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Review of *Eqbal Ahmad: Critical Outsider in a Turbulent Age*

Nubar Hovsepian

Chapman University, hovsepian@chapman.edu

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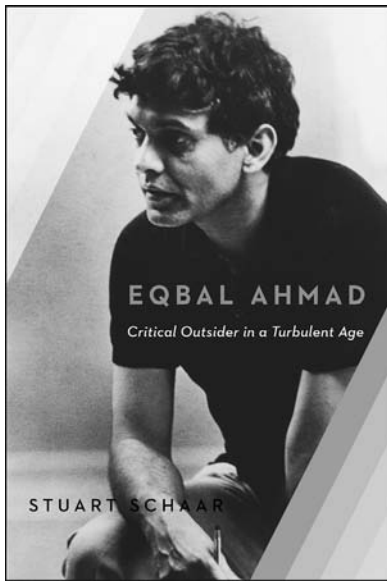
Review of *Eqbal Ahmad: Critical Outsider in a Turbulent Age*

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Eqbal Ahmad: Critical Outsider in a Turbulent Age, by Stuart Schaar. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015. 240 pages. \$35.00 cloth, \$34.99 e-book.

REVIEWED BY NUBAR HOVSEPIAN

As one of the Harrisburg Seven, a group of antiwar activists accused of conspiring to kidnap Henry Kissinger in 1970, Eqbal Ahmad embarked on a national speaking tour to debunk the government's charges. Making a stop at the University of Washington in Seattle, where I was in my last year of undergraduate studies, he awed and mesmerized the audience with his performance. He projected a rare form of worldliness and an antiwar stance that included solidarity with Palestine, which he often noted was colonized at the height of decolonization. Less than a year later I relocated to Beirut, but from then on Ahmad was on my must-see list when I returned for visits to the United States. A few months after moving to New York in 1979, I met Stuart Schaar at Ahmad's kitchen table. Hence the biographer and the subject became lifelong friends, collaborators for justice, liberation, and self-determination.

Schaar's short but poignant biography captures Ahmad's multiple dimensions and identities: Indian, Pakistani, and secular internationalist. He is a man who crossed boundaries, affiliated with liberation movements and with the oppressed. As Edward W. Said wrote, Ahmad "managed unostentatiously to preserve his native Muslim tradition without succumbing either to frozen exclusivism or to the jealousy that has often gone with it. Humanity and genuine secularism in this blood-drenched old century of ours had no finer champion."* Schaar develops this theme throughout his biography and he concludes the book by observing that despite his outsider status, Ahmad "was rooted in the culture and tradition of Islam . . . for him, striving for social justice represented the very essence of Islamic culture and polity and therefore the core of the religion itself" (p. 158).

* Edward Said, "A True Struggle, A Good Man," *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 9 May 1999.

Schaar's biography, at times too telescopic, is organized around themes: Ahmad's life and its multiple influences; Islam; imperialism and nationalism; the Middle East and Palestine; South Asia; and a critique of U.S. foreign policy, the Cold War, and terrorism. This volume serves as an important contribution and companion to Ahmad's published works.[†]

Ahmad was a keen student of liberation movements and guerrilla warfare. As Schaar explains, he studied Algeria's struggle for independence, and then turned his attention to Vietnam and U.S. imperialism (p. 105). Unlike the servants of power (for example, Kissinger), Ahmad understood revolutionary warfare as an instrument to drain the enemy's legitimacy. Though not the classical pacifist, he often advocated peaceful and nonviolent means of resistance to achieve self-determination. The mode of struggle for Ahmad was, to a great extent, informed by the nature of the enemy. He shared this sentiment in a 1967 speech to the national conference of the organization of Arab students. Maintaining that the Arabs could never defeat Israel militarily, he suggested the organization of a massive nonviolent march by Palestinians across established borders to articulate the need for a formal home in Palestine.

As the age of decolonization unfolded, Ahmad turned his critical attention to the new postcolonial order and the leaders who ushered independence. As Schaar points out, he delineated a minimum set of requisites for post-independence, which *inter alia* included: commitment to democracy accompanied by institutions that would ensure its practice, and "congruence of new institutions with the historical inheritance of local culture" (p. 109). He adumbrated these principles in a series of three articles for the *Arab Studies Quarterly* on the ongoing crisis in the Third World. In the final article, "The Neo-Fascist State: The Pathology of Power in the Third World," Ahmad argues that instead of "inventing new souls" as Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire had yearned, the liberators became the new oppressors of their people, as they centralized power and constructed dictatorships. As Ahmad often explained in reference to Pakistan, people aspired for "economic and social justice, political democracy, and cultural freedom," which is precisely what their leaders failed to deliver (p. 111). These demands and yearnings sparked the start of the Arab uprisings in December 2010.

Schaar does a wonderful job capturing the special relationship and bond between Ahmad and Said. The two met in 1968, shortly after Said published his essay "The Arab Portrayed," a piece commissioned by Ibrahim Abu-Lughod. In many ways their experience with exile drew them to each other, sharing a "certain relationship of alienation and intimacy with one's chosen environment, and of constant often secret negotiations between one's colonial past and contemporary metropolitan life" (p. 68). In view of this partnership, it stands to reason that Said dedicated *Culture and Imperialism* to Ahmad, his cultural and political soulmate.

Schaar captures the mutual admiration, respect, and wit that animate the special friendship between Ahmad and Said. Along with Abu-Lughod, they collaborated on promoting social justice and particularly on advancing the quest for Palestinian liberation. At their behest, Ahmad connected with various Palestinian leaders, offering his critical insights on their practices in meetings and memos, which I had the pleasure of delivering on some occasions.

[†] Carollee Bengelsdorf, Margaret Cerullo, and Yogesh Chandrani, eds., *The Selected Writings of Eqbal Ahmad* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

Through this short biography, Schaar captures Ahmad as the quintessential oppositional intellectual, one who crosses boundaries, speaks truth to power, remains loyal to his cultural roots as an act of affiliation and not merely filiation. In this sense, he is indeed the “critical outsider.”

Nubar Hovsepian, chair of political science at Chapman University, is the author of *Palestinian State Formation: Education and the Construction of National Identity* (Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008).
