

**From Exile to Resistance: An Intimate Portrait of Edward Said**

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## **From Exile to Resistance: An Intimate Portrait of Edward Said**

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*Places of Mind* is the result of a lengthy association of the author with Edward Said. His involvement with Said's philosophy originates in the early 1980s as he started graduate studies at Columbia University as his student. As time went by, Timothy Brennan grew intrigued by his mentor, and they remained in steadfast friendship till the end of Said's life. Brennan's sympathetic narration captures Said's intimate traits, a sensitive intellectual yet a warrior with a biting sarcasm who does not compromise with power. The book's title is a conscious gesture to remind us of Said's displacement and life in exile. The author's intimate relationship with Said and his understanding of his thinking are evident throughout the book. The biography is more of an intellectual characterization of Said than a critical study of his academic work. One of the strengths of Brennan's memoir is his decade-long exploration of a treasure-trove of source material previously unavailable to others, which sets his work apart from previous biographers. Through his deep engagement with Said's archives and correspondences, Brennan uncovers the complex and nuanced thought processes that underlies Said's influential body of work.

In the first few chapters, Brennan progressively familiarizes the reader with an account of Said's personal life. His familial circumstances are described in great detail, as much as his friendships and mentors. The reader becomes familiar with the influential women in the intimate circle of Said's life, including his mother, Hilda, who was an essential source of encouragement from his adolescence onwards. Compared to what Said offers in his autobiography, *Out of Place* (1999), Brennan's narrative contains a significant quantity of additional material. He is well aware that Said's autobiography is written from a subjective point of view, and there are many details that he avoided sharing or twisted in his memoir due to emotional barriers. Despite rendering numerous details of Said's mental status in the early phases of his life in the book's first and second third, Brennan fast-forwards Said's private life after his second marriage and briefly explains his connection to his children.

Almost until the end of the second third of the biography, readers encounter intimate moments and unpublished semi-autobiographical sensitive details of Said's life. Brennan precisely portrays Said's early private life and generously documents any impression of characters in

contact with him. However, in the last third of the book, he abruptly ends with the humanizing characteristics of Said. He fades into Said's professional performances and his contentious career as an anti-colonial rebellion advocate. Brennan's picturesque and appealing image of Said's world is entertaining, yet the work appears too lengthy to describe some of his life events. Frequently, the book is more of a discussion of Said's controversial figure in developing his work, and excessively explanatory of the complexities and contradictions of Said's character in the critical disputes in which he became involved.

Nonetheless, it is apparent in the biography that Brennan has the propensity to exalt Said without addressing any obvious flaws or inconsistencies in his work. Brennan's close relationship with Said has a detrimental effect on how he interprets Said's ideas by giving a too-optimistic perspective of Said's intellectual achievements. His lack of critical analysis emerges as a source of bias in his narrative of Said's life and work. It is crucial to recognize the limitations of what can be comprehended through archives. Brennan's over-reliance on his sources leaves out essential facets of Said's attitudes that are not covered by these sources, and is a potential flaw in his work.

Throughout the book, Brennan focuses on Said's mental journey. He paints a vivid picture of Said's premature adulthood, his quest to find himself, his political awakening, and how he became engaged with philosophy in the first place. During Said's extended summer stays in Lebanon in his mid-teens, he became immersed in the discussions of Kant, Hegel, and Plato. Later, at Princeton, he chose "Special Humanities" to develop his earliest obsession, music, which was the first source of his intellectual life before philosophy and literature. Brennan centres principally on Said's critical political role as a literary philosopher. Rather than merely envisioning this intellectual process, Brennan is attempting to comprehend how Said's ideas emanated from his subjective sentiments and formed his persona. He wishes to credit Said's qualifications by covering his compartmentalized mental universe and thinking patterns.

Various biographies of Said differ in their approaches and focus, as well as in their level of critical engagement with Said's work and ideas. Some focus on his literary criticism and theory, while others explore Said's political activism and his role as a public intellectual. Although Brennan does not bring fresh insights into Said as a philosopher, he does try to do justice to

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Said's intellectual endeavours by clarifying misreadings of his diverse bibliographies, highlighting Said's remarkable dedication to the classics of Western philosophy.

From Brennan's perspective, Said's work is a powerful illustration of how theoretical perspectives heavily influenced by personal experience may be utilized to critique prevailing cultural narratives. Emphasizing Said's role as a public intellectual deeply committed to political and social justice, Brennan points out that his legacy continues to influence current discussions about cultural representation, power, and resistance. To get acquainted with Said's intellectual trajectory, Brennan takes the readers through his identity crisis, how he extracted his whole philosophy from the issue of his exile, and how his blurring identity led him to deconstruct it.

Born in Jerusalem and raised in Cairo, Said comes from the geographical intersection of the West and the East. With the greatest load of monotheistic absolutism and religious rites, his origins heavily influenced his academic interests. Brennan densely depicts Said's early years in the United States, describing how he struggled to overcome the alienation he faced in the country despite inheriting an American passport on the grounds of his father's citizenship. Said could not stop thinking about the stereotypes of the Orient in mainstream popular culture, especially after visiting California for the first time at thirty-three. The book widely discusses the issue of exile in Said's life, which was one of his enduring intellectual concerns. His overall analytical disposition was formed by exilic consciousness. Said saw the intellectual exile as playing a vital role in contemporary culture. Being dependent on the East and the West and feeling estranged from both, he perceived them as notions that work to construct an ideology rather than an indication of geographical reality. By examining Said's psychological and temperamental dimensions, Brennan demonstrates how exile consciously and subconsciously formed his identity. Said employs exile as a euphemism for his dialectical approach. For him, the sense of meaning uprooted is more than just a tragic destiny bestowed upon him; the concept of exile encapsulates Said's sense of freedom. As Brennan formulates, an exile for Said was "about being odd, awkward, and at home nowhere."

The book reveals much information on how literary theory inspired Said's thoughts. According to his friend, Palestinian historian Tarif Khalidi, he was at his heart "a philosopher who had migrated into literature." Said's thirst for poetry and his long-term research in history were never literally addressed in his existing literature. Still, they were essential in the early years

of his intellectual development. Brennan has been relatively successful in conveying the message that, for Said, literature was not only a passion but the cornerstone of his politics.

Despite extensive reading in psychoanalysis, existentialism, and phenomenology, Said remained distant from these fields because he was far more concerned with how artworks are created in a particular environment. He published his groundbreaking book *Orientalism* (1978) in response to the war in the aftermath of the Arab-Israeli war. The book is a comprehensive philosophy of power that reveals the European impulse to normalize the alleged inferiority of the East. Despite facing much criticism, it made postcolonial studies a valid academic field. Said intended to emphasize that representation is a component of reality, not simply its verbalization. Said's continual battle for Palestine is evident throughout the book. Yet, Brennan covers Said's tireless efforts to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli issue in considerable detail in the book's last chapters. The media pressure, the hate threats that Said was getting very often, and the mental strain on him due to the overflow of responsibility, exacerbated his physical health. A decade before he was diagnosed with leukemia, Said already felt tired. Friends and family began to notice his ill health. He eventually lost the battle to leukemia in 2003, leaving behind the tremendous legacy of uncovering the politics of presentation, and raising awareness of the political repercussions of the humanities.

Rather than merely praising Said's literary work, Brennan could have benefitted from stepping outside Said's intragroup intellectual circle and reflecting more on his works' critiques. Namely, *Orientalism* received massive criticism for how Said was essentializing the very categories of the East and the West he was trying to problematize. Brennan seems obligated to protect Said in a favourable manner, which leaves him in a position of not taking criticism of Said's work into account. Brennan is cautious of jeopardizing Said's public appeal. He occasionally endorses Said's arguments and presents some linkages in a more confident or consistent light. Although full of profound insights, Brennan's book swings between the inevitability of intimacy and a lack of distance which limits a critical perspective. His intimate connection to Said provides a rich engagement with his subject that subsequently elevates the quality of his work. Still, this intimacy prevents a certain amount of distance required for a critical viewpoint.

### **Biography**

**Bahar Zamani** is a PhD candidate at the Institute for Art Theory and Cultural Studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, Austria. She has prior teaching and assisting experience in academic courses related to philosophy. Her research's underlying epistemological curiosity is about recasting religious convictions into secular logic, othered religious subjectivity, and the role of spirituality in postcolonial resistance.