

EQBAL AHMAD (1934-1999)

An Intellectual Unintimidated by Power or Authority

Edward Said

Eqbal Ahmad, perhaps the shrewdest and most original anti-imperialist analyst of Asia and Africa, has died, aged 66, in Islamabad following an operation for colon cancer. A man of enormous charisma and in corruptible ideals, he was a prodigious talker and lecturer.

He had an almost instinctive attraction to movements of the oppressed and the persecuted, whether in Europe, America, Bosnia, Chechnya, South Lebanon, Vietnam, Iraq or the Indian Subcontinent. He had a formidable knowledge of history, always measuring the promise of religion and nationalism against their depredations and abuse as their proponents descended into fundamentalism, chauvinism and provincialism. Ahmad was a fierce, often angry, combatant against what he perceived as human cruelty and perversity.

Ahmad was an early and prominent opponent of the Vietnam war, and in 1970 was tried with the Berrigan brothers on a trumped-up charge of conspiracy to kidnap Henry Kissinger — on which he and his alleged co-conspirators were acquitted. In addition to his outspoken support of unpopular causes (especially Palestinian rights), Ahmad's uncompromising politics kept him an untenured professor at various universities until 1982, when Hampshire College, Massachusetts, made him a professor. He taught there until he became emeritus professor in 1998, dividing his time between New England and Pakistan.

During these years he travelled all over the world. Arabs, for example, learned more from him about the failures of Arab nationalism than from anyone else. In 1980, in Beirut, he was the first to

predict the exact outlines of the 1982 Israeli invasion; in a memo to Yasir Arafat and Abu Jihad he also sadly forecast the quick defeat of PLO forces in South Lebanon. He was a relentless opponent of militarism, bureaucracy, ideological rigidity and what he called 'the pathology of power.' He was consulted by journalists and international civil servants about abstruse currents in contemporary Afghanistan, Algeria, Iran, India, Pakistan, Angola, Cuba, Sri Lanka and he had an encyclopaedic knowledge of the US.

No one who saw him sitting bare-foot and cross-legged on a living-room floor, conversing genially until the early hours, with a glass in his hand, will ever forget the sight or the sound of his voice as he announced four major points — but never got past two or three. He loved literature, especially poetry, and the sensitive and precise use of language, whether it was Urdu, English, French, Arabic or Farsi. Ahmad was that rare thing, an intellectual unintimidated by power or authority, a companion in arms to such diverse figures as Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn, Tariq Ali, Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, Richard Falk, Fred Jameson, Alexander Cockburn and Daniel Berrigan.

Immaculate in dress and expression, faultlessly kind, an unpretentious connoisseur of food and wine, he saw himself as a man of the 18th century, modern because of enlightenment and breadth of outlook, not because of technological or quasi-scientific 'progress'. Somehow he managed to preserve his native Muslim tradition without succumbing either to the frozen exclusivism or to the jealousy that has often gone with it. Humanity and secularism had no finer champion.