Obituary of Edward Said

Edward Said, who has died aged 67, was one of the leading literary critics of the last quarter of the 20th century. As professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University, New York, he was widely regarded as the outstanding representative of the post-structuralist left in America. Above all, he was the most articulate and visible advocate of the Palestinian cause in the United States, where it earned him many enemies.

The broadness of Said's approach to literature and his other great love, classical music, eludes easy categorisation. His most influential book, Orientalism (1978), is credited with helping to change the direction of several disciplines by exposing an unholy alliance between the enlightenment and colonialism. As a humanist with a thoroughly secular outlook, his critique on the great tradition of the western enlightenment seemed to many to be self-contradictory, deploying a humanistic discourse to attack the high cultural traditions of humanism, giving comfort to fundamentalists who regarded any criticism of their tradition or texts as off-limits, while calling into question the integrity of critical research into culturally sensitive areas such as Islam.

Whatever its flaws, however, Orientalism appeared at an opportune time, enabling upwardly mobile academics from non-western countries (many of whom came from families who had benefited from colonialism) to take advantage of the mood of political correctness it helped to engender by associating themselves with "narratives of oppression", creating successful careers out of transmitting, interpreting and debating representations of the non-western "other". Said's influence, however, was far from being confined to the worlds of academic and scholarly discourse. An intellectual superstar in America, he distinguished himself as an opera critic, pianist, television celebrity, politician, media expert, popular essayist and public lecturer.

Latterly, he was one of the most trenchant critics of the Oslo peace process and the Palestinian leadership of Yasser Arafat. He was dubbed "professor of terror" by the rightwing American magazine Commentary; in 1999, when he was struggling against leukaemia, the same magazine accused him of falsifying his status as a Palestinian refugee to enhance his advocacy of the Palestinian cause, and of falsely claiming to have been at school in Jerusalem before completing his education in the United States. The hostility Said encountered from pro-Israeli circles in New York was predictable, given his trenchant attacks on Israeli violations of the human rights of Palestinians and his outspoken condemnations of US policies in the Middle East. From the other side of the conflict, however, he encountered opposition from Palestinians who accused him of sacrificing Palestinian rights by making unwarranted concessions to Zionism.

As early as 1977, when few Palestinians were prepared to concede that Jews had historic claims to Palestine, he said: "I don't deny their claims, but their claim always entails Palestinian dispossession." More than any other Palestinian writer, he qualified his anticolonial critique of Israel, explaining its complex entanglements and the problematic character of its origins in the persecution of European Jews, and the overwhelming impact of the Zionist idea on the European conscience.
Said recognised that Israel's exemption from the normal criteria by which nations are measured owed everything to the Holocaust. But while recognising its unique significance, he did not see why its legacy of trauma and horror should be exploited to deprive the Palestinians, a people who were "absolutely dissociable from what has been an entirely European complicity", of their rights.

"The question to be asked," he wrote in the Politics Of Dispossession (1994), "is how long can the history of anti-semitism and the Holocaust be used as a fence to exempt Israel from arguments and sanctions against it for its behaviour towards the Palestinians, arguments and sanctions that were used against other repressive governments, such as South Africa? How long are we going to deny that the cries of the people of Gaza... are directly connected to the policies of the Israeli government and not to the cries of the victims of Nazism?" He insisted that the task of Israel's critics was not to reproduce for Palestine a mirror-image of a Zionist ideology of diaspora and return, but rather to elaborate a secular vision of democracy as applicable to both Arabs and Jews. Elected to the Palestine national council (PNC) in 1977, as an independent intellectual Said avoided taking part in the factional struggles, while using his authority to make strategic interventions. Rejecting the policy of armed struggle as impermissible - because of the legacy of the Holocaust and the special conditions of the Jewish people - he was an early advocate of the two-state solution, implicitly recognising Israel's right to exist. The policy was adopted at the PNC meeting in Algiers in 1988. In adapting the English version of the Arabic draft text, Said used his influence to rephrase the Arabic; although his modifications were insufficient to satisfy the Reagan administration, which ended by dictating the crucial words that appeared in Arafat's speech to a special session of the UN general assembly (convened in Geneva because the US state department refused to grant Arafat a visa to attend the UN in New York), there can be little doubt that Said's tireless representations in the American media, explaining that the declaration amounted to a "historic compromise" on the part of the Palestinians towards the Jewish state, opened the way for the US-PLO dialogue that would lead to the Madrid conference and the Oslo peace process.

As the peace process gained momentum, however, Said adopted an increasingly critical stance and, in 1991, resigned from the PNC. The Oslo declaration, he argued, was weighted unfairly towards Israel; the scenario, provisioning an Israeli withdrawal from Gaza and Jericho in advance of the other territories and agreement on the final status of Jerusalem, amounted to "an instrument of Palestinian surrender, a Palestinian Versailles". To the end, he remained a thorn in the side of the Palestinian authority. The best-known and most distinguished Palestinian exile became the subject of censorship by the representatives of his own people, one of the standard-bearers of the liberal conscience in the increasingly illiberal climate of intolerance and corruption surrounding President Arafat and his regime. Said was born in Jerusalem into a prosperous Palestinian family. His father Wadie, a Christian, had emigrated to the US before the first world war. He volunteered for service in France and returned to the Middle East as a respectable Protestant businessman - with American citizenship - before making an arranged marriage to the daughter of a Baptist minister from Nazareth. In Out Of Place (1999), the memoir of his childhood and youth, Said described his father, who called himself William to emphasise his adopted American identity, as overbearing and uncommunicative. His Victorian strictness instilled in Said "a deep sense of generalised
fear", which he spent most of his life trying to overcome. To his father, Said owed the drivenness that brought him his remarkable achievements. "I have no concept of leisure or relaxation and, more particularly, no sense of cumulative achievement," he wrote. "Every day for me is like the beginning of a new term at school, with a vast and empty summer behind it, and an uncertain tomorrow before it."

Wadie Said revealed little about himself or the source of his money, but certainly Edward and his sisters never wanted for anything, travelling with battalions of servants, summering (after 1947) in the cultivated comfort of Dhour el Shweir in Lebanon, enjoying sumptuous dinners on transatlantic liners. Said described his mother, whom he evidently adored, as brilliant and manipulative, neurotically difficult to please, giving always the impression that "she had judged you and found you wanting" - yet instilling in him a love of literature and music.

Said's first name, improbably inspired by the Prince of Wales, was the creation of his parents, whom he would come to see as "self-creations" out of an eclectic blend of elements and aspirations: American lore culled from magazines and his father's memories, missionary influence, incomplete and hence eccentric schooling, British colonial attitudes. Arabic was forbidden at home, except when speaking to servants; even the waiters at Groppis, the fashionable Cairo cafe, were addressed in bad French. According to Said, his un-Arab Christian name induced a split in his adolescent sense of identity, between "Edward", his outer self, and the "loose, irresponsible, fantasy-ridden metamorphoses of my private inner life". Bright but rebellious, he described himself as having been a leading troublemaker at Cairo's Victoria College, the British-style public school whose snooty captain Michael Shalhoub would later achieve celebrity as Omar Sharif. Sent at his father's insistence to Mount Hermon, a private school in Massachusetts, he blossomed academically, but lacked the right attitude to be acknowledged as an outstanding student. He responded positively to the American approach to essay-writing, which he found more imaginative and stimulating than the buttoned-up British approach in Cairo.

The contrast between his burgeoning academic distinction and the absence of formal recognition clearly marked him deeply. He would claim that it was this experience, as much as the work of his more widely acknowledged intellectual mentors, including RP Blackmur, Antonio Gramsci, Theodor Adorno, Raymond Williams and Michel Foucault, that influenced his anti-authoritarian outlook. Said's engagement with Palestine drew on deep emotional roots, particularly his affection for his Jerusalem aunt Nabiha, his father's sister, who, after 1948, devoted her life to working with Palestinian refugees in Cairo, although she never discussed the political aspects of the dispute in Said's presence. Until his 30s, Edward was too preoccupied with his studies, progressing smoothly through Princeton and Harvard graduate school, developing his critical methodologies and indulging his passion for music, especially the piano, at which he achieved an almost professional level of competence, to take much interest in the politics of his homeland. It was the trauma of the Arab defeat in 1967, which unleashed a second wave of refugees (many of them already refugees from the 1948 exodus), that shocked him out of what he would come to see as his earlier complacency, reconnecting him with his former self. Said's writings on English literature, such as Culture And Imperialism (1993), and western classical music drew heavily on his sense of being an outsider. Like Joseph Conrad, the subject of his PhD thesis and first published book, he retained an
"extraordinarily persistent residual sense of his own exilic marginality", which enabled him to deploy a kind of double-vision in his readings of the English novel, discerning the invisible colonial plantations that guarantee the domestic tranquillity of Mansfield Park, or finding in Conrad's self-consciously circular narrative forms the sense of the potentiality of the challenges to western hegemony that would erupt during the post-colonial era.

Where African writers such as Chinhua Achebe dismissed Conrad as a racist, suggesting that, whatever his gifts as a writer, his political attitudes must make him despicable to any African, Said saw such reasoning as amounting to spiritual, intellectual and aesthetic amputation. Contrary to the assumption sometimes made about him, he did not consider that the hidden political agendas and attitudes of cultural supremacy that he regarded as informing the canons of western culture from Dante to Flaubert necessarily diminished their artistic integrity or cultural power.

His achievement may have been to enhance artistic comprehension by drawing attention to unstated political dimensions in the knowledge that art must always escape enlistment for partisan ends. In a brilliant essay on Die Meistersinger that grapples with Wagner's anti-semitism, he quoted, with approval, Pierre Boulez's remark that "Wagner's music, by its very existence, refuses to bear the ideological message that it is intended to convey." A similar statement could be made about Said's work as a critic. The anti-colonial perspective that animates his work does not issue in ideological consistency. Rather, it challenges conventional assumptions about art, music and literature, opening up new avenues of inquiry and questioning the criteria by which knowledge is organised and husbanded. Like his hero, Theodor Adorno, Said was "the quintessential intellectual, hating all systems, whether on our side or theirs, with equal distaste".

Versatile and subtle, he was better at elucidating distinctions than formulating systems. A Christian humanist with a healthy respect for Islam, he was a member of the academic elite; yet he inveighed against academic professionalism, venturing into territories well outside his area of speciality, insisting always that the true intellectual's role must be that of the amateur, because it is only the amateur who is moved neither by the rewards nor the requirements of a career, and who is therefore capable of a disinterested engagement with ideas and values.

The unusual complexity of his background - privileged yet marginal, wealthy yet powerless - allowed him to empathise with dispossessed people, especially the victims of Zionism and its western supporters, while enjoying in the fullest measure the cultural riches of New York, a city that rang louder than any other with Jewish achievement and success.

In his final years, Said's health grew ever more fragile, and, though passionately concerned with the unfolding Palestinian disaster in the wake of 9/11 and the Anglo-American invasion of Iraq, he took a conscious decision to withdraw from political controversy and channel his energies into music. The West-Eastern Divan Orchestra he founded with the Israeli citizen Daniel Barenboim in 1999 grew out of the friendship he forged with the musician who shares his belief that art - and, in particular, the music of Wagner - transcends political ideology. With Said's assistance, Barenboim gave master classes for Palestinian students in the occupied West Bank, infuriating the Israeli right.
The orchestra received a tumultuous reception at the BBC Proms last month. It may prove a fitting legacy for an intellectual whose work illuminated our crisis-ridden world by embracing its contradictions and celebrating its complexities.

In 1970, he married Mariam Cortas, by whom he had a son and a daughter.

· Edward Wadie Said, writer and academic, born November 1 1935; died September 25 2003

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