

The Confessions Of A Pakistani Native Orientalist

Pervez Hoodbhoy

Hear ye, Counterpunch readers! The victory of Native Orientalists – the ones which the late Edward Said had warned us about – is nearly complete in Pakistan. It has been led by “the minions of Western embassies and Western-financed NGOs” and includes the likes of “Ahmad Rashid, Pervez Hoodbhoy, Najam Sethi, Khaled Ahmad, Irfan Hussain, Husain Haqqani, and P.J.Mir”. Thus declares Mohammad Shahid Alam, a professor of Pakistani origin who teaches at Northeastern University in Boston, Massachusetts. [*Counterpunch*, 2 Dec 2009]

I ought to be thrilled. Now that I am a certified foreign-funded agent/orientalist/NGO-operator who “manages US-Zionist interests”, a nice fat cheque must surely be in the mail. Thirty six years of teaching and social activism at a public university in Pakistan – where salaries are less than spectacular – means that additions to one’s bank balance are always welcome.

But what did I do to deserve this kindness? My sole interaction with the good professor was in mid-2008, when we shared the speaker’s podium at the International Islamic University in Islamabad. Sadly, it was not terribly pleasant.

But then these are not pleasant times. There is carnage in the streets. Blood flows down the gutters and body parts are strewn in bazaars and markets. Suicide bombers have also targeted mosques, funerals, and hospitals. The internet is filled with videos of Pakistan army soldiers being decapitated, pictures of separated heaps of limbs and heads of Shiites, and women writhing under the blows of heavy whips and chains.

The Taliban, mostly from the mountains of Waziristan and other tribal areas of Pakistan, are not particularly shy to broadcast such achievements. For example, their decapitation movies – culminating in heads being stuck upon poles and paraded around town – are watched for free by kids. On 15 February 2009, the Tehreek-i-Taliban Pakistan announced a ban on all female education and, at last count, 362 schools have been blown up in Pakistan’s tribal areas.

Curiously, these very people also happen to be the heroes of Professor Alam. This self-described “anti-imperialist” and “anti-Zionist” migrant to the heart of imperialism tends to become breathless in his celebration of the brave Taliban “resistance fighters”. At the meeting I mentioned above, he received ecstatic approbation from a leader of the *Jamaat-e-Islami*, Khurshid Ahmad, who chaired the meeting. This praise is also apparent in what the professor writes:

"Yet, in one corner of Pakistan, resistance comes from the sons and daughters of the mountains, yet uncontaminated by western civilisation, firm in their faith, clear in their conviction, proud of their heritage, and ready to fight for their dignity.... They stood up against the Soviet marauders: and defeated them. Today, they are standing up again, now against the American marauders and their allies."

[*Pakistan’s Mercenary Elites*, by M. Shahid Alam,
<http://aslama.org/Pol/PolOctober92007.html>]

Unless the professor is physically infirm, may I suggest that he head for the mountains of Waziristan to help the Pakistani Taliban movement? Or give a helping hand to Al-Qaida, an organization also known for its benevolence? To be sure, he may miss the free lunches the American taxpayer provides to him, but surely there must be satisfaction to be had in strapping a madrassa lad with explosives aimed at a Pakistani bazaar – especially one frequented by unveiled women and brides-to-be.

Politeness aside, I do take serious personal offence on just one matter in his outbursts against the opponents of Al-Qaida and the Taliban. This is when the good professor invokes the name and authority of Edward Said, author of “Orientalism”, in condemning me and my colleagues in Pakistan.

Edward was my mentor and hero, the man who wrote a highly positive blurb displayed prominently on the backside of my book on Islam and science. He was also the closest friend of Eqbal Ahmad – my guru and dearest friend. With Eqbal, many were the pleasant evenings that we spent at Edward’s apartment on Riverside Drive, New York. When Eqbal died, Edward and I were both lost in grief. When Edward died in 2003, I defended him against a poisonous article published the next day in the Wall Street Journal by a notorious Islamophobe, Ibn Warraq.

So cut it out, professor! Edward Said does not belong to the jihadists and their declared supporters – like you. He and Eqbal loathed their primitivism and utter ruthlessness, as well as their desecration of Islam. Please do not press him into your service.

On the contrary, Edward belongs to those of us on the Left who have worked for the Palestinians and their right to the lands on which they once lived, who keep fighting for justice and democracy in Pakistan, and who fervently opposed America’s immoral invasion of Iraq in the streets of Islamabad and elsewhere. Edward was a supreme secular humanist who would have no truck with fanatics of any faith.

I do not know all the “native orientalist” and “brown sahibs” that the professor lists. Perhaps he secretly hopes that they shall receive appropriate attention from jihadist groups. But I do know some of these “traitors” – and they are among the finest people around. A couple, in their youth, had fought against the Pakistan Army in the mountains of Baluchistan. Others have stoutly defended religious minorities and worked to protect civil rights, democracy, and human values.

Professor Alam: be assured that once the expected cheque arrives, I shall be happy to send you a one-way ticket from Boston to Peshawar, from where you will easily find your way to Waziristan with help from your friends there. It shall be no less than business class, in appreciation of the services you render to your cause.

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