

Tribute to Edward Said

“For a Critical Culture”



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The Théâtre de Beyrouth, the Center for Behavioral Research at the American University of Beirut, Dār al-Ādāb, and Dār al-Nahār organized a Conference in Beirut (June 29 to July 2nd) to pay tribute to Edward Said, the leading Arab intellectual in the world.

It is high time for an Arab country to pay tribute to Said who has been acclaimed and honored in the most prestigious world institutions. That the event should take place in Beirut took a particular importance since pre-war Beirut was considered by poets, authors, and intellectuals as the platform of the Arab World, its conscience, and the only free space in the whole of this region.

Indeed, Beirut rose to the occasion. The 30 guests-authors and scholars - who came from abroad were very impressed by the vitality of the city, the enthusiasm of its people, and the high standard of the conference. Thus Beirut reclaimed her position as the cultural capital of the Arab World.

The Conference started with a session on the intellectual. It tackled several of the issues that Edward Said discusses in his book **Representations of the Intellectual** (1994). Eqbal Ahmad, the Pakistani poet and academician, situated Said

amongst the foremost twentieth century intellectuals, namely Benda, Gramsci, Sartre, Chomsky and Foucault. Ahmad underlined the fact that Said was the only universal, non-Western intellectual in this prestigious group. Ahmad agreed with Said that the Intellectual was, by definition, an individual in dissent, a marginal creature, an outsider who keeps away from power to safeguard his integrity and freedom. The Intellectual, of course denounces abuses of all kinds and functions beyond boundaries and demarcation lines. A spirit in opposition, an independent thinker, the Intellectual speaks for all those deprived of speech.

Following the opening session, several panels on East/West and West/East relationships, and on critical literary theory triggered interesting discussions among the speakers and the audience. The closing session was entitled “The Idea of Palestine,” while films were shown in the presence of their producers Tareq Ali, Michel Khleifi and Mohammad Malas.

The Conference reached its climax when Edward Said read sections of his Memoirs. We had the privilege to partake of this “première” for the Memoirs are not yet published. And while this brilliant scholar cried and made us cry as he evoked his mother, we felt that he truly represented the human being whose heart, soul, and mind worked together, and bore the idea of man/woman at its highest level.

Moreover, Edward Said has rightly claimed that there has been a revolution in the consciousness of women, minorities, and marginals so powerful as to affect main-stream thinking. Scholars all over the world have testified to the fact that Said’s now classic book **Orientalism** has been instrumental in such a revolution. Translated into 26 languages, **Orientalism** speaks both to West and East and re-defines relationships with Self and Other at the historical, socio-economic, and personal levels.

The fully packed audience, who came to pay tribute to Edward Said in Beirut, acknowledged it fully. Men and women of all age groups applauded him and told him, in words or silently, “thank you for being Edward, thank you for being what you are.”

References

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