

The Politics of the Margin and the Centre: Re-reading Edward Said

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ABSTRACT

The paper attempts to locate Edward Said's understanding of the margin and the centre through his own condition of displacement. The paper introduces many of his concepts, and argues that these concepts revolve around the notion of the margin and the center as perceived and understood by Said. His idea of the state of marginality is singular as it brings forth certain positive element in it. For him, marginality can gather strength and instill a new insight to an observer. By redefining marginality, he subverts the traditionally held notion about it. His works provide vital insights to many postcolonial interrogations, and he remains one of the most important thinkers of the twentieth century.

KEYWORDS

Marginality; Postcolonial; Displacement.

It will not be wrong to say that the conflict of the margin and the centre has been the central theme of many of Edward Said's works. This thematic concern may not appear at all surprising once we take into consideration the "uniquely punishing destiny" (*Orientalism* 27) that Said shares with other Palestinians. He spends his early life as a refugee in Egypt – "I was born in Jerusalem and had spent most of my formative years there and, after 1948 when my entire family became refugees in Egypt" (Exile 556). His *Out of Place*, which is "a record of an essentially lost or forgotten world", (*Out of Place* xi) clearly mentions the influence of the conflict:

an extraordinary increasing number of departures have unsettled my life from its earliest beginnings. To me, nothing more painful and paradoxically sought after characterizes my life than the

many displacements from countries, cities, abodes, languages, environments they have kept me in motion all these years. (*Out of Place* 217)

His life is a life "out of place"; always at the margin carrying a sense of dissatisfaction and grief. He writes:

To this day I still feel that I am away from, ludicrous as that may sound, and though I believe I have no illusions about the "better" life I might have had, had I remained in Arab world or lived and studied in Europe, there is still some measure of regret (*Out of Place* 223).

He stays in New York after being displaced from – Palestine, Egypt and Lebanon. He was born in Jerusalem in 1935. Still there is the constant awareness of being at odds with his environment.

Now it does not seem important or even desirable to be “right” and in place (right at home, for instance). Better to wander out of place, not to own a house, and not ever to feel too much at home anywhere, especially in a city like New York, where I shall be until I die. (*Out of Place* 269)

The paper attempts to study Said’s conceptual formulations from the perspective of his marginalized situation, and how this particular situation has molded him to acquire a unique attitude towards an understanding of the world and its events. In 2000, Said pens an essay entitled “Reflections on Exile” where he characterizes the condition of marginality as “a debilitating solitude; a loneliness, a discontinuous state of being, a state of jealousy... often eccentric intransigent, unpleasant...” (Zeleva *The Politics and Poetics of Exile* 9). Despite all these negative connotations, the condition of marginality, for Said, lends a contrapuntal awareness of perspectives. This is due to the fact that people in general are aware of only one culture, one perspective whereas marginalized people are exposed to different cultures and perspectives. This exposure is of great value to the person and his/her outlook as he/she becomes what Said says, “conscious of other contrapuntal juxtapositions that diminish orthodox judgment and elevate appreciative sympathy”. (Reflections 168).

With this “contrapuntal juxtaposition” a marginalized person experiences the need to create his/her separate world. This world resembles the world of a fiction because it is “unnatural”. It is a world of imagination and therefore we see that marginalized people are generally people from the field of literature, politics and academics. Of course, thousands of people do experience such state however writers and intellectuals experience it in a totally

different manner which for them is paradoxically a catalyst of creative productivity. They have shown to write more in the condition of marginalized state than while being in the comfort zone of their homeland. Nuruddin Farah who has been in exile since 1970s produces a work entitled “In Praise of Exile” where he empathically mentions that “distance distills; ideas become clearer and better worth pursuing” (In Praise of Exile 65).

In the essay “Reflections on Exile” Said distills out the beauty of marginalized and displaced people. According to him, they alone are the cosmopolitan intellectuals having “a touch of solitude and spirituality” (Reflections 181). The condition of marginality is but a symbol of freedom, emancipation and liberation. It is no exaggeration that liberation as an intellectual mission has now shifted to its unhoused, decentred and exilic energies, energies whose incarnation today is the migrant (Zeleva *Tribulations* 114).

In his *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion*, Thomas Tweed has discussed the concepts – locative, supralocative and translocative. “Locative” in simple term is the centre, it values the belongingness to a space while “supralocative” is associated with periphery rather than the centre, and values transcending space instead of being located in one place. “Translocative” somewhat swings between locative and supralocative i.e. it constantly moves between the centre and the margin. Said’s notion of marginality resembles to that of Tweed’s supralocative that emphasizes periphery, and also to that of translocative (in between centre and margin). The in-between position is the sacred space for Said for it helps to acquire the contrapuntal vision which is essentially a deconstructive way of looking at things. This unique position of the person in periphery gives significance to the marginalized and ignored section of the society and the culture.

Said's experience of the marginalized position has led to see the concept of culture in a totally different mode. He sees "culture" as "an environment process and hegemony in which individuals and their works are embedded" (The World 8). According to Said, culture has a boundary that defines what is inside the culture and what is outside the culture. In other words, it has an environment within which it functions. Said cites the example of Auerbach. He (Auerbach) moves away from his familiar environment and goes to the alien place of Istanbul. Said also notes the dominating and authorizing position of culture. Auerbach's *Mimesis* is written when he is exiled to Istanbul. The book deals with Europe but he himself confesses that the book would not have been written in the same manner if he has not been in a marginalized position. The decentred situation has lent a different perspective to Auerbach which otherwise would have been reconfigured by what Said says as "grid of research techniques and ethics by which the prevailing culture imposes on the individual scholar its canons of how literary scholarship is to be conducted" (The World 9).

In *Culture and Anarchy* (1961), Arnold speaks of "the great men of culture" who have "best knowledge, best ideas of their times". Said remarks that these "best knowledge" and "best ideas" are in fact the privileged ones out of all other ideas in the society, which Arnold terms as "culture". Said highlights the fact that it is the State that promotes and safeguards the so called "culture" and therefore culture and State are strongly linked. He writes that "the power of culture is potentially nothing less than the power of the State" (quoted in Ashcroft 53). Anything that harms the State is labeled as "anarchy" and it includes strikes, demonstration and so on. Arnold writes:

Thus in our eyes, the very framework and exterior order of the State, whosoever may administer the State, is sacred; and culture is the most resolute enemy of anarchy (quoted in The World 11)

The sacredness of the State is established and the culture is promoted to safeguard against any sort of anarchy. This paradigm is nothing but "an assertion of hegemony by the State to maintain its power over the people. It is only by the hegemonic strength of the culture that Macaulay asserts that English language should be taught in India instead of the vernaculars language like Sanskrit. He does not hesitate to say that "a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia". He is speaking with a pre conceived notion that European culture is superior to that of the Orient. The idea of the involvement of hegemony will be clear when we consider the fact that he is pronouncing his statement from "a position of power" where he can easily "translate his opinions into the decision" (The World 13). Said's idea of culture revolves around the notion of hegemony. It is not merely a way of life. Being in a non-privileged position, Said has been able to see (from the median state) the clash of civilization – of the Orient and the Occident, and the role of hegemony in determining what is ascribed as "culture" and whose vested interest it is serving.

In his work *The World the Text and the Critic*, Said discusses a form of criticism which he calls "secular criticism". This criticism transcends the traditional literary criticisms – practical, academic, literary history, literary apprehension and interpretation and literary theory. Said argues that these criticisms have an orientation towards a doctrinaire set of assumptions and a language of "specialization and professionalization allied with cultural dogma" (The World

25). These “assumption” and “cultural dogma” according to Said bring an end to criticism for criticism should not have any “solidarity” beforehand. Secular criticism unlike the rest does not occupy specific position and label like “Marxism”, “Feminism”. It deals with the texts by being in the state of median; by being in-between the processes of “filiation” and “affiliation”. It has a sensitive response to the dominant culture with the acute awareness that the individual consciousness is but a product of the dominant culture. This sensitive response caters a capacity for an analytical distinction which is lacking in the traditional criticism owing to their solidarity. Said points out:

These (the attribute of the secular criticism) trouble the quasi religious authority of being comfortable at home among one’s people supported by known powers and acceptable values, protected against the outside world. (The World 16)

It will not be wrong to say that Said accurately perceives this form of criticism (secular criticism) because of his own exiled condition where he himself is located in between two cultures experiencing “filiation” and “affiliation”. Said explains the two terms – filiation and affiliation.

If a filial relationship was held together by natural bonds and natural forms of authority – involving obedience, fear, love, respect and instinctual conflict – the new affiliative relationship changes these bonds into what seem to be transparent forms – such as guild consciousness, consensus collegiality, professional respect, class and the hegemony of a dominant culture (The World 20)

The process of affiliation is important in the modern time. In fact Said asserts that it is increasingly becoming

difficult to maintain filiation to one’s native culture and avoid affiliation to the new values and new ideals. The movement from the process of filiation to affiliation characterizes the worldliness of texts according to Said. Before going into the details as such, it would be good to know how the “text” is perceived by Edward Said. The text as used and understood by Said is somewhat different from that of Roland Barthes. Barthes views text as a form of structure having syntagmatic and paradigmatic elements. Said however goes further to take into account the involvement of culture in the production of text. For Said, it is a “cultural act” and what Barthes has done is the separation of the text from the world by giving it an autonomous identity. Said speaks of the worldliness of the text by locating it in the world and writes, “A text in its actually being a text is being in the world” (The World 33).

Regarding the relation of the text and the world, the classicists view that the world exists outside while the text simply represents it. Structuralist on the other hand sees the world as being constructed by the text. The world as such does not exist. There cannot be any non-textual experience of the world. These two views are balanced by Said. According to him:

The text does not exist outside the world, as is the implication in both the realist and structuralist positions, but is a part of the world of which it speaks, and this worldliness is itself present in the text as a part of its formation (quoted in Ashcroft 39)

Thus text plays a significant role in the ways we perceive the world however the existence of the world as such is not denied by Said. Coming to affiliation, it is (as a critical approach towards text) is of crucial importance for Said because it breaks the text from its filiative connection with other texts and is replaced by affiliation to the world thus

establishing the worldliness of the text. A reader is liberated to see the text as a phenomenon in the world with all sorts of affiliation – non canonical, non-traditional and non-literary. Bill Ashcroft explains:

Affiliation, then is a feature of the text's worldliness. While filiation suggests a Utopian domain of texts connected serially, homologously and seamlessly with other texts [...] The affiliation of the text constantly leads us back to its worldliness, for we are drawn to ask the question: "Where is the text taking place?"; "How is it taking place?" Affiliation draws us inexorably to the location and the locatedness of the text's production. (43)

Perhaps it will not be wrong to say that Said's ideas generally involve location and its association to culture. His views are embedded in the "worldliness" which we can attribute to his state of marginality.

In the essay entitled "Intellectual Exile: Expatriates and Marginal" Said brings forth the concept of Intellectual Exile. According to him, an intellectual exile or an intellectual in the state of marginality is comparable to the person who has suffered a shipwreck and has landed on an island, thus compelling to live "with the land, not on it." The image of Robinson Crusoe might have come to the reader's mind. However, Said observes that an intellectual exile does not try to "colonize his little island" like Crusoe. An intellectual exile is more akin to Marco Polo who is always on move from one place to another, and never settles down.

The condition of the homelessness which is the destiny of an intellectual exile gives "certain rewards and yes privilege". According to Said, an intellectual exile carries in him both what is left behind and what is present in front of him now. He is provided with a double vision which does not allow him to see things separate. This double vision engenders a new and unpredictable component which for Said

is "a better perhaps even more universal idea" (Representations 44).

Perhaps even more important than this aspect of a double vision is the intellectual exile's perception of "situations as contingent". The change in place and with it the change of culture, ideas and values make it possible for an intellectual exile to apprehend situations as human made and not natural or god given and therefore subject to change. Said writes: "What in effect is the exile standpoint for an intellectual is that you tend to see things not simply as they are but as they have come to be that way." (Representations 45). The reflection on how a situation has "come to be that way" opens the possibility for modification and change (for a better one). Undoubtedly, an intellectual in marginality is thus endowed with revolutionary ideas. He is "necessarily ironic, skeptical even playful". (Representations 45).

An intellectual exile needs not to be an "actual immigrant" observes Said in his essay "Intellectual Exile: Expatriates and Marginal". By the exercise of the faculty of imagination an intellectual can "move away from the centralizing authorities towards the margins" (Representations 47). This brings us to something he has said about exile somewhere around the beginning of the essay – exile as a metaphorical condition. The intellectual exile in this case is very much a member of the society in which he lives. The membership is there so he is not an exile in "actual condition" but he is at war with the society and therefore his "privileges, power and honors" are somewhat diminished. Said writes in this context:

The pattern that sets the course for the intellectual as outsider is best exemplified by the condition of exile, the state of never being fully adjusted, always feeling outside the chatty, familiar world inhabited by natives so to speak, tending to avoid and even dislike the

trappings of accommodation and national well-being (Representations 39)

In the discussion of 'Intellectual Exile', it is important to bring forth the notion of amateurism as given by Said. He calls the critic who follows secular criticism as amateur. The word "amateur" contrasts with "professional". This is significant. Said's choosing of this particular word hints at his attempt to free the critic from the bondage of the "narrow professional specialization" which dissociates criticism from the worldliness. The worldliness of the critic is as crucially important for Said as the worldliness of the text. Bill Ashcroft explains the importance of criticism by describing the drawback of professional expertise in criticism:

The cult of professional expertise in criticism is pernicious because it surrenders the actual material and political concerns of society to a discourse dominated by economists and technocrats. (47)

It is important that we do not translate Said's concept of "amateurism" as an easy and superficial substitution of criticism. Rather it seeks to accomplish a vital task of foregrounding the real situations and circumstances in criticism. He himself stands as a good example of an amateur. His study of a wide range of discipline is strongly grounded in the worldliness; in the politics of culture. His own works and varied pronouncements show his affiliation to the real situations. He never divorces himself from the environment which engenders both his criticisms and the texts. An exile himself he understands the impact of the worldliness most probably better than anyone else.

Said's intellectual works in a framework which is not static but dynamic in nature resulting from the

interaction of varied cultures - the marginalized as well as the centralized culture. The intellectual while having a critical perspective on certain issue locates himself within his particular culture and then attempts to expand the horizon to include the one which is ignored. The consequence of such an attempt is the textured universalism in which one side is not neglected for the other side; in which the marginal and the central come together for a better whole.

Further, this attempt is a real test for an intellectual and is by no means easy. His capacity to leave or abandon his royalty to a specific culture is put under scanner. Generally, a person has prejudices and inclinations which establishes his "non secular" attitude and also formulate his individual identity. Said is asserting the intellectuals to dissolve their individual identities with the realities of other people instead of trying to overrule them.

It may be argued that Said, being denied of any culture in particular due to his fragmented and partial situatedness, voices for in-between situations. For him, it is not a matter of choice but rather a compulsion subjected by his marginalized condition. If he claims to be on one particular side, then the claim itself sounds empty and rightly so for once he has been pushed out of his inherent culture, he can never belong to any other culture. He speaks of affiliation to new values and ideas yet an exile remains somewhat aloof from all sorts of attachment. His key tenets celebrate the in-between condition which he himself occupies. Various reasons are ascribed for this exaltation - contrapuntal vision, worldliness, secular outlook, affiliation and so on so forth. Still this can be looked as a maneuvered or a clever attempt to valorize his unique condition which many consider as unfortunate. It will not be wrong to say that this so called

“unfortunate” has been transformed by Said to make it a blessing in disguise.

Nonetheless, to flatly assume that he has romanticized the marginalized state will be an act of overlooking on our part. Said understands the gap that one may experience in perceiving the marginalized from the level of imagination and from the level of lived experience. While being in the mental level, a person might be charmed by it even literature is abundant with the stories of men who have admirably conquer the miserable condition of displacement. So much so for the imagination but when one actually lives it, and experiences it in its harsh actuality then the terrible nature of it is revealed in full swing. “The crippling sorrow of estrangement” remains forever with the person.

Antonio Gramsci has discussed two types of intellectual – traditional and organic ones. The traditional one remains aloof from the social change and is conservative by nature. On the opposite pole is the organic intellectual. He is revolutionary and is well grounded in society. He strives to change tradition and bring modification for the betterment of the society. Apart from Gramsci there is another thinker whom Said discusses in Representation of the Intellectual. She is Julian Benda. Benda has given the notion of intellectuals as “Philosopher Kings who constitute the conscience of mankind”. It echoes Plato’s idea of the Philosopher King who is most apt to rule his Republic. Benda’s Philosopher King will uphold the standard of truth, justice, and morality in the society. Gramsci’s intellectual and Benda’s intellectual get juxtaposed in Said’s idea of an intellectual. His intellectual should have the organic nature while at the same possessing the vision of a philosopher who is concerned with justice and equality.

There has been no major revolution in modern history without intellectuals; conversely

there has been no major counter-revolutionary movement without intellectuals. (Representations 8).

Elsewhere he observes that the intellectual does so on the basis of universal principles:

that all human beings are entitled to expect decent standards of behavior concerning freedom and justice from worldly powers or nations, and that deliberate or inadvertent violations of these standards need to be testified and fought against courageously. (Representations 9)

Comparable to the movement of a marginalized person (moving from the centre to the periphery), ideas and theories move from one place to another. Said gives the example of the idea of transcendence moving from Orient to Occident. The intellectual life as such is given impetus by this circulation of ideas and therefore it is a positive condition. In his essay “Traveling Theory” Said explains that we can have four levels of this circulation. One, there is the initial situation or the point of origin from which the idea engenders. Two, the idea moves from its natal location and time to another location and time. Third, there is the struggle for space i.e. the confrontation as well as the acceptance of the original idea into a new one to suit the purpose of the new users. Coming from the first level to the last one, ideas lose some of their originality and they refigure themselves into a new pattern. In Said’s words, the ideas lose “their original power and rebelliousness”. Said is influenced by Lukac’s theory of reification. An idea or a theory is generated under the pressure or provocation of a “real historical circumstances”. These circumstances fail to remain same in the later time and so the other versions of the theory do not possess the same strength and forcefulness. Said says “the theory is degraded and subdued, made into

relatively tame academic substitute for the real thing" (Reflections 436).

In the argument as to what should constitute a canon, Allan Bloom has written in *The Closing of the American Mind* that the then existing canon for an American literature student should be kept unaltered in order to prevent the decline in the quality of the American literary education. This step will help the student to come into contact with better individuals who are more cultured, intelligent, educated and sensitive. Said argues against Bloom's view of canon saying that it is one-sided in dealing with the plurality of cultures and therefore suggests a canon of texts where the heterogeneity and the plurality of the society are reflected. Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* should be studied but not in isolation. It should be read along with the text like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. The combination of such texts will provide a deconstructive reading of both the texts and a better understanding of the real scenario. Bill Ashcroft sums up:

So the debate about the curriculum unleashed by Bloom's book circulated around questions about the monocultural and Anglocentric character of American society. While the Bloom position advocates the confirmation of a particular Eurocentric tradition, many university teachers, along with Edward Said saw the need to adjust the traditional curriculum to the needs of a rapidly changing American population. (16)

In the "curriculum debate" Said's attempt has been to seek for an inclusive and liberal canon where both the centre as well as the marginal finds a voice of their own. This perspective has come from his

exilic positioning as Ashcroft writes "the secular displaced intellectual reads the works of the Western canon because that become the site of his or her own strategic act of reading as resistance." (16).

Said's originality in analyzing text and critic lies in his giving importance to the location and situatedness of them. He has asserted the worldliness of the text and the critic thus, advocating the materiality of the condition of writing. This materiality has been subdued by the emergence of the poststructuralist theory. The text in the poststructuralist theory has been completely disassociated from the environment it has come forth. Said is thus reversing the poststructuralist's stand. Bill Ashcroft gives his conclusion:

So Edward Said's originality lies in his determination, his unflappable persistence in promoting a notion of the materiality and worldliness of writing, textuality, reading, criticism and intellectual work in general (24-5)

Said's lasting contribution is that he makes people see marginality in a new light. Marginalized position engenders critical insights, independence of thought and originality of vision. He has frequently used the condition of being marginalized as a metaphor to describe his vision of the role of the modern intellectual who needs a critical detached perspective from which to examine his culture. His (Said's) identity and worldview are shaped by his marginalized condition, and therefore he repeats the act of leaving again and again.

I fabricate occasions for departure others giving rise to the fear voluntarily. The two (displacement and fear) seem absolutely necessary to my rhythm of life and have intensified dramatically during the period I've been ill. (*Out of Place* 217)

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