

Rewriting History: An Analysis of Edward Said's *The Question of Palestine*

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Abstract

Postcolonialism as a literary theory analyses the history, culture, politics and discourses of European imperialism on the colonized countries. Edward Said, one of the forerunners among the postcolonial theorists, through his work *Orientalism* has contributed to different perspectives of the theory. As a social, cultural and political theory, it looks into the life of the people of once colonized countries and the process of decolonization from a theoretical perspective. Consequently, it addresses the need of heeding to the voice of the voiceless. As a Palestinian Arab, Said focuses on the political implications of the theory of postcolonialism and analyses the ground situation of the people of Palestine through his work *The Question of Palestine*. Decolonization process also involves the need for rewriting the history from the marginal perspective of the natives, which was otherwise written by European imperialism. Hence, the objective of this article is to reexamine the romanticized version of the Meta historical account of the people of Palestine. The proposed hypothesis of the study is that there exists a significant difference between the historical accounts written by the imperial world to that of reality on the ground. Said, through *The Question of Palestine*, entreats the literary world that the narratives of the West need to be revisited for the real understanding of history.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, History, Narratives.

Edward Said, one of the greatest intellectuals of the twentieth century was diasporic Palestinian Christian Arab writer. As a lover of his nation, he was very interested in the liberation of his own land and his countrymen. As a cultural critic, he feels that the world after the period of formal colonialism still perpetuates the reign of colonialism through various means in different spheres. He is widely known for his influential work *Orientalism*, which forms his theoretical base. Of his works, *Orientalism*, *The Question of Palestine*, *Covering Islam*, *Culture and Imperialism*, *Beginnings: Intention and Method*, *The Politics of Dispossession*, *Out of Place* are more popular and are widely read. As a Palestinian Arab, Said, in *The Question of Palestine*, takes up the cause of Palestine and entreats the world community to speak on behalf of a community which is totally annihilated from its own land. He emphatically phrases that the Palestinians need be accepted as human beings and their land rights be accepted as they are the natives of the land. Hence, the objective of this article is to reexamine the neglected but romanticized version of the historical account of the people of Palestine. The proposed hypothesis of the study is that there exists a significant difference between the historical accounts of the imperial world and the native world.

Over the centuries, most parts of the world had experienced colonial occupation. Colonialism had left an indelible mark on those colonies. Though formal colonial occupation ended in the middle of twentieth century, a different form of colonialism, namely neocolonialism has crept into the world to sustain its domination. Such neocolonial activity by America, the presumed super power of the world, is exercised in the land of Palestine in the name of giving home for the homeless people. In fact, the Jews who were once the natives of the land were expelled from the land in the first century and they returned to the land only in 1947. This was

supported by Britain which occupied Palestine in the beginning of twentieth century. One of the important things that happened in the land was the affirmation by Zionism, the official movement for the cause of the Jews, that the land is barren and non-existent. Only an upcoming population of Jews can do miracles in the land. This agenda of Zionism was duly carried out by denying the existence of the Palestinians in the land. To achieve this objective, the history of the natives was concealed from the perception of the West. Said takes up the issue and tries to rewrite the history from the point of its victims and wants to tell the real history of the people of Palestine.

Said and others in an article entitled “A Profile of the Palestinian People” narrate the geographical position of the land of Palestine and the social life of the people. The land contained one of the ancient civilizations of the world from where the urban life stems even before the West claimed its life as civilised life. They write that “it is the only place in the world where a town is known to date back nine thousand years. Jericho is the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world, being ‘four thousand years older than any other urban settlement known at present’” (235). Palestine became predominantly Arab and Islamic country by the end of the seventh century. It became the centre of Islam due to the belief of the Muslims and its religious significance. Further, they add that “in 1516, Palestine became a province of the Ottoman Empire. Through the years it retained its fertility, as well as its Arab and Islamic character” (236). They quote the description of the land by an English poet George Sandys: “a land that flowed with milk and honey; in the midst as it were of the habitable world, and under a temperate climate; adorned with beautiful mountains and luxurious valleys; the rocks producing excellent waters; and no part of empty delight or profit” (236). Only after the Second World

War, the Jews started settling in the land with the help of Britain, since Britain has already formed British Mandate Palestine. This created a tension and consequently the problem between Arabs and Jews began. Soon, the incoming population declared that the land is barren and Palestinians were considered non-grata in the land.

For Said, it is a fact even before the arrival of the Jews that there existed a group of people mostly Sunni Muslims, and a few Christians, Druze and Shi'ite Muslims. They spoke Arabic and considered themselves Arabs. They were mostly agriculturalists living in some 500 villages. This is not to deny the fact that urban settlements also existed. There was a group of intellectuals who organized the people against British rule and the incoming Jewish population. Thus, there was a flourished community that was existing for a long time, though there religious affinity may date back to seventh century BC. However, Said and et al. in the article entitled "A Profile of the Palestinian People" write that "this Palestinian society was dismantled and dispersed. Even the historic fact of Palestine's prior existence as an entity and of the Palestinians as a people was questioned and portrayed as an apparition of doubtful authenticity" (237).

Said and et al. in the same article quote the view of Janet Abu-Lughod, who warned against the "danger of forgetting the 'startling recency' of the destruction of Palestine: 'Our natural tendency to assume that what exists today has always been, may afford us psychic peace but only at the terrible cost of denying reality. And once historical reality has been denied, our capacity to understand and react meaningfully to the present is similarly destroyed'" (237-238). They continuously affirm that the destruction of Palestine is an intended one to "transform Palestine into 'Eretz Yisrael'" (238). Consequently, the history of the land had been rewritten by Zionism as if it has established the land. They vividly portray that "the Zionist movement was

committed to the transformation of Palestine into a ‘mono-religious’ Jewish state, its success required it to be as intent on the destruction of the indigenous Arab society as it was on the construction of a Jewish life in Palestine” (238).

Moreover Said narrates how the history of the Palestinians was hidden and the purpose behind this veil. The perception of the Occident about the Orient is invariably unrealistic. They held as told in *The Question of Palestine* that the Orient is “the vast spaces, the undifferentiated masses of mostly colored people, and the romance, exotic locales...” (3). The negation of Palestinian history, Said narrates in *The Question of Palestine*, stems from Golda Meir’s assertion in 1969 that “the Palestinians did not exist” (5). What concerns Said mostly is the “continuing avoidance or ignorance of the existence today of about four million Muslim and Christian Arabs who are known to themselves and to others as Palestinians” (5). This brings forth the reality of denying the history of the people of Palestine which is otherwise a history of their own. Said, in *The Question of Palestine* affirms that “on the land called Palestine there existed as a huge majority for hundreds of years a largely pastoral, a nevertheless socially, culturally, politically, economically identifiable people whose language and religion were (for a huge majority) Arabic and Islam, respectively” (7). Said affirms the existence of the people in the land. This indeed goes against the assertion of Golda Meir and thus calls for the attention to rewrite the meta-history of the people. The reason for rewriting the meta-history stems from the fact that the world had different histories which were neglected and in order to fight against the supremacy of the European historiography. In order to achieve this objective, Said insists on the need for critical theory.

Further, Said continues to write that the perception about the land was not in favour of the people of the land. He says in *The Question of Palestine* that “Palestine has been a place where a relatively advanced (because European) incoming population of Jews has performed miracles of construction and civilizing and has fought brilliantly successful technical wars against what was always portrayed as a dumb, essentially repellent population of uncivilized Arab natives” (8). Naturally enough, this construes the fact that the history written by Zionism is becoming the history of the land leaving aside the history of the natives who were present in the land for a long time. He himself writes that “we need to try to understand what the instruments of this contest were, and how they shaped subsequent history so that this history now appears to confirm the validity of the Zionist claims to Palestine, thereby denigrating the Palestinian claims” (8).

In the name of the reconstruction of the land for the Jews, the living population was driven out without any consideration. Their history was not at all considered. Edward Said, in *The Question of Palestine* quotes the remarks of Moshe Dayan in April 1969, which shows the denial of the history of the people. Moshe Dayan says,

We came to this country which was already populated by Arabs, and we are establishing a Hebrew, that is a Jewish state here. In considerable areas of the country (the total area was about 6 percent) we bought the lands from the Arabs. Jewish villages were built in the place of Arab villages. You do not even know the names of these Arab villages, and I do not blame you, because these geography books no longer exist; not only do the books not exist, the Arab villages are not there either. Nahalal arose in the place of Mahalul, Gevat – in the place of Jibta, (Kibbutz) Sarid – in the place of Heneifs and Kefar

Yehoshua – in the place of Tell Shaman. There is not one place built in this country that did not have a former Arab population. (14)

The reconstitution of the land for the Jews is an imperial project of the West. Said, clearly portrays that the Zionist claim of the land was backed up by the European powers and at a later stage by America. Said says,

The declaration was made (a) by a European power, (b) about a non-European territory, (c) in a flat disregard of both the presence and the wishes of the native majority resident in that territory, and (d) it took the form of a promise about this same territory to another foreign group, so that this foreign group might, quite literally, make this territory a national home for the Jewish people. (15-16)

One of the important assertions made by Western imperialism at least in the case of Palestine was a direct exploitation. Said, in *The Question of Palestine* gives the remark made by Weizmann, who said “it was a miraculous cleaning of the land; the miraculous simplification of Israel’s task” (22). He virtually asserts that Zionism did not fight for the task in Palestine rather in the great capitals of the West. He says, “on the one hand, the native resistance to the Zionists was either played down or ignored in the West; on the other, the Zionists made it their claim that Britain was blocking their greater and greater penetration of Palestine” (22). Naturally it evolves the fight between Britain and Zionism but in fact, it is an another way of occupying the land by denying the existence of the people in the land. He himself writes in the same book that “address the world as the aggrieved, with Britain (a colonial power) as your enemy; ignore the natives, and have nothing said about them, so long, objectively, as you cannot be seen directly to be exploiting them” (23).

While speaking about rewriting, McLeod in *Beginning Postcolonialism* states that “a re-writing often exists to resist or challenge colonialist representations of colonized peoples and culture perceived in the source-text and popular readings of it. In this way we might consider a re-writing of a ‘classic’ text as ‘postcolonial’” (168). It is clear from the analysis of McLeod that the colonized was not given a chance to represent themselves (164). Said, in *The Question of Palestine* vividly affirms that the Palestinian Arabs were not given a chance to represent themselves, rather they were represented and especially not allowed to speak for themselves. He writes,

Today the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) is recognized by over 100 nations, and of course by all Palestinians, as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, and yet neither the United States nor Israel concedes that the PLO represents Palestinians. On the contrary, Camp David specifically arrogated the right of Palestinian representation to the United States, Israel, and Egypt. (25)

The Western representation is always unrealistic. Said continues to assert that the West invariably held the view that “the Arabs and Islam represent viciousness, veniality, degenerate vice, lechery, and stupidity in popular and scholarly discourse” (26). Once again Said gives the representation of the West in the similar words: “Arabs are Oriental, therefore less human and valuable than Europeans and Zionists; they are treacherous, unregenerate, etc.” (28). Similarly, he declares, “Zionism is progress and modernity; Islam and the Arabs are the opposite” (31). Moreover, Said gives the opinion of Niebuhr according to whom the “Arabs are sui generis inferior and that they were simply the creatures, without will or opinion, of a hopelessly decadent, small, feudal class of “overlords” who manipulated the “masses” as so many puppets”

(32). Another important concept told about the Palestinians is alarming. Said, concurs with the view of Edmund Wilson, the American writer, according to whom the Arabs lacked concern for their family. Said writes the opinion of Wilson thus: “Orientals (are) not having the same regard for human life that “we” do. In other words, Arabs don’t care for children, they don’t feel love or anger, they are simply quick-breeding animals. The “certain contempt” felt for Arabs extends to finding the Arab Palestinian “stupid” in his obstinacy about being accommodated elsewhere...” (35-36).

While speaking about rewriting history, Said has the following to say:

To speak of the Palestinians rationally is, I think, to stop speaking about war or genocide and to start to deal seriously with political reality. There is a Palestinian people, there is an Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands, there are Palestinians under Israeli military occupation, there are Palestinians – 650,000 of them – who are Israeli citizens and who constitute 15 percent of the population of Israel, there is a large Palestinian population in exile: these are the actualities which the United States and most of the world have directly or indirectly acknowledge, which Israel too has acknowledged, if only in the forms of denial, rejection, threats of war, and punishment. The history of the past forty years has shown that Palestinians have grown politically, not shrunk, under the influence of every kind of repression and hardship; the history of the Jews has shown too that time only increases attachment to the historically saturated land of Palestine. Short of complete obliteration, the Palestinians will continue to exist and they will continue to have their own ideas about who represents them, where they want to settle, what they want to do with their national and political future. (51)

Said vividly portrays that the representation of the Palestinian Arabs is crucial to the understanding of the history of the people.

An important factor that has to be analyzed while rewriting history is ‘self-determination.’ Said, in *The Question of Palestine*, asserts that “behind every Palestinian there is a great general fact: that he once – and not so long ago – lived in a land of his own called Palestine, which is now no longer his homeland” (115). Hence, the history of the natives is to be rewritten so as to get the rights of the Palestinians in their land. Besides, the history presented by Zionism did not give the real accounts of the native Palestinians. Consequently, Said wanted to say that unless the meta-history of the people is rewritten, the issue will not end.

According to Said, rewriting involves self-determination. Based on the issue of Palestine, he opines that “an independent and sovereign Palestinian state is required at this stage to fulfill our history as a people during the past century” (175). Self-determination dignifies the life of the people. When the imperialist ideology is exercised, the dignity of the natives is obliterated in order to uphold the presumed superiority of the Europeans. This involves rewriting of history from the point of the natives. The natives had a history which was marred by and for the benefit of the imperial powers. Said repeatedly asserts that the history of the period of imperial powers is not inclusive but exclusive. An inclusive history which gives vent to the history of the natives will help to attain self-determination which is required for the peaceful co-existence in the world.

Said wanted a Palestinian narrative for the purpose of retelling the story of Palestinians. Valerie Kennedy, Assistant Professor in the Department of English Language and Literature, Bilkent University, Turkey, says in *Edward Said: A Critical Introduction* that “for Said writing a narrative of Palestinian history means having ‘Permission to narrate’ in order to set the historical

record straight” (51). This involves the critical reexamination of the history presented by Zionism and rewriting the history of Palestinians. Thus, narration becomes part of the struggle for the physical and political existence of the Palestinians and human rights and dignity that rightfully belong to the Palestinians.

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