

Edward Said on Intellectuals' Identity and Ideology of Difference

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Abstract—There is no doubt that Said battles throughout his life with an intricate identity conflict which demarcates his views on politics and identity at large. As an intellectual who lives on the crossroad of cultures, and out of a place, that one might call a homeland, he learned painfully to live more than one life and embrace more than one identity. When filiative bonds are out of reach, the affiliative ones might serve the urgency of survival but never take roots in him or create a romantic sense of belonging. It seems exile, and the exilic rootless spirit is so essential to him as an intellectual and his scholarly and political project. The present paper delves into Said's views of the identity of the intellectual as well as identity politics of difference represented in Zionism as a movement of liberation against the Palestinians rights. I argue that in his Canaanite reading of Walzer's *Exodus and Revolution* and the roots of the Jewish identity in Freud's *Moses and the Monotheism*, Said attempts to provide the alternatives to the reductive identity politics and the very 'connected intellectual' that makes it tenable. Arguably, the openness of the Jewish identity and that of the exilic Jewish intellectual is Said's stalwart point of critique.

Keywords—exile, Intellectuals, Jewish Identity, Palestinians, Radical Politics, Zionism.

I. INTRODUCTION

In his interview with the Palestinian intellectual Edward Said in 2000, Ari Shavit, the Israeli journalist in *The Haaretz* magazine remarked that Said sounded very Jewish. Said welcomed the complement with a pride and retorted approvingly: "I am the last Jewish intellectual ... the only true follower of Adorno" (Said,2001:458). Said in this, seemingly, celebratory phrase, which particularly comes in the context of his unremitting call for acknowledgment on the part of Israel as a prelude for reconciliation with the Palestinians, stresses on the exilic identity of the intellectual. Exile, according to Said, is the very notion that defines the Jewish identity historically. In a sense, it is a gesture of privilege and strength. For despite the sorrow and the pain associated with this condition, it enables the exiled to co-exist on the crossroads between cultures and identities. And suggestively, this not necessarily makes one totally receptive or open to cultures or other identities if there is no willed intention to do so. The final note in Said's interview is significant in its appealing resonance, and I believe, it poses a fundamental challenge to the Zionist ideology of difference that claims a pristine Jewish identity. Said takes up the challenge against ideology of difference in his entire oeuvre but this paper focuses on his interesting critical readings of two

works that overtly mobilise the past, *vis-a-vis* the history of Judaism, to serve the radical politics of Zionism as well as the orthodox claim to identity. The first is Said's Canaanite Reading of Michael Walzer's *Exodus and Revolution* (1985). The second is Said's scholarly essay, *Freud and the Non-European* (2003), it critically reflects upon Freud's vision of the Jewish identity in *Moses and the Monotheism*. (1939). The underlying critique of the use of these seemingly religious texts is pointed to the very politics of identity and the ideology of difference that serves it inasmuch as to the intellectual ideological choices and belongings that makes both justifiable.

II. THE CANAANITE READING OF EXODUS POLITICS

As a contemporary interpretation of the Old Testament story of Exodus, Walzer's book *Exodus and Revolution* presents both a new political theory of liberation and a theory for the intellectual's role in society. Said, in his 'Canaanite reading' of the text, (1986) seems very critical of these conclusions that Walzer coaxed out from his reflections on this canonical text. On the one hand, it asserts and justifies the radical politics of Zionism and their approach to the Arab native inhabitant. And on the other, suggests the theorisation of the role of intellectuals

in society, mainly, exemplified by Albert Camus' position towards his own *pied noir* community and French colonialism.

To begin with, Said (as a secular critic) derides the very use of a sacred text as a point of reference for present or future politics. Admittedly, for Said, nothing can prevent the use of a sacred text as an 'appealing work of art' (Said and Christopher 1988,169). Unfortunately, however, Walzer's book didn't add or bring anything outstanding if compared to what has been written on the Bible by other notable literary theorists, such as Northrop Frye, Frank Kermode, Paul Ricoeur and Hayden White (*ibid*). Said noted that Walzer's objective with this adaptation is merely political, for, despite the scarcity of his contribution to Jewish studies, 'the Jewish material' in his text, Said says, 'is made to pull in a chariot of a resolutely political... agenda' (*ibid*:170). Apparently, Walzer's political agenda is to bring justification and legitimation to the radical politics of Zionism and its ideology towards the Palestinians. 'Exodus politics' is Walzer's phrase and distinguishes the Jewish account of deliverance and their political theory of liberation (*ibid*:162). Unlike any other ancient people's revolt for liberation, for Walzer, the Jewish experience is exceptional because it is linear, a continuous history that one can trace 'from Exodus to the radical politics of our time'(Walzer,1985:162-2). Therefore, it stands out as a model, for future liberation movements; from exile to the Promised Land through the wilderness seemingly is the trajectory of exodus politics.

Before delving into what 'exodus politics' entails, let's present Said observation about it, which is worth noting. From the outset, Walzer typically acted as an intellectual who is connected to his own community to a degree that lessens his critical voice and moral judgement. This is not to say that he is parochial in his delineation of the triumphant narrative of Zionism(Said and Christopher, 1988:177), but he willingly ignores the rights of those who happen to be non-Jews. Ironically, after being the majority, for Walzer, those Palestinians, native Arabs, who are trapped in the Jewish state, as he coolly put it in 1972, should therefore be 'helped to leave' (*ibid*: 173). Walzer qualifies 'Exodus Politics' with a number of adjectives, it is 'progressive,' 'moral,' 'linear,' 'secular', and 'Western' and, above all, it is about liberation and not oppression. Noticeably, Said asserts that the power of phrases such as 'national liberation' and 'oppression,' in particular, as well as their provenance, is not Exodus. Rather, they enter the European and American political dictionary in the context of the colonial/anti-colonial encounter, which is to be found in the work of anti-colonial writers, both European and non-European; e.g., Sartre, Debray and Chomsky,

from within the colonial camp, and those of the third world, such as Fanon and Cabral (*ibid*: 170). We also learn from Said that Walzer avoids history in his adaptation (*ibid*:165). In his narrative Walzer adamantly ignores the bloody episode of the historical events of Exodus and of the very exclusivist ideology which Jews then rest on in their treatment of their opponents (*ibid*:166; see also De Ste. Croix 1981). As a secular critic, Said found it difficult to digest adjectives like, 'progressive', alongside the divinely ordained injunction 'thou shalt destroy them'. Walzer calls upon us not to take this literally because, in his theorisation, 'exodus politics' is nothing other than "gradual infiltration" (*ibid*:167). This statement, to be sure, reflects a policy adopted by a branch of Zionism thought be more liberal and progressive (Ben-Gurion, Weizmann) and which is epitomized in Weizmann's phrase, 'another acre another goat,'(Said 1995)rather than in the revisionist Zionism of Jabotinsky-Begin. While this leads us to the whole history of Palestinian dispossession and expulsion and land expropriation by Zionism and later Israel, it suffices here to assert that the strategic consensus for Zionism (Israel later), was, and is still to this day, to get rid of the Palestinians in any possible way, that is 'an unbroken ideological continuity' (Said 2000, 58). Exodus politics, as applied to the Zionist movement, are about establishing a Jewish state, not the state of its citizens(Said 1979, 81–82). So, the exclusionist character of Zionist exodus politics is evident in terms of the rights of both the Jews and the non-Jews. This is precisely what exodus politics entail. A huge corpus of historical evidence written by Israeli, Jewish and Palestinian historians tells us about the systematic dispossessions and the brutal chapter of history that Palestinians endured; Palestinians were massacred, terrorised in 1948, in 1967, and forced to leave their own land so a new nation could be born(Pappe, 2007; Morris, 2004). To say that such separatist, exclusionist and ideological politics are 'exodus politics,' which is a model or a political theory of liberation, is something that demands a great deal of critical scrutiny.

Furthermore, Said is also perturbed at the amalgamation of the 'sacred and profane' (Said and Christopher 1988,167)that Walzer theorises in his exodus politics (Masalha 2013). How secular or realistic a paradigm for 'radical politics' is 'Exodus politics' when it is divinely inspired and buttressed in terms of ideology and language. 'Chosen people,' 'Covenant,' 'Redemption,' 'Promised Land,' in parallel with moral, progressive, liberating, linear, secular, Western, and so on, is the whole ideology that annuls the rights and the claims of all except one, and only one, claim. Interestingly, Said also noted that while

Lewis Feuer, in his book *Ideology and Ideologists* (1975), avers to show the presence of the Exodus 'myth' in all revolutionary ideologies, Walzer insists on the Exodus as being the ultimate revolutionary theory and the most liberating (Said and Christopher 1988, 164). Not only had he failed to spot the shortcomings of this ideology, or that of romantic nationalism which one finds in the work of Frantz Fanon, but he failed to explain why 'Moses's Levites' can be read as the avatars of social democratic leadership, whereas Lenin's vanguard party cannot, despite some, e.g., Lincoln Steffens, who establish the connection between Leninism and Exodus (*ibid*: 163). In this case, one may venture to argue that 'Exodus politics' is nothing but a replica of identity politics in its most extreme and reductive form. To reiterate, it is a national fervour, empowered by a religious, biblical, messianic claim that rests on a history of suffering and victimhood, which, alas, has been exploited— Said refers to writers such as Peter Novick, Tom Segev and Norman Finkelstein (Said 2004, 141)— in order that it can be anchored to an ideology of difference and exclusivism.

Un-connecting "the connected Intellectual": Albert Camus, a case in point

Yet, resulting from this type of politics Walzer presents his notion of the intellectual. Clearly, he holds the virtues of 'connectedness,' which he aptly finds in Camus' commitments to his own French-Algerian community. Said tells us, in an interview with Bruce Robbins in (1998) about a 'factual inaccuracy' in Walzer's use of Camus. Camus was made to seem as though he were an Algerian all his life, supportive of the Algerians' rights, but only when he had to choose between his mother and FLN terrorism, did he choose his own *pieds noirs*. For Said, this is 'a factual lie,' (Said 2001, 337) because Camus is the antithesis to Genet (*ibid*:338), he could not rise over his own filiation. When Camus condemns colonialism in his earlier writings, he did it similarly to Conrad's condemnation of the excesses and the pretensions of the English and the abuses of the Belgians in Africa; he never condemns the very idea of colonialism (*ibid*:337-8). More importantly, one also learns that, in his writings, Camus denies the existence of the Algerian people as a nation, similarly to Walzer and his cohorts who have denied the Palestinian existence as a nation (*ibid*:337-8). Said contends, that such choices are morally precarious and totally unacceptable a position for the intellectual; as a man/woman of thought and enlightenment. To tamper with morals, the universal value of justice and critical judgments for the sake of one's community's interests is not a respectable stance for which intellectuals should opt. "Who is more effective as critic" Said asks Walzer, "a

white South African militant against the regime, or an Afrikaaner liberal urging "constructive engagement" with it? Whom does one respect more, in the accredited Western and Judaic traditions, the courageously outspoken intellectual or loyal member of the complicit majority?" (*ibid*: 175)

Conversely, through Walzer's trajectory, which is implicated in Camus 'realist politics', one is tempted to refer to Benda's *Betrayal of the Intellectuals* (1972), in which he attacks the intellectuals for compromising their callings by succumbing to what he calls 'political passion'. 'Disinterestedness' is the virtue of the intellectual, in his view; which Said applies as 'critical distance' epitomised in the exilic spirit, which is obviously, anchored in 'humanism'. In Said's view, Zionism is a movement of romantic nationalism and Walzer seems to be the ideologically trapped type of "the connected intellectual". To resolve the intellectuals dilemma apropos matters of belongings, solidarity or connectivity Said asserts in his *Representation of the Intellectuals* (1994), on the importance of solidarity on the part of the intellectuals, but he insists that there is 'never solidarity before criticism' (Said 1994). Criticism in this stance, for Said is a humanistic democratic endeavour that offers constructive critique to one's own identity or nation and empowers the intellectual to speak truth to power. Perhaps, one could hoist Said here on his own petard, for his vehement support of Arafat for two decades of his life. To be sure, the intellectual portrait introduced in his *Reith Lectures* applies to him more fittingly after the 1990s when the critical tone of his voice gradually rose to reach an irreversible volume after the Oslo Accord in 1993. To his credit, however, Said was always critical of the Palestinian National Movement, albeit he was variable in tone before and after Oslo. In contrast, Walzer's *Exodus and Revolution* and other books, such as *Just and Unjust Wars* (1977), maintained different standards of criticism, one which is completely apologetic to Israel and another for its critics and even friends. Ronald Dworkin, in his review of Walzer's *Spheres of Justice*, describes Walzer's moral theory as being dependent on what he calls a 'mystical premise' (Dworkin, 1983; Quoted in *BV*:175). As a liberal with left credentials, Walzer seems unsparingly critical of one strand branch of Zionism, as indicated earlier, and in so doing he maintains the elevated image of Israel as being liberal, democratic, progressive and secular. In Walzer's eyes, Israel is always exceptional. One must be reminded again that the Vietnam War in 1967 coincided with Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and with the annexation of East Jerusalem, but Walzer, asserts that 'Israel is not Vietnam,' (Micheal Walzer and Peretz 1967)

stating a number of differences, from which one comes to the conclusion that Israel is ranked above all criticism.

To recap, in his reinterpretation of the Exodus, Walzer suggests that it is a political theory of liberation which connects the past, represented in the experience of the Jews yearning for liberation, with that of the Zionist project, which aims to reconstitute the Jewish state in the Promised Land. In his view, through tracing its linear connections, exodus politics could serve also as a model for a future movement of liberation. At the same time, he appreciates highly the role of the connected intellectuals who are implicated in the role of Camus and his position regarding his *pieds noir* and French colonialism in Algeria.

III. FREUD AND THE UNRESOLVED IDENTITY OF THE INTELLECTUAL

In his scholarly essay, *Freud and the non-European*, Said reflects on Freud's views on Jewishness in his book *Moses and Monotheism* (1939). Said made a clear case for connections between the exile, diaspora, the unhoused, the cosmopolitan character of the Jewish identity on the one hand, and on the other, the need for Israel to bank on its mixed, non-European past. So as to open up to, reconcile and coexist with other identities which are historically believed to be formative to the very Judaic tradition represented in the identity of its founder, Moses the Egyptian.

Jewishness, as inferred from Freud's reflections, is far from 'shut' or 'open', it is extremely problematic and, according to Said, Freud seems to be "resolutely divided about it". Said even goes so far as to say that Freud is "deliberately antinomian in his belief" (Said, 2003:32). This is akin to Auerbach, who seems to negotiate between the Jewish and European component of his identity (Said, 2004:102). The unresolved identity of Freud, as Yosef Yerushalmi put it, is said to be reflected in his contradictory attitudes toward Jewishness and of Zionism (Said, 2003:36; Yerushalmi, 1993:13).

Notwithstanding Said's notes of critique of Freud's discrepancy, the general blueprint of Freud's spirit is of great use to Said. He held that Freud is irremediably anti-religious and his mobilisation of the Egyptian-ness of Moses' identity as the founder of Judaism, seems to challenge the orthodox claim for a pristine identity and the very 'doctrinal attempt' to put Jewish identity on a "sound foundational basis whether religious or national" (Said, 2003:45). Apparently, and contrary to Theodor Herzl (1860-1904), as Jacqy Chemouni observes, Freud has located the Jewish identity in the realm of the universal (*ibid*: 37). Similarly, to Spinoza and Marx, Freud has an 'uneasy relationship with the orthodoxy of his own

community'. This is squarely related, according to Said, to his "irremediably diasporic, unhoused character" (Said, 2003:53). The exile identity, Said asserts, is not only a Jewish characteristic of identity but became a widespread phenomenon (Said, 2003:53). Here, Said has set the universal spirit of Freud versus the official Zionist claim of a Jewish identity, which was obviously adopted by Walzer as being an intact, exclusive one that is located in a designated specific location. While, on the one hand, Freud asserts that the founder of Judaism is a non-Jew, he further claims that Judaism originated in the realm of an Egyptian, non-Jewish European and he did insist that it began with other identities, namely, Egyptian and Arabian. On the other hand, the official Israeli narrative, as Said put it, sweeps under the rug such significant "complex layers of the past and goes on through legislation and policies in to seal off other identities and histories" (Said, 2003:45).

In short, the spirit of Freud in Said's reflections serves as a call for the Israelis to open out the Jewish identity to its non-European formative backgrounds, whereas the second, in the name of consolidating the Jewish identity politically into a state, pursues the very track of the European/non-European code of difference against the Palestinians, albeit under a new label. Ironically, the Zionists bank on the dichotomies that originated the phenomenon of European anti-Semitism defined as the Jews and the non-Jews, European/non-European. Said's political application of connection here takes on two dimensions; the first is a contrast between the Jews' plight—manifested in a history of discrimination in Europe which produced the phenomenon of anti-Semitism—and that of the Palestinians at the hands of the Jews, ironically, the long-suffering victims of discrimination in Europe. Similarly, to the Jews in Europe who were relegated to having a foreigner status, such as by the Nuremberg Nazi law, the Palestinians, following the establishment of Israel in 1948, were also reduced to foreign status. "Inside Israel" Said says, "the main classificatory stipulation was that it was a state for Jews, whereas non-Jews, absent or present ... were judicially made foreigners" (Said, 2003: 42). So Said, in this respect, reminds us of the Palestinians' new status as victims of the victims. It is argued here that both Jews and Palestinians are victims of an ideology of difference. The second dimension is a political call for Israeli Jews to be reconciled with their own past and present and to open up to formative backgrounds and other identities. Likewise, this is required from the Palestinians. It is a message of co-existence rather than of forcible separation and discriminatory ideology.

IV. CONCLUSION

In his Canaanite reading, Said maintains that neither a model of a political theory of liberation nor of Camus, the connected intellectual, stands the test of humanistic criticism. For Said, Walzer's theorisation means the very practice of an ideology of difference that excludes, discriminates and dehumanises the other. It cherishes animosity and rescinds bridges of co-existence and of a sharing community in Palestine. In return, Said asserts that 'Exodus Politics' has to be encountered through a 'politics of humanism' which must be learned from the position of strength that the Canaanites cling to; which is exile, the ability to be compassionate with those who do not belong, the ability to say that injustice is injustice. In the same token, excavating the archaeological formation of the Jewish identity in *Moses and Monotheism*, Said emphasises not only Freud's views and challenges both the national and the religious pristine grounding of identity, but he also challenges the very claim that any identity, even the most definable, identifiable and stubborn communal one, can be fully incorporated into one, and only one, identity. The strength of Freud's thought on Jewish identity, as it is implicated in the identity of its founder, Moses, is its essence of cosmopolitanism. In fact, this is the very strength of the Canaanite exile's position in Said's concluding remarks on Walzer's exodus politics. The exile, the unresolved, the irreconcilable identity, even within itself it is the final resort for the intellectual's intervention in the political and public sphere.

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