

Edward W. Said (1935 - 2003)

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Description Edward W. Said came to international prominence as a scholar with the publication of *Orientalism* (1978) — a revisionist study of European imperial discourse about the Orient and its inhabitants, and a pioneering text in the establishment of post-colonial studies. Alongside a distinguished career in English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, Said was widely known as an active supporter of the Palestinian struggle for self-determination. He was a vocal and articulate critic of pro-Zionist US foreign policy and Yasser Arafat's leadership as it developed following the 1993 Oslo Agreement. Next to his friend and ally, Noam Chomsky, this made him one of the most controversial academic intellectuals in North America.

In his memoir, *Out of Place* (1999), Said notes that his cultural and social placelessness always made him feel on the margins. Born in Jerusalem to a wealthy but dislocated family of Christian Palestinians, he grew up in a mobile, upper class environment in Cairo. His childhood and adolescence were shaped by encounters with British colonial attitudes, his father's American patriotism, and the family's repression of Arab history, culture, and language. It is from this perspective that Said developed an influential type of cultural and literary criticism, which he defines in *The World, The Text, and the Critic* (1983) as "worldly" and "secular" and which has become widely known and debated for its critical appropriation of Foucault's discourse analysis, its critical dialogue with Western Marxism (especially with Antonio Gramsci and Raymond Williams), and its adherence to the great European literary and intellectual traditions.

Rejecting postmodernist claims of the death of the intellectual as the bearer of the humanist ideals of the Enlightenment, Said remained strongly committed to the tradition of Western humanism. Critics have attacked this allegiance as idealizing and have decried Said's privileging of the intellectual as dislocated, hybrid figure and key protagonist in the struggle for global social justice and human freedom. This viewpoint omits both the disempowerment non-privileged people (i.e. the majority of displaced people) experience as a result of dislocation and the power of essentialist discourse in the daily struggle for post-colonial autonomy.