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When History Betrays its People

The history of the world tells us that words are tools of expression and resistance. In some cases, words fail to create intended bridges and as a result, weapons and extreme actions become the alternative. “One of structuralism’s characteristic views is the notion that language doesn’t just reflect or record the world; rather, it shapes it, so that how we see is what we see” (Barry 61). In a colonial situation for instance, natives of that nation are deprived a proper education therefore lack the appropriate language and knowledge/truth. “There is an almost universally felt anxiety that the language will express things we hadn’t intended, or convey the wrong impression, or betray our ignorance, callousness, or confusion” (62). Reality, or if I may say “truth”, is not an image dictated by others. Those in power, the colonizers, maintain power through ideology. My focus on postcolonialism as a theory is because a post-colonial study challenges the mainstream dominant power. It gives voice to those left out; those silenced throughout the years. It shifts perspectives around as it challenges the status quo. This confrontation is extremely dangerous because it dehumanizes and weakens the dominant force. It excavates a diminished history that has been denied. Those in power decide what is acknowledged in history and what is erased, as well as what is considered as truth. The most pertinent example of such a history eluded is that of Palestine. In 2006, a Palestinian director Hany Abu-Assad put together a film that created great controversy. It was considered a dangerous film because of its objectivity: “...calling into question what is usually taken for granted as simply the way things are” (Barry 63). When *Paradise Now* was released, it was

immediately viewed in binary oppositions. Politicians perceived it as good or bad, black or white; the reason being, they have something to lose/gain. However, art intended it to be a human thing. The director presents us with two sides that *seem* to be anything *but* cohesive. Edward Said, a Palestinian American post-colonial critic tells us that experiences are always overlapping and interconnected. There is no purity to anything and there are links between our experiences. Moreover, there is no neutral position in anything. Said says that we all share “discrepant experiences” and once we can see that, we will be able to look at things contrapuntally and make connections (Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 28). With the plight of Palestine, the image is conspicuous. The Israelis use tactics against the Palestinians. In return, and eager to defend themselves and reclaim what has been lost, Palestinians strike back with the only means accessible; suicide bombings. When looking at literature or any worldly text from a contrapuntal perspective, Said says we find the hidden and invisible elements. *Paradise Now* forces the viewer to analyze it in a contrapuntal way and understand the two sides while refraining from making any judgments without understanding the colonial history and ideology at work and what institutions have we settled for. Understanding the current and past situation is essential in a contrapuntal reading.

Palestine was once occupied by the British and remains under Israeli occupation. *Paradise Now* shows us the current state of Palestine and the reasons that cause them to take such extreme measures. It is not asking us to condone suicide bombers, but it tells us that in the midst of all the chaos, there was a colonial history, the Balfour declaration, Arab opposition, and rioting wars and attacks. Zionists and advocates such as Israeli former Prime Minister Golda Meir once said: Palestine was “a land without a people for a people without a land” (Said, *Orientalism* 305). This attitude attempts to look down at the Palestinians from a colonial superior position denying their existence. “The most discouraging aspect of Israeli policy toward the Palestinians everywhere is

an almost total official triumph of ideology over reason and even common sense. To deny the existence of Palestinians makes sense epistemologically *if* one believes that Palestine is still an empty desert waiting to be cured of its neglect” (Said, Question 139). The elision of the Palestinian identity gives Israel power. Franz Fanon, a revolutionary writer from the French Caribbean colony Martinique claims that this is the case in any colonial situation. “Fanon argued that the first step for ‘colonialised’ people in finding a voice and an identity is to reclaim their own past. For centuries the European colonizing power will have devalued the nation’s past, seeing its precolonial era as a pre-civilised limbo, or even as a historical void” (Barry 193). He says that the first attempt for the colonizers is to obliterate the existence, culture and history of those colonized. Having achieved this, only then would there be complete and total domination. However, this rarely pulls through.

One way to achieve this total domination is to replace history with *false truths* [my italics] such as “the Palestinian’s never existed”. The viewer of the movie, the critic, and the politician of a nation should look at the colonial history; the matter is not only a religious belief or cause. One has to ask questions. A suicide bombing may seem senseless but there is a history behind it. “Suicide bombing...is a purposive self-annihilation, a confrontation between oneself and oneself, the extreme end of autoeroticism, killing oneself as other, in the process killing others....Suicidal resistance is a message inscribed on the body when no other means will get through” (Spivak). In order to understand the actions, you have to take into account the history. The Palestinians had a history entrenched with bloodshed and diaspora; so did the Jews. The movie presents alternatives to the current order because the current order oppresses; we should not accept it as natural. The movie speaks out and registers a history people have chosen to neglect:

“Neither imperialism nor colonialism is a simple act of accumulation and acquisition. Both are supported and perhaps even impelled by ideological

formations that include notions that certain territories and people *require* and beseech domination, as well as forms of knowledge affiliated with domination: the vocabulary of classic nineteenth-century imperial culture is plentiful with such words and concepts as ‘inferior’ or ‘subject races’, ‘subordinate peoples’, ‘dependency’, ‘expansion’ and ‘authority’. (Said, *Culture and Imperialism* 8).

Hany Abu-Asaad shows us how ideology works itself into the minds of people and how concepts such as authority and inferiority are present in Palestine. Similarly, Michel Foucault mentions *truth* and how only one truth is made superior. He talks about *epistemes*; structures that are unconscious. They take the same roots of ideology. Foucault states that knowledges are structured and that there is no awareness in the situation. Media, religion, and institutions function through distorted knowledges. Power controls truth; truth is not the objective truth. Truth is just the manifestation of someone’s power (Foucault 1668). Later in the paper, it will become apprehensible how Khalid and Said are products of fanatical ideological interpolation and their actions cannot be condoned nor sympathized with, more so, understood. They are willing to sacrifice their lives for a *false truth* fed by organizations like the one apparent in the movie that support them emotionally, spiritually, and economically while eventually leading them into a false misrecognized path.

The story follows the lives of two Palestinian childhood friends who live in Nablus. Said and Khalid are ordinary men who do mundane things. They live among the rubble in a Nablus refugee camp and work as garage mechanics. They have been recruited to accomplish a suicidal attack in Tel Aviv. The film tracks the events that take place in the last two days of their lives. The two men are not shown as fanatics; rather, two ordinary men who pray, work, and live out their lives. The *Organization* comes along with smart tactics and promises them a life better than that they already have. The day before the attack, they shave their heads and beards and put on

suits to look like Israelis. An explosive belt is attached to each man. The bombs cannot be removed without detonating them. Khalid and Said receive instructions to set off the bomb at the same place with a time interval of fifteen minutes so they get the biggest number of Israelis possible. In the process of preparing the attack, they tape a video glorifying God and justifying their cause, belief, and actions. They are given a chance to appear on television. On their last night, they are given a ceremonial dinner. In his recorded speech, Said expresses the Palestinian's position and their anger at Israelis in denying the Palestinians their rights. Nevertheless, the director undercuts the heroism in both filming incidents. While taping, the camera breaks down. During Khalid's farewell speech, his political sermon is interrupted with his personal message to his mom saying: "I forgot to mention it", about some kitchen appliances. The videos are absurd. This glorifying of God and commotion make no sense and it is Abu-Asaad's attempt to expose that. Aime C'esaire, a well-respected post-colonial critic focuses on the problems of misrepresentation and misrecognition (C'esaire 179). Religion here is misrepresented and used in the name of carrying such appalling operations. The attacks are performed in the name of Islam but the misrecognition is that this is not Islam by doctrine. Nevertheless, Khalid and Said decide to believe such misrepresentations and carry out the operation.

When they cross the Israeli borders, Khalid and Said run into some trouble. Khalid returns; Said runs away and is unheard of. The bomb is removed from Khalid and he is given until the end of the day to find Said who is accused of betrayal. This moment of retreat is crucial since it is when Khalid comes to a realization and begins to doubt his false beliefs. He questions authority and the truth he has been provided with. It is as if he reached an epiphany; one of another kind than his earlier. At the same time, moments of confusion and nervousness drive Said almost mad. He later crosses the Israeli border by himself and goes to a bus station where

he decides to blow himself up. He holds back when he sees a child there. Part of his retreat is due to the human element in him and his doubtful questioning. Later, the story shifts. Khaled and Suha are on a manhunt for Said. Suha is a rational young Palestinian woman who grew up abroad. They find Said about to bomb himself on his father's grave. Said tells Suha why he is taking part in the attack. We find out that Said's father was an "ameel" (a collaborator, Palestinian working for the Israeli's). The film ends with Said on a bus with Israeli soldiers, and a sudden black flash indicating the detonation of the bomb. Ironically, Said believes the bomb will solve the problem of the Zionist movement that brought the Jews into the Palestinian lands in the first place.

The nineteenth century was about locating a homeland for the Jews in Europe. As a result, a political movement known as Zionism originated among the Jews who lived in Europe. The Balfour Declaration in 1917 made certain that Palestine would be the land for Jews without considering at all the population of Palestinians who lived there: "...the question of Palestine, a richness often obscured, ignored, or willfully misrepresented" (Said, *Question*, 118). In order to get a clearer understanding of the political agenda carried out, Tom Segev, an Israeli historian said the Balfour Declaration was "one nation promising another nation the land of a third nation" (Chow). It was Britain and the great powers coming together amongst themselves and agreeing that Palestine, which belonged to Palestinians, would be the homeland of the Jews. Accordingly, Israel was created by casting out the majority of the Palestinian population in a series of events that take place over a period of history I shall briefly cover.

After World War I, the area known as the Middle East was divided among allies and Britain ended up ruling Palestine. Jewish immigration to Palestine started during the British Mandate period between World War I and 1948. It increased with Adolph Hitler's attempt to eliminate the Jewish populations in Germany and elsewhere. Immigration to Palestine tremendously increased

as people heard of the Holocaust. Fighting between the Palestinian natives and Jewish militias evolved after the influx of the Jews into Palestine. Britain vacated the area and a war between the natives and the immigrants took its toll on the inhabitants of that area. The Jewish presence was initially imposed through law by the British. The Palestinians lost the war primarily because they had insufficient artillery due to the fact that they were occupied by the Ottoman Empire pre-World War I, and then by the British and French. On the contrary, the Jews were in possession of modern weapons handed over by Europe. The war of 1948, also known as the “Catastrophe” to the Arabs resulted in a massive number of Palestinian refugees. “Nevertheless, 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” (Said, Question 115). Jewish militias ejected some Palestinians while others left in fear of losing their lives and families. They left hoping that within a few weeks, they would return safely to their homes and land. Arabs know that Israel is a state that came into existence in a very unjust way for Palestinians. The Jews established their state by immigrating from Europe to a land and displacing its people and stealing their property when in fact, an occupied people have a right under international law to resist and fight for their freedom and self-determination even if the constructed history expunges all those facts.

In “Culture and Imperialism”, Edward Said says it is possible to analyze experiences socially and historically and come to understand the experiences of others. The west can understand the non-west and vice versa. Not only Jews can understand Jewish suffering (Said, Culture 9). If one does not agree with this, they are essentializing identity and this is when they step into the danger zone. Trying to understand “discrepant experiences” can point out where ideologies are coming from and how they are constructed. A more tangible understanding of discrepant experiences would be religion. Religions seem to be worlds apart. Every religion claims a triumphing essence

over the other. When looked at contrapuntally, their impulse is the same; people are becoming hyper-religious. They are linked; one has developed because the way the other has. Another shared experience is the Palestinian current situation, and the Jews in the Holocaust. A contrapuntal reading of *Paradise Now* would show the Jewish intervention parallel to the Palestinians condition. At a certain point in time, because of all the injustice practiced, people become overtly attached to their nation and begin to essentialize. Nationalism is a great thing, but if you allow that nationalism to take over everything, you are going to encounter problems because it makes one rigid and one-dimensional.

To get a clearer understanding of rigidity and how people can relate to other experiences, let us look in depth into the characters introduced in the movie. Suha plays a very important role in the movie because Assad presents her as the consciousness of the Arabs, or the image the west does not know of. She is a Palestinian born in France raised in Morocco. She is the daughter of Abu Assam, a public hero and an honored leader who carried out suicidal attacks. However, she is not a supporter of suicide bombings or any form of violence. Suha questions theological issues and wonders how one is considered a martyr if one has to kill her/himself. Islam forbids suicide. She is a firm believer in that suicide bombings only achieve one thing; they create innocent victims and instigate retribution in a non-ending cycle. This is Edward Said's "politics of blame" (Said, *Orientalism* 29). Each side reacts and throws blames on the opposing side to justify their act. Suha, being aware of the current situation believes a Palestinian state should be achieved through peaceful means. She believes such attacks of fanatic extremism are not valid and not reasonable. They give the west/Israel an excuse to enact more violence against Palestinians. It makes such an attack excusable because media portrays one side of the struggle. Those who have power play with the images and truths. For example, Khalid was first seen as oblivious. Because of repeated voices around him, he becomes a believer in suicidal attacks. As time passes in

preparation for the mission, he begins to question and doubt things. With the help of Suha in re-interpolating him, he concludes that it is absurd. *Paradise Now* shows us a picture of two men who share similar lives and backgrounds. They start on the same path, but one diverges away from the constructed truth forced upon them. There is always hesitation floating around Khalid and Said. They are never sure what they are doing but the handling organization seems manipulative and in control. Because it has power, it claims to have the *truth*. Said and Khalid hold the desire for justice, more so, retaliation. The organization has a role in feeding their minds with images and *truths* that are structured. It approaches them in the name of religion and duty. Suha tells Khalid the Paradise he longs for is in his head. His immediate response is: "I'd rather have paradise in my head than live in this hell!" (Abu-Asaad). This shows the rigidity of Khalid's character. However, Suha is the voice of consciousness, the voice and opinion unrecognized in this part of the world.

Edward Said asserts that our opinions have been materially formed by things around us. When one hears the representations repeatedly, it makes any taking over of a country feasible. Said says we need to slow down our perception and look again at the colonized as well as the colonizers situation. "We need to see that the contemporary global setting-overlapping territories, intertwined histories..." (Newton 286). Understanding the overlapping territories helps us understand the violence that perpetuates this cycle. Violence breeds angry generations driven by rage and fundamental reading of the Quran.

When religion and politics argue, no side ever wins. Arguing only creates distance. It is impossible to look at religion or politics separately. In *Paradise Now*, the political is linked with the religious, social, and historical. It shows us the gaps in history and how reality is constructed. The movie reprimands the suicidal acts and stresses that religion should not be armed with weaponry to defend itself. In times like these, we cannot create a nation exclusive on religion or

ethnicity. When we disregard that, there will be less bloodshed. The religious element cloudens the meaning of the act. The sacrifice becomes so easy when you believe you will be rewarded immediately with Paradise. Below is a dialogue from the movie that takes place between Khaled and Said:

Said: "What happens afterward?"

Khaled: "two angels pick you up"

Said: "are you sure?"

Khaled: "Absolutely" (Abu-Asaad).

Religion has been taken into extremes. It has been misrepresented and misinterpreted. The reasoning that the death of Israeli victims will advance a cause is illogical; it is not justifiable. It is a waste to spend your life preparing for such act, believing in it, and acting on behalf of the organizers who send, but do not go.

The images and truths these organizations send out are objectifying and controlling. The film shows different sides of reality; not what the west/media broadcasts and what the Arab world fails to do so. Eastern people are portrayed as irrational, stagnant, and absurd, especially the Islamic world. This image of the East serves the West. When the East enacts tyranny, backwardness, and irrationality, the west just has to defend itself. The west is satisfied when Arabs confirm the stereotypes. The East becomes the "Other" of the West as in any colonial situation. There is a vicious cycle in asserting identity in a fundamental way. There is a need to emphasize how overlapping and similar we are. Television is flooded with stereotypical images of Arabs and Muslims; fanatics driven by hate and religion: "...their actions determined by instinctive emotions (lust, terror, fury, etc.) rather than by conscious choices or decisions" (Barry 194). In the movie, Said believes suicide bombing is the only resolution to reclaim what has been taken back from colonialism; lost dignity and land. C'esaire mentions that when colonialism was

practiced against the West, it was seen as brutal. He says people wonder how Nazism happened. All this time, Europe was treating them this way. This culminated in Nazism. It was not accepted because it was practiced against Europeans. This is hypocrisy (Césaire 174). When hope no longer resides as an option, extreme measures will be taken. When life becomes worthless, you have virtually nothing to live for, and you create a mentality willing to die for his or her cause of liberation and freedom; whatever it may be.

Zionists and the West tend to look down at Palestine from a position of colonial superiority. They are looking through the Palestinians in an attempt to deprive them of their existence. When the question on whether the Israeli's and Palestinians are capable of living side by side in peace is posed, there is a dense history to be understood before making any assumptions or forming conclusions: "...since most Americans seem unaware that the Palestinians actually lived in Palestine before Israel came into existence. Yet only if those values and history are taken account of, can we begin to see the bases for compromise, settlement, and finally, peace" (Said, Question 118). The struggle has been going on for almost a century. At the moment, the current situation says there is neither a Palestinian state, nor an Israeli. There is no freedom, no future, and no security; only suffering and misery. The current situation is a legal separation with Israel controlling all borders and space.

Overall, *Paradise Now* may prevent us from judging and taking sides obliviously. At least, this is what it attempts to do. A contrapuntal understanding of the Palestinian and Israeli opposing sides makes us cautious that there is never just one way of seeing things. One should always keep in mind Nietzsche's famous remark "there are no facts, only interpretations" (Barry 63). Whatever questions you have to ask about how justifiable the movie is or is not, there will always be a history to be recognized. The movie challenges and defies the status quo. "Works of art or literature should thus not be thought of as individual creations but as emanations of a

cultural system and have to be understood in relation to the codes that operate to create meaning within that cultural system” (Newton 113). *Paradise Now* must therefore be understood in relation to the ideologies existing in our lives. Truth and ideologies lie in the hands on those in power and “power is essentially that which represses. Power represses nature, the instincts, a class, individuals” (134). As with the Palestinian/Israeli situation, the basis for all conflicts arises when you believe you need something more than someone else does. The movie, in spite of the injustice it portrays against the Palestinians, is against suicide bombings and attacks on civilians because they are morally repugnant. It willfully wishes to present a side usually forgotten about and made unimportant, while making it possible to read it parallel with the dominant side. This kind of post-colonial literature may someday promote one nation inclusive of all the people with equal rights; in other words, a secular democracy.

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