

Edward Said's 'Secular Criticism': A Counter Modern Approach to Textual Suzerainty

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Abstract

Edward Said (1935-2003), who is known to the world through his path-breaking work, Orientalism (1978), can be appropriately understood through an analysis of what he means by the term 'secular criticism' in his introduction to the 1983 work The World, the Text, and the Critic, which bears the same title 'Secular Criticism'. Said came up with his theory of secular criticism at a time when such postmodernist theories as structuralism, post-structuralism and deconstruction were at the zenith of their influence on both sides of the Atlantic. As theoretical frameworks, these theories upheld, with some exception in case of structuralism, the view of severing texts from their contexts, which gradually led to a kind of textual suzerainty. In this context, Said's 'secular criticism' was a shock because it sees a text as grounded in material reality and refuses to read it without referring back to the social, political and economic realities which a literary text truly reflects. Here I will briefly define secular criticism and show how it put a challenge to the 'textual republicanism' (Barry 66) exercised by such theories as post-structuralism and deconstruction.

Keywords: Said, secular criticism, structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction

Edward Said (1935-2003), a critic, political commentator, literary and cultural theorist, has been very influential during the last four decades both in and outside the academic fields. He has specially influenced the postcolonial studies. According to Bill Ashcroft and Pal Ahluwalia (2001,p.ii) 'postcolonial studies would not be what it is today without Edward Said's contributions in this field'. His views on the political effects of representation in literature from Eurocentric and 'mono-cultural' perspectives and the demand for recognition on the part of oppressed formed the nature of identity formation in the postcolonial world and offered a new understanding of the links between text or critic and their material contexts. Edward Said's position as a cultural theorist has mainly been established by his books *Orientalism* (1978), *The Question of Palestine* (1979), *Covering Islam* (1981), *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) etc. whose 'historical and social setting is political and cultural in the most urgent way' (Said, WTC 27). As a thinker, Said shows that literary representation is inextricably connected with power-related dynamics grounded in the worldliness of a text.

What is Secular Criticism?

The essay, "Secular Criticism," published in 1983 as the introduction to *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, is Said's very clear and bold statement about his position as a thinker and also on the

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question of the connection between literary texts and their material contexts. Aijaz Ahmad (1992, p.217) calls the essay 'Secular Criticism' 'as dossier of his (Said's) basic theoretical position.' Secular criticism, on the basis of a reading of this essay, can be simply defined as a critical approach that seeks to find out the relationship between a text and its worldly context. This kind of literary criticism deals with local and worldly situations of literary texts and is constitutively opposed to the production of massive, hermetic systems. The essay sounded a sort of death-knell for formalist criticism of all stripes, whether in the form of disengaged close readings or of elaborate theories that treated literature as an isolated realm unto itself.

Said's trinity-the world, the text, and the critic-makes a complete world and gives birth to what he terms 'secular criticism.' According to him secular criticism looks texts as socially, and politically grounded in material reality; and the function of a critic is to unearth this connection between texts and the world. In his (1983, p.4) words, 'texts are worldly, to some degree they are events, and even when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless a part of the social world, human life, and of course the historic moments in which they are located and interpreted.' Said holds the view that essentially all compositions arise from specific, identifiable circumstances; they participate in a human world which determines their content, effects, and, ultimately, how critics engage them. So, a text offers a particular location from which to examine the extrinsic cultural realities that render such a text possible as well as the textual content's relationship to those realities. Said did not use the term, "secular" in its usual context, that is, anti-religious, unholy or profane. His use of the world secular can be interpreted as 'worldly', "decentered," or coming from more than one point of origin. In 'Secular Criticism' Said opines that the critic should go on a metaphoric exile from 'home'; because in this way a critic can work to recover the connections of a text with the political realities of the society in which it occurs. At the end of the essay, 'Secular Criticism', Said gives some examples of secular criticism in his own writings. He (1983, p.27) says that in discussing the works of such writers as 'Swift, Hopkins, Conrad and Fanon', he looks at the worldly and secular world in which their works take place and how these writers pay 'attention to the detail of everyday existence defined as situation, event and the organization of power.'

Secular Criticism and Contemporary Literary Theories

Edward Said's secular criticism differs both from such popular contemporary literary theories as structuralism, post-structuralism and deconstruction and more traditional academic criticism such as practical criticism. At the beginning of 'Secular Criticism', Said (1983) says

"literary criticism is practiced today in four major forms" (1). The first is "practical criticism, which he describes as book reviewing and literary journalism;(2) academic literary history, which is a descendant of such nineteenth-century specialties as classical scholarship, philology, and cultural history; (3) literary appreciation and interpretation which he states is principally academic, but unlike the other two, not confined to professionals and regularly appearing authors, and the fourth and final form,(4) literary theory, a relatively new subject" (1).

Said takes an approach that is different from the above four approaches. But it is mainly the last one which Said targets. In reducing the worldliness of the text to a structural inertness, Said claims, contemporary theory tends to lift the activity of the critic out of the world, making it less and less connected to worldly realities.

Secular criticism, which is grounded in the materiality of texts, is different from practical criticism, academic literary theory and literary appreciation in the sense that these approaches to literature according to Said (1983, p.2), tell

our students and our general constituency that we defend the classics, the virtues of a liberal education, and the precious pleasures of literature even as we also show ourselves to be silent (perhaps incompetent) about the historical and social world in which all these things take place.

So, whereas the academic history of literature emphasizes the value of literature and the timelessness of classical literary works, it avoids the discussion of the very contexts which provided the motifs and the contents of these literary works.

Literary Theory, as Said (1983,p.3) says, is different from the three previous forms of criticism. Said appreciates the kind literary theory that is 'insurrectionary'; 'bold interventionary movement' fathered by such figures as 'Saussure, Lukacs, Bataille, Levi-Strauss, Freud, Nietzsche and Marx.' But according to Said literary theory also soon proved itself no different from the traditional approaches to literature. To Said (1983,p.3), literary theory, which was imported from Europe and became popular in the American universities during the late 1970s, retreated into the labyrinth "of textuality," dragging along with it such apostles of European revolutionary textuality as Derrida and Foucault.' Said (1983, p.4) refers to "textuality" as an aspect of literary theory which removes a text from the circumstances, the events, the physical senses that made it possible and render it intelligible as the result of human work.'

Secular Criticism and Structuralism

Said's secular criticism differs from all major modern literary theories. Said's concept of secular criticism, which owes much to structuralism in the sense that structuralism came before secular criticism with a belief that all **human activity** and its products, even perception and thought itself, are **constructed** and not **natural**, even differs from structuralism. The structuralists for the first time began to see a text as more than a written communication between the writer and the readers. They elevated a text to the level of 'discourse' and coined such terms as 'signs', 'signifier', and 'signified'. The structuralists mostly treated literary texts as scientific objects. The real force of Said's theory of worldliness is that he takes on board Saussure's view of the meaning of the sign residing in its difference from other signs, and the structuralist rejection of a simple relationship between the text and the world. Nevertheless, he insists on the fundamentally political importance of the world from which both the text and the critic originate. To Said, criticism is not a science but an act of political and social engagement, which is sometimes paradoxical, sometimes contradictory, but which never solidifies into dogmatic certainty. A text,

in its actually *being* a text, is a being in the world. That is, it has a material presence, a cultural and social history, a political and even an economic being as well as a range of implicit connections to other texts.

Secular Criticism and Poststructuralism

But Said's secular criticism challenges mainly poststructuralism and the deconstruction of Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes. Derrida, who read his paper "STRUCTURE, SIGN AND PLAY IN THE DISCOURSE OF HUMAN SCIENCES (1966)" at the John Hopkins International Colloquium on "THE LANGUAGE OF CRITICISM AND THE SCIENCES OF MAN" in October 1966, articulated for the first time a poststructuralist theoretical paradigm. Derrida starts this essay by putting into question the basic metaphysical assumptions of Western philosophy since Plato which has always principally positioned itself with a fixed immutable centre, a static presence. Another key text in deconstruction is Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (1966). As Peter Barry (2002) writes in "BEGINNING THEORY: AN INTRODUCTION TO LITERARY AND CULTURAL (1995)" "The most quoted line of the book '*Of Grammatology*' is 'there is nothing outside the text'. In his pathbreaking work, 'The Death of the Author', Roland Barthes (1968, p.1324) also disconnects a text from its author through the following remarks:

Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing. As soon as a fact is narrated... this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins.

To poststructuralism and deconstruction, the centre, the clear organizing principle by which meaning can be determined, does not exist because we can never reach a final meaning. So, Said is correct in remarking that literary theory in the 1970s paid too much attention to the text's formal operations but far too little to its materiality. The result of giving too much importance to a text's abstract operation is that a text becomes 'a kind of self-consuming artifact; idealized, essentialized, instead of remaining the special kind of cultural object it is with a causation, persistence, durability and social presence quite its own'. Thus, in poststructuralism and deconstruction, it is not worth paying attention to how a text 'sought after, fought over, possessed, rejected, or achieved in time.' Said (1983, p.4) writes :

As it is practiced in the American academy today, literary theory has for the most part isolated textuality from the circumstances, the events, the physical senses that made it possible and render it intelligible as the result of human work.

This means that the text is crucial in the way that we 'have' a world and that worldliness is constructed within the text. The text has a specific situation which places restraints upon an interpreter, 'not because the situation is hidden within the text as a mystery but because the situation exists at the same level of surface particularity as the textual object itself. The text does not exist outside the world, as is the implication in both the realist and the structuralist positions, but is a part of the world of which it speaks, and this worldliness is itself present in the text as a part of its formation.

We may grant that the 'author' in the text is a textual construction without therefore assuming that nobody speaks to us in the text, which is the tendency in much modern literary theories of the 1980s. But secular criticism has brought forth the issue of worldliness, which is concerned with the materiality of a text's origin, for this material being is embedded in the very materiality of the matters of which it speaks: dispossession, injustice, marginality, subjection. Writing is the complex and generally orderly translation of many different forces into a decipherable script, forces which all converge on the desire to write rather than to speak, to dance, to sculpt. In having given up the world entirely for the aporias and unthinkable paradoxes of the text, according to Said (1983), contemporary criticism has retreated from its constituency, the citizens of modern society, who have been left to the hands of 'free' market forces and multinational corporations .

Said shows his dissatisfaction with this idea of textuality and of the endless deferring of meaning held by deconstructionist theory. Derrida's view of the 'deferral' of signification, the limitlessness of interpretation implies, at least in theory, a meaning which always tends towards meaninglessness because it can never be satisfactorily situated in the world. But there are several ways, claims Said (1983,p.39), in which the 'closeness of the world's body to the text's body forces readers to take both into consideration.' Texts are in the world, they have various kinds of affiliation with the world, and one of their functions as texts is to solicit the world's attention, which they do in a number of ways. Many texts incorporate the explicit circumstances of their concretely imagined situation. But textuality in deconstruction is the 'exact antithesis' (Said, 1983: 3) of history, for although it takes place, it doesn't take place anywhere or any time in particular.

Secular Criticism and Literary Amateurism

The specialist, professionalised critical vocabulary of contemporary criticism, bases itself on the belief that one aspect alone of the literary experience dominates all others. This belief has led to an extremely sharp break between the critics and the reading public because writing and criticism have come to be considered extremely specialized functions with no simple equivalent in everyday experience. The alternative to such specialization is a form of criticism from which ambiguity and contradiction cannot be entirely removed but which happily pays that price in order to reject dogma. Said (1983, p.29) writes:

In its suspicion of totalizing concepts, in its discontent with reified objects, in its impatience with guilds, special interests, imperialized fiefdoms, and orthodox habits of mind, criticism is most itself and, if the paradox can be tolerated, most unlike itself at the moment it starts turning into organised dogma.

Thus, it is the ever more narrowly focused specialization of theory and criticism which characterizes the contemporary critical scene and to which secular criticism is adamantly opposed.

Said's Secular Criticism and Foucault

Said (1983, p.29) goes on to say that to treat literature as an inert structure is to miss the important fact that it is an *act* located in the world. To treat the text as merely a structure of the paradigmatic and syntagmatic, say, is to divorce the text from the relations of power within which it is produced. Said like Nietzsche and Foucault saw texts as fundamentally facts of power, not of democratic exchange. Traditionally, we are inclined to see writers and readers engaged in communication on an equal footing. But according to Said, far from being an exchange between equals, the discursive situation between a writer and a reader is more like the relationship between colonizers and colonized, oppressors and oppressed. To Said, when a critic is able to find this connection between a text and its context, it enables him to 'speak truth to power'. Such kind of critical consciousness, to Said (1983, p.29), helps the critic to arrive at some acute sense of what political, social, and human values are entailed in the reading, production, and transmission of every text.' He also says that secular criticism would be 'life-enhancing and constitutively opposed to every form of tyranny, domination, and abuse; its social goals are noncoercive knowledge produced in the interests of human freedom (Said, 1983). He calls secular criticism as the fundamental human and intellectual obligation.

Thus, we see that by secular criticism Edward Said likes to draw our attention to the fact that even if a text is considered to be a silent printed object with its own unheard melodies, there are many historical, ideological and political circumstances which mould the body of a literary text. To him a text is produced by the concrete material forces of the world for which it speaks. So, by his theory of secular criticism, Said threw a challenge to the modern literary theories like post-structuralism and deconstruction which separates texts from their contexts and at the same time paves the way for the emergence of a materially grounded theory like postcolonialism.

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