deconstruct centrist, propagandist approaches to history favoured by western historiographers and sociologists, dismantle western systems of representation that are supportive of the powers that be, and eliminate interventions on the part of those represented, and could function as well as the resistance of memory against the hegemonic will to forget. Once we orient our students to such interpretive principles, they would be able to see literature as a form of resistance, as an act of digging out the layers of deliberate forgetting, and thereby as an act of remembering too: in this way students would be able to interpret, for example, texts like *Chernobyl Prayer: A Chronicle of the Future* (1997) by Svetlana Alexievich, *We Do Not Part* (2021) by Hang Kang, or *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017) by Arundhati Roy, as acts of remembrance, as resistance against the authoritarian will to erase alternate voices. Again, they would be able to read, for instance, Ghassan Kanafani’s *Men in the Sun and Other Palestinian Stories* (originally published in 1962), or Mahmoud Darwish’s poem, “After the Last Sky”, as narratives/artistic expressions articulating or voicing the plight of an unhomed humanity. The metaphor of exile as a critical and an intellectual disposition— rather than existential predicament— thus could offer us a unique interpretive pedagogy, a “critical-utopian perspectivism”, as Radhakrishnan coins it,⁹ that would not merely call for a re-reading of the politics of customary/selective reading practices; allow us to soar above the filial/canonical/nationalist modes of belonging thus ensuring critiques of insiderism, and identity politics, but also would help reenvision paradigms of affiliative solidarity.

One of the principal pedagogical approaches that we deduce from Saidian system of interpretation is that he sees the act of interpretation as a deeply political issue— an ethico-political style of life— as a weapon of wielding urgent and definitive interventions, and as a strategy of representing the rights or cause of the minoritised, the “unconsoled”¹⁰ of the earth. Said’s conceptualisation of interpretation as an act of transcendence, his interdisciplinary approach to ‘doing criticism’, not merely provide windows into lived human experiences but uncovers deeply hegemonic realities as well. However, the insights that we derive from Said’s interpretive principles can be seen, finally, as reflecting his philosophy of life, contours of which involve dismantling the status quo of revenge, hatred and violence, and imagining a dignified and equitable existence for all. Said’s lifelong commitment to decode and uncover the myths and lies that constitute the discourse of Zionism, his recalcitrant attitude against a system of denial and politics of exclusion, that denies Palestinians their right to return and the right to exist, underline a pedagogical approach that would affiliate with, and if possible, “speak truth to power” in support of a just cause.

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- ¹ See Abdirahman Hussein, *Edward Said: Criticism and Society*, Verso, 2002, p. 181.
- ² Italics mine.
- ³ Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, Harvard University Press, 2001, p. 171.
- ⁴ Maswood Akhter, Farhanaz Rabbani et al., “Integrating Legal, Spatial, and Saidian insights into the pedagogic practices for English Studies in Bangladesh”, *National Conference on Critical Affective Pedagogy for Bangladesh: Teaching Language, Literature, Cultural Studies and Communication in English Studies* (Conference Proceedings), Edited by Prof. Dr. Sanyat Sattar, Tania Tasneem Hossain et al., Department of English, Jahangirnagar University, 24 & 25 May 2024, p. 24.
- ⁵ Adel Iskandar and Hakem Rustom, “Introduction: Emancipation and Representation”, *Edward Said: A Legacy of Emancipation and Representation*. Eds. University of California Press, 2010, pp. 5-7.
- ⁶ R. Radhakrishnan, *A Said Dictionary*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2012, p. 38.
- ⁷ Iskandar and Rustom, “Introduction: Emancipation and Representation”, *Edward Said: A Legacy of Emancipation and Representation*, op. cit. p. 7.
- ⁸ Timothy Brennan qtd. in Youssef Yacoubi, “Edward Said, Eqbal Ahmad and Salman Rushdie: Resisting the Ambivalence of Postcolonial Theory” *Edward Said and Critical Decolonization*. Edited by Ferial J. Ghazoul. The American University in Cairo Press, 2007, p. 198.
- ⁹ See Radhakrishnan, *A Said Dictionary*, op. cit. p. 41.
- ¹⁰ I borrow this expression from Arundhati Roy’s book, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*. See the dedication page.