

EDWARD SAID AND THE FOUCAULTIAN ANXIETY OF INFLUENCE

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Abstract:

Edward Said's critical methodology is intermittently shaped by his engagement with thinkers as diverse as Raymond Williams, Antonio Gramsci, Theodor Adorno and Gyorgy Lukacs. However, it is the French thinker Michel Foucault, whose persistent influence has been consistently acknowledged by Said in his major works. In consonance with Foucault's ideas, Said rejected the existence of knowledge and truth outside the discourse of power dynamics. However, Said never clearly demarcated a perpetual theoretical framework for himself. There is a gradual and immanent evolution in the formulation of Said's subjectivity, from an anti-humanist to a liberal humanist attempting to draw a trajectory of secular politics. This is the reason that Said often turns towards a trajectory of ideas which is contrary to the Foucaultian paradigm. Said often posits against Foucault's pacifying notions of power, knowledge and truth in the context of resistance against the oppressor. As a dedicated intellectual, Said's avowed manifestation was for the defence of universal values confronting power structures. This was a clear departure from Foucault's epistemological relativism, which rejected the existence of universal values. The objective of this paper is to investigate the paradigm shifts in Said's trajectory of thought in relation to his engagement with the Foucaultian oeuvre, especially in the context of his defence of values such as equality, freedom and justice.

Keywords: *Edward said, foucault, postcolonial, knowledge/power, humanism, discourse.*

Edward Said's critical methodology is intermittently shaped by his engagement with thinkers as diverse as Raymond Williams, Antonio Gramsci, Theodor Adorno and Gyorgy Lukacs. However, it is the French thinker Michel Foucault, whose persistent influence has been consistently acknowledged by Said in his major works. In consonance with Foucault's ideas, Said rejected the existence of knowledge and truth outside the discourse of power dynamics. However, Said never clearly demarcated a perpetual theoretical framework for himself. There is a gradual and immanent evolution in the formulation of Said's subjectivity, from an anti-humanist to a liberal humanist attempting to draw a trajectory of secular politics. This is the reason that Said often turns towards a trajectory of ideas which is contrary to the Foucaultian paradigm. Said often posits against Foucault's pacifying notions of power, knowledge and truth in the context of resistance against the oppressor. As a dedicated intellectual, Said's avowed manifestation was for the defence of universal values confronting power structures. This was a clear departure from Foucault's epistemological relativism, which rejected the existence of universal values. The objective of this paper is to investigate the paradigm shifts in Said's trajectory of thought in relation to his engagement with the Foucaultian oeuvre, especially in the context of his defence of values such as equality, freedom and justice.

There is a clear difference between Foucault and Said's discourses about power/knowledge complex, and this difference is not just epistemological but also a political and historical one. In his essay "Travelling Theory," Said offers an incisive critique of the Foucaultian discourse for it blurs the prospects of theory and reduces it to just an immanent discourse without any contextual significance. He disapproves Foucault for the substitution of critical consciousness and intellectual reflection by the sapless theoretical criticism and methodological approaches. Said accuses Foucault for making "not even a nominal allowance for emergent movements ... revolutions, counter-hegemony, or historical blocks" ("Travelling

Theory” 246). Said argues that in human history there are always some spaces outside the range of dominating and saturating systems, and “this is what makes change possible” (“Travelling Theory” 247).

Said refers to Chomsky-Foucault TV debate on the topic “Human Nature: Justice or Power?” The transcript of which was subsequently published in *Reflexive Waters: The Basic Concerns of Mankind*. Approving Chomsky's position, Said posits that it is both intellectually responsible and politically engaged. Contrary to this, he criticises Foucault for being intellectually dormant and politically passive. Said comments in this context: “One could not imagine Foucault undertaking a sustained analysis of powerfully contested political issues, nor, like Chomsky himself ... would Foucault commit himself to descriptions of power and oppression with some intention of alleviating human suffering, pain, or betrayed hope” (*The World* 247). William D. Hart believes that reading the transcript of Chomsky-Foucault debate is still enlightening for the critical circles. Hart argues in this context: “Their differences matter ... less on the philosophical issue of human nature than on the political question of utopia. This difference might be formulated as 'What is the political significance of utopian ideas in subverting undesirable forms of hegemony?'" Hart further argues that the idea is not that “the philosophical and the political issues are not related, but that practical politics is more important than abstract theory” (121). It appears that in his “strong” reading Chomsky infers his notion of universal human nature from his political commitments. In contrast to this Foucault seems to be deriving his political affiliation from an unacknowledged notion of human nature.

The antithetical position of Said and Foucault are not simply based on the fact that Said defends liberal humanistic stance of Chomsky against Foucault's antihumanism which completely dismisses the prophetic role of intellectual as anti-democratic. The fact, however is that, there cannot be any clear demarcation between humanism and antihumanism. This is because an onslaught on humanism and the privileged subject itself reiterates the privilege of that particular subject. The consensus that seems to be evolving in the ideas of Chomsky, Foucault and Said is that the intellectual should be the harbinger of resistance to oppression. Despite that, there seems a little possibility of intellectual resistance to power structures without retrieving the intellectual's subjectivity from such theory of subjectivity which considers the subject as a creation of institutions and discourses. Chomsky-Foucault debate cannot be resolved by favouring either of Chomsky's humanism or Foucault's antihumanism, but by constituting intellectual resistance to domination through a theory which deems subjects as both constituted and constitutive. Although Foucault considers the human subject as constituted discursively, institutionally and historically while Chomsky asserts his faith in universal human nature, they both seriously engage with the question of the intellectual and political expansion of human freedom. For Chomsky, the real task of an intellectual is the creation of, “the vision of a future just society; [and] a humanistic social theory that is based, if possible, on some firm and humane concept of the human essence or human nature” (Chomsky, “Human Nature” 172). Contrary to this, Foucault follows the imprints of Heidegger and asserts that humanism must be rejected “since it does not value the humanitas of man high enough” (*Basic Writings* 210). In *Order of Things*, Foucault clearly states that the concept of humanism must be dispensed with, since it merely describes the products of technological, economic and political regularities. Foucault questions the theoretical status of human nature and considers the notion of some fixed human essence as intrinsically dangerous because it can be harnessed to tame individual men and women by inculcating some ideal model in their mindset. In *Truth, Power, Self*, Foucault says: “What we call humanism has been used by Marxists, liberals, Nazis, Catholics ... What I am afraid of about humanism is that it presents a certain form of ethics as a universal model for any kind of freedom.” Foucault further argues: “I think that there are more secrets, more possible freedoms, and more inventions in our future than we can imagine in humanism as it is dogmatically represented on every side of the political rainbow. (15)

In spite of being a staunch opponent of humanism, Foucault is very often inspired by powerful impulse for human subjectivity. The anti-humanist viewpoint of the constituted human nature and the humanist assumption of the constitutive attributes of the subject indistinguishably substantiate the fact that

the desire and quest for subjectivity is as inevitable as the historical and social forces which constitute them. Any substantial critique of humanism not only acquires its purpose of existence from the discourse of humanism, but it also ascribes validity to the humanistic pursuit of subjectivity. In spite of the fact that Foucault turns away from attributing the prophetic and representative status to the intellectual, he doesn't circumvent the ineluctability of self-valorisation and self-referentiality. While offering a critique of humanism as a discourse and ideology, anti-humanism cannot absolve itself from being in the same way an ideology saturated discourse. Akin to humanism, antihumanism also considers subjectivity and freedom as existential inevitability. Contrary to the usual presumption that Foucault is an anti-humanist who denies human freedom and subjectivity, it becomes clear that the Foucaultian position is neither simplistic nor categorically anti-humanistic one.

The crux of Foucaultian thought is that in every social sphere the relations of power are all pervasive due to the simultaneous all pervasiveness of freedom. The genealogy of the modern subject, according to Foucault, denies independent existence to power and freedom. This is because, according to Foucault, both power and freedom are intricately intertwined. In "The Subject and Power," Foucault argues that: "something called power, with or without a capital letter, which is assumed to exist universally in a concentrated or diffused form, does not exist. Power exists only when it is put into action, even if, of course, it is integrated into a disparate field of possibilities brought to bear upon permanent structures" (788). The discourses on freedom and power become meaningful if they are construed in human terms, because power necessitates acting and acting sequentially presupposes acting upon something or someone. Foucault posits that power is always exercised only over free subjects, and this is possible only insofar as they are free. If the determining factors saturate the whole then there would be no relationship of power. Foucault disapproves the objectification of power as merely an apparatus of domination, and he attributes validity to the coagulation-free dissemination of power relations. The flexible circulation of power relations is a prerequisite for countermanding the strategic and crucial relations of people who are often constrained by institutionalisation. For Foucault, resistance to power is incorporated within the power relations and where there is power there is resistance. In "The Ethics of Care," Foucault argues that: "[I]n the relations of power, there is necessarily the possibility of resistance, for if there were no possibility of resistance of violent resistance, of escape, of ruse, of strategies that reverse the situation there would be no relations of power" (12). Hence, Foucault's genealogy of modern subject is seriously concerned with the metaphysics of political and intellectual resistance. Inconsistent with the common notion that power relations are entrapments from which one must escape, Foucault considers power relations as mediums which provide enough scope for their reversal. Foucault argues aptly in this context: "To exercise power over another, in a sort of open strategic game, where things could be reversed, that is not evil" ("The Ethics of Care" 18).

Said's life-long mission was to promote non-coercive knowledge as it is the utmost duty of the intellectual to speak "truth to power." However, the truth which Said believes is the responsibility of the intellectual to speak is different from the truth instrumentalised and advanced by power. Contrary to this Saidian position, Foucault is distrustful of the manifested significance of truth as he considers truth to be more dangerous than power itself. The most vital point of Foucaultian paradigm is resistance to the hegemony of the present, which is a direct outcome of the connection between the power of truth and the complex grid of oppression and resistance. Instead of locating intellectual power to resistance in the oft-cited "speaking truth to power," Foucault favours constituting "a new politics of truth" (*Power/Knowledge* 133). Foucault considers the intellectual as a progeny of the power/knowledge interconnection and hence a perpetrator of the validity of that network. The fundamental issue raised by Foucault is to enquire the privilege of intellectuals situated outside the authority of truth and still able to determine the normative order of human conduct. In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt aptly says that it is highly incredible to "determine, and define the natural essences of all things surrounding us, which we are not, should ever be able to do the same for ourselves this would be like jumping over our own shadows" (10). Arendt

considers humankind from the viewpoint of the actions of which it is capable. Arendt identifies the problem of diminishing human agency and political freedom and explicates the paradox of increasing human powers through humanistic and technological inquiry and diminishing control over the consequences of actions. Similarly, Foucault believes that the idea of intellectual as a visionary for the amelioration of society is both anti-democratic and against the spirit of people's resistance to power. The worldly authority of intellectual, according to Foucault, should not be transcendentalised, because it is ideological and relative. This is the idea that Said develops in *Orientalism*, as he gives a critique of the legitimacy and authority of Orientalists.

Saidian humanism draws inspiration from the idea that in spite of being located inside the power relations amidst hegemonic systems and cultural paradigms, the potential of critical consciousness to historicise the worldly situation and to offer secular critiques constitute the basis of intellectual resistance to power. Said argues that the individual consciousness is "placed at a sensitive nodal point." In *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Said avers that: "On the one hand, the individual mind ... is very much aware of the collective whole, context, or situation in which it finds itself. On the other hand, precisely because of this awareness a worldly self-situating, a sensitive response to the dominant culture." On that basis, Said forcefully argues that "the individual consciousness is not naturally and easily a mere child of the culture, but a historical and social actor in it" (*The World* 15). Said wishes to say that human beings have historical and cultural existence and it is neither necessary nor possible for human beings to live outside the intertwined network of history and power. Freedom can be facilitated and experienced through intellectual resistance to power, and not through any resistance paradigm located beyond the complex network of knowledge/power relations, which will be thoroughly non-secular and ahistorical. The critical consciousness with a focus on resistance to the power apparatus is simultaneously antagonistic to the historical circumstances underneath which power functions. It can be argued that the dialectical interdependence of power and resistance enables the reversibility of their relationship.

Said believes that the interdependence of cultures is an evolutionary process of history which promotes profound understanding for the mutual existence, improvement and amelioration of society. In *Orientalism*, Said puts forward the idea that the fundamental principle of communication between different cultures is based on the basic premise of positioning the self within the relation to others. In the context of Said's own upbringing, his Arabian origin and Western cultivation is a unique manifestation of the mutual inclusiveness of different cultures. The discourse of *Orientalism* is surely an outcome of Said's own dialectical consciousness which thrives on the Arabian and the Western facets of his own self. In the introduction to *Orientalism*, Said aptly says in this context: "severely and as rationally ... I have tried to maintain a critical consciousness, as well as employing those instruments of historical, humanistic, and cultural research of which my education has made me the fortunate beneficiary" (26). If the will to annex and assimilate the other is grounded in the ontological hierarchy of different cultures, then it must be countered by a moral and critical approach towards an ethical and introspective self-understanding. Said's revolutionary humanism impelled him to strive for justice through active intellectual involvement, but not in the sense of wishing to gain power over others. Said observes in *The World, the Text*: "Resistance cannot be an adversarial alternative to power, and also a dependent function of it" (228). Said maintains a fine balance between his Arabian origins and Western intellectual upbringing. The dialectical tension between different cultures and different locales is immanent in Said's critical consciousness. Said draws inspiration from Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur* for nurturing a critical consciousness which is at once particular as well as general at the same time. In the preface to *Orientalism*, Said elaborates the Goethian notion of *Weltliteratur* as, "the study of all the literatures of the world as a symphonic whole that could be apprehended as having preserved the individuality of each work without losing sight of the whole" (xxiv). Said draws upon the Goethian concept to suggest that the whole of human race can be perceived as a relevant *whole* by comprehending distinctive histories collectively and dialectically as integral to an entirety.

It was Said's opinion that secular criticism must appeal to the authority which should be worldly and derive resistance from critical consciousness. This kind of secular critical consciousness will even resist one's own subjectivity because the dialectical disposition of intersubjective power connections implies becoming and not becoming oneself at the same time. There is similarity in Said and Foucault as both articulate a liminal zone in which subjectivity and non-subjectivity are tempered reciprocally with each other. It is in "Travelling Theory" that Said wishes to "preserve some modest ... belief in noncoercive human community" while simultaneously asking the question, "what is critical consciousness at bottom if not an unstoppable predilection for alternatives?" (*The World* 247). This motif of the "alternatives" is vital for what Said expects from the intellectuals. Secular critics, according to Said, have to "provide alternatives: alternative sources, alternative readings, alternative presentation of evidence" (Viswanathan 222). Said seems to argue that to invent, construct or search an alternative is an act of oppositionality and creation at the same time. In both culture and politics indistinguishably, it makes addition of another voice and complicates a totality by approaching it with something variant from itself. One of the instances of such a false totality is the approval of nationalism regularly found among the modern states in their cultural, political and social self-representations. The task of the modern critics with secular critical consciousness is to initiate oppositional criticism so as to challenge the sites of hegemony. The objective of Saidian humanistic criticism is to suggest alternatives which must evolve into oppositional knowledge and challenge the questionable values, received ideas and entrenched institutions. Here Said seems to be similar to Foucault who says in *The Archaeology*: "... to speak is to do something something other than to express what one thinks; to translate what one knows, and something other than to play with the structures of a language" (209).

In a society which is currently passing through the postmodernist phase, the fundamental issue to be adequately addressed by an intellectual is to determine the cause for resistance and the target against which he articulates his paradigm of resistance. If the theoretical notions of human nature and historical progress are abandoned, the "radicality" of ideas loses its intensity, becomes a value by itself and hence does not suggest any social change, which it is ethically supposed to espouse. Without deeply and critically engaging with the issue of human nature, Foucault historicises human nature and considers the conceptualisation of justice as a mere tool which is linked with the apparatus of power for putting up a veil on injustice. For Said, the ideals of humanism are necessary for accomplishing justice with the intellectual mode of resistance. In the preface to *Orientalism*, Said expresses his faith in the principles of humanism, by asserting: "It isn't at all a matter of being optimistic, but rather of continuing to have faith in the ongoing and literally unending process of emancipation and enlightenment that ... frames and gives direction to the intellectual vocation" (xiii). Said labels the Foucaultian spurning of humanistic ideals and objectives as sheer functions of power. Said considers this: "a perfect instance of Foucault's unwillingness to take seriously his own ideas about resistances to power" (*The World, the Text* 246). However, a genealogical study of Foucault's intellectual biography gives ample evidence of intellectual resistance as a central motif of his theoretical discourse. In Paul A. Bove's words, Foucault's deconstruction of the modern subject seems to be "the disclosure of humanism as merely a substitutive sign for the metaphysical 'will to power'" (*Intellectuals in Power* 132).

In the case of Foucaultian and Saidian notions of the mutual reversibility of power relations between resistance and power, there will be no position extraneous to the network of knowledge/power complex. Foucault and Said seem to have similar epistemological views on the issues of knowledge/power and subjectivity. However, a clear distinction can be made between their respective political positions and political praxis. While Foucault assaults the domain of politics from the epistemological ground, Said offers political stance seeking a critique of epistemological theory. Whereas Said is primarily concerned with the political efficacy of his criticism for the attainment of specific historical goals, Foucault's major concern is the correctness of epistemological theory in abstraction. Said seeks to appropriate Foucaultian discourse but he also attempts to reject its determinism. While seeking to assimilate Foucaultian discourse

he is careful enough to resist or even reject its determinism. Said makes orientalist studies the subject of the analytics of knowledge/power without subjecting the sphere of oriental literature and aesthetics *per se*. This way Saidian critical enterprise preserves the aesthetic sphere for resistance against knowledge/power matrix and determinism saturated theory of power.

Saidian theory is a consequential attempt at critically exploring the historical antagonism between humanism and anti-humanism. Said's purpose is to concentrate on the intellectual and historical conditions in which the political efficacy of the theory of knowledge and power and historical commitment have lost their intensity due to ahistorical and academic application and institutionalisation. Though Said relies on Foucaultian conceptualisation of power and resistance, it will be reductive to anoint him downright Foucaultian or anti-Foucaultian. Said's actual objective is to historicise and contextualise Foucault's theory under certain historical conditions with the purpose of maximising the political usefulness of both Foucault's postulations and his own critical theory. Saidian humanism is aimed at countervailing the mortification of the theory of power to the epistemological validation for intellectual disinterestedness and political disengagement. The pure epistemological consideration without any serious historical or political concern will not formulate any palpable resistance against power. Similarly political activism sans epistemological roots will be a directionless endeavour ending in fiasco. Humanism seems to have acquired certain ideological implications and drifted away from the actual political and historical circumstances. In *Power, Politics*, Said rightly argue that "structuralism, poststructuralism, deconstruction, semiotics, Marxism, feminism ... all represent academic choices and a lot of them are not related to the circumstances that originally gave rise to them" (113). Said seems to suggest that a critical analysis of the genealogical and historical formations of these paradigms of thinking will save them from institutionalisation, reification and academic compartmentalisation.

In spite of Said's disagreement with many of Foucault's notions, it seems purposeful to read both the thinkers dialectically by overcoming the antagonism between humanism and antihumanism. Though Said disagrees with Foucault's political orientation and totalising propensity of his theory of power, his theory of humanistic resistance draws upon Foucault's dialectics of power and resistance. Said's historical criticism owes much to Foucault and it would not be unfair to locate Saidian humanism within the Foucaultian power-knowledge paradigm, which seeks to overturn the basis of humanism. It is imperative to underscore the fact that there is no discursive or historical transcendence for either Foucault or Said.

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