



# Edward Said

## Lectures in Beirut

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**E**dward Said, author of the controversial book "Orientalism" and one of the most versatile Arab/American intellectuals, gave two dazzling lectures at the American University of Beirut campus on the 3rd and 4th of January 1995.

Both lectures drew packed audiences. The first one was a retrospective on his famous controversial book "Orientalism" while the second was on Critical Theory; theory which now encompasses the realm of women's studies.

Defending his book "Orientalism," Said said that it was mistakenly read as an anti-Western work bent on perpetuating hostility between East and West while in fact it was criticizing the discourse of traditional orientalism which looked at the complex heterogeneous "east" from a "western" dominant discourse. Said believes there are no fixed homogeneous categories of "Orient" and "Occident" but rather constructions of traditional Orientalists who have had a "chronic tendency to deny, suppress and distort the Orient." What he regrets is readers merging his anti-Orientalist view with a pro-Islamic one, which simplified the issues discussed and equated his criticism of Orientalism with him being a supporter of fundamentalism.

Said called for people to practice "crossing from one culture to another"

while maintaining a "visceral connection" with their own culture. He also called the audience to view cultures as hybrid and heterogeneous rather than homogeneous and see themselves as "mongrels" - i.e. products of various cultures and bloods. He believes that any attempt to force people into distinct breeds and entities is "false". In sum, Said doesn't like gloating and uncritical nationalism but is very interested in alternative discourses, the discourse of minorities, of women and anyone who was considered for a long time as "lower people."

### Women's Studies as Alternative Discourse

According to Said the most interesting writing done nowadays is the one written by people "outside the centers," the marginals, the women, the minorities. He reiterated this belief in his second lecture on the broad spectrum of critical theory which includes nowadays:

1. Cultural studies specializing in contemporary culture and purport
2. Gay and lesbian studies
3. Feminist studies
4. Post-modernist studies

Again Said welcomed the appearance of these "minority discourses" and the "translated works" of authors of different backgrounds and cultures. He emphasized the importance of feminist discourse in trying to understand the "Other" and praised the works of the founders of feminist discourses like de Beauvoir, Friedan, Millet while criticizing also "the parrots and the mimics".

In fact, in his latest book **Culture and Imperialism** (Vintage, London, 1993) Said mentions that since independence was gained by the ex-colonies, "new and imaginative reconceptions of society and culture were required in order to avoid the old orthodoxes and injustices" (p.263). In his opinion, the women's movement was central for the reconception of post-colonial society and for using their struggles to fight "the unfair male practices of concubinage, polygamy, footbinding, sati etc.

Said comes across as a very passionate and committed scholar with an extraordinary range of knowledge as varied as literary criticism, history, musicology and critical theory.

Moreover, it was amazingly refreshing to listen to this man praising again and again the importance of women's studies and the women's movement in the world.

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