

The rhetoric of detachment and collective identity politics in *out of place* by Edward Said: transcending modernist aesthetics

بلاغة الإنعزال وسياسة الهوية الجماعية في سيرة إدوارد سعيد خارج المكان: تخطي جماليات الحداثة

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Abstract

This study aims to trace the construction of affiliations and modes of belonging in *Out of Place* (1999) by Edward Said, in conjunction with his other works, that transgress real connections and present realities, and challenge the coherence of conventional notions of identity and detachment. It argues that Said reassesses his attachments and collective identity politics, not by rejecting his filiations but by finding a way to reconstruct or retrieve them. By thinking of Said and Darwish contrapuntally, this paper shows that Said works through these detachments, and moves between multiple identities to reconstruct a 'filiative' personal narrative which in turn contributes to the (re)-construction of a whole Palestinian national narrative. Building on Benedict Anderson's concept of nationality, this paper illustrates that the national self emerges from the destabilisation of a unified, coherent subjectivity; it comes out of an "estrangement" and detachment from one's self. Anderson explains that "nationality is necessarily an effect of the narratives we tell in the face of an incoherent sense of one's self, a literal alienation from one's self" (1991: 204). This detachment allows Said to open himself to the deeply disorganised state of his real history

and origins, and to re-construct and form them to form in a historical experience, piecing together all the different narrative fragments to understand what really happened in Palestine in 1948 and beyond (Said, 1999: 6).

Keywords: Affiliation, Detachment, Identity Politics, Reconstruction, Palestinian National Narrative, Subjectivity, Estrangement.

ملخص

تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تتبع بناء الانتماءات، وطرق الانتماء، في سيرة إدوارد سعيد الذاتية خارج المكان الذي يناقش الروابط الحقيقية ويتحدى تماسك المفاهيم التقليدية للهوية والانفصال. تجادل هذه الورقة بأن سعيد مثل صديقه محمود درويش يعيد تقييم إنتماءاته وسياسات الهوية الجماعية. هذا ليس برفضه للهوية الأصلية بل عن طريق إيجاد طريقة لإعادة بنائها أو استعادتها. توضح هذه الورقة أن انتقال سعيد بين الهويات المتعددة يهدف إلى سرد روايته الفردية الذي يسهم بدوره في إعادة سرد القصة الوطنية الفلسطينية ككل. بناءً على مفهوم بنديكت أندرسون للجنسية، توضح هذه الورقة أن الذات الوطنية تنبثق من زعزعة استقرار ذاتية موحدة ومتماسكة؛ إنها تأتي من "انفصال" عن الذات. يشرح أندرسون أن "الجنسية هي بالضرورة تأثير للروايات التي نرويها في مواجهة شعور عدم التماسك، والنفور من الذات" (1991: 204). يتيح هذه الانفصال لسعيد إعادة قراءة وفهم تاريخه وأصوله، وأن يبينها من أجل إعادة بناء تجربة تاريخية وتجميع جميع الأجزاء السردية المختلفة لفهم ما حدث بالفعل في فلسطين في عام 1948 وما بعده (سعيد، 1999: 6).

الكلمات المفتاحية: الإنتماء الطوعي، الانفصال، سياسات الهوية، إعادة البناء، السرد الوطني الفلسطيني، الذاتية، الإغتراب.

Introduction

Much criticism has been done on Said's memoir *Out of Place* that was published in 1999. Faysal and Rahman (2013) discussed ways in which this memoir illustrates Edward Said's notions of the intellectual exile and resistance. Abuhilal (2013) examined the concepts of Diaspora and Said's engagement with this concept in his writings including his memoir. Neimneh and Obeidat (2015) argued that Said's *Out of Place* can be read as a postcolonial text. They also suggested that illness augments Said's identity crisis of being in exile. Barbour (2007) maintained that exile in Said's memoir functions as a space that allows

for detachment from any physical or psychic sense of belonging. While these critical interventions show that critics have reflected on the concepts of exile and identity in Said's memoir, the representation of filiation and affiliation in relation to exile and the place of origin in his memoir are understudied. Therefore, this paper intervenes in this line of analysis to present a new and intriguing understanding of Said's ideas about detachments and identity politics. This paper re-reads Eastern and Western reflections on Said's memoir, problematizing easy understanding of Said's ideas about attachment and detachment.

The term detachment in this paper is not intended to indicate 'disengagement'; it rather implies an active process that requires a certain kind of effort or conscious withdrawal from the compulsive bonding of belonging. It highlights an aspect of exilic experience that does engage a combination of intellectual, national and aesthetic practices. To be more specific, it asserts a form of critical nationalism, and a refusal to submit to the force or even lures of detachments, and therefore, it is of special significance as an advocate for positional autonomy.

Though this type of exilic activity is a modernist and an elite experience, and one that might be viewed as privileged and indulgent, it "diminishes the radical potential of the posture of detachment, and the very real sense of alienation and displacement involved in an aesthetic lifestyle" (Collins, 2017: 89). Though the practices of detachment have certainly been criticised for their inherent elitism, many of their critiques seem to assume that they are based on a real belief in the critical possibilities of detachment. Amanda Anderson, for example, argues that detachment can be understood as a productive "temporary vantage, unstable achievement, or regulative ideal" (Anderson, 2001:32), which one might seek as a component of a critical process. The practice of detachment can indicate a belief in "universal features of human nature and therefore ability to abstract human experience from its historical and cultural setting" (Collins, 2017: 90). Indeed, detachment can be viewed as a "stance" or strategy that can be historicised without nullifying its usefulness as a critical resource: it represents an act of transcendence more than a submission, one connected to the aspirations and productions

always been understood as a paradigmatic refusal of the [Modernist] writer to surrender his or her radical freedom to the demands of an oppressive state or system” (Deane, 2010: 367), and a position that allows them to transcend hegemony and repression at home. Unlike modernist writers, Palestinian memoirists project ‘exile’ as fundamentally the antithesis of homeland and a space of the negation of existence. While the proponents of this modernist movement tend to advance the idea that “there is an essential virtue and gain in escaping from the singularity of one culture into the multiplicity of all” (Ibid), Said represents the exile/home dichotomy as an emblem of loss and lack of sense of at-homeness. This is to say that Palestinian memoirists problematise rather than embrace the modernist notion of detachment or exile and add to our understanding of the notion of detachment or exile. Exile for the exiled Palestinian writer embodies an alienation from home, catastrophe, suffering and loss; it marks rupture and absence rather than affiliation to multiple places. Said defines exile in *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays* as “the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted” (2001:173). Said describes ways in which exile has driven him from one language to another, from one culture to another and how this transition brought deep shifts in his sensibility that cannot be corrected. This transition from one language to another, from one culture to another within the Palestinian context is a forced exile/loss that makes the individual vulnerable; passive and helpless; it is an involuntary transition that reflects the involuntary exile of Palestinians. Therefore, multiplicity for Palestinian writers is generally experienced as loss and double estrangement (Qabaha, 2018: 55). Exiled Palestinian writers are torn between countries, between homes, between cultures and between languages.

This argument can further be illustrated by looking at the following lines that Mahmoud Darwish shares with Edward Said in his tribute to him:

He [Said] says: I am from there, I am from here,
but I am neither there nor here.

using the phrase “the subsequent changes in my life and Palestine’s” (1999: 111). Said asserts that the detachment of Palestinians from their native place caused a disruption of their lives, which is inflicted in his own identity. Said also writes in *After the Last Sky* that: “identity – who we are, where we come from, what we are – is difficult to maintain in exile. Most other people take their identity for granted” (1986: 16).

Said’s experiences of “exile, removal, unwilling dislocation” reveal that his exilic life can be seen as quintessentially Palestinian (1999: 118). Said describes his displacement as a condition that “kept me in motion all these years” (Ibid: 217). “Thirteen years ago”, Said continues to state in his memoir:

I wrote in *After the Last Sky* that when I travel I always take too much with me, and that even a trip downtown requires the packing of a briefcase stocked with items disproportionately larger in size and number than the actual period of the trip (Ibid).

Said’s description above reflects the lives of Palestinians as a series of displacements initiated by the Palestinian collective experiences of displacement. Said alludes above to his book *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives* (1986), the title of which is taken from Darwish’s poem ‘The Earth is Closing on us’ (1984). In the poem, Darwish, as Said does in the above mentioned book, passionately reflects on the condition of exiled Palestinians who are destined to multiple and constant displacements and relocations, and he laments that their return has not yet been achieved.

This is to emphasise that Said reflects on ‘the dynamic interaction’ between his exilic experience and the collective Palestinian experience of dislocation. In *After the Last Sky*, Said writes that

“the stability of geography and the continuity of land – these have completely disappeared from my life and the life of all Palestinians” (1986: 19), and for him “the place [Palestine] is lost” and “[its] identity is retained only in the repeated experience of staying and then moving on. Homecoming is out of the question. You learn to transform the mechanics of loss into a constant metaphysics of return” (Ibid: 149).

love on one spot in the world; the strong man has extended his love to all places; the perfect man has extinguished his (cited in Said, 2001: 185).

While it is true that Said views physical detachment from the place of origin as liberatory, he simultaneously thinks of it as an unexpected and unwelcome loss. Said follows his above citation of Hugo by explaining that “exile is predicated on the existence of, love for, and bond with, one’s native place; the universal truth of exile is not that one has lost that love or home, but that inherent in each is an unexpected, unwelcome loss” (Ibid). For Said, celebrating detachment does not mean forgetfulness of the place of origin.

Some critical commentaries on *Out of Place* take Said’s reflection on the critical possibilities that detachment (or being out of place) offer as Said’s ultimate reading of detachments. Faysal and Rahman, for example, seem to argue that Said privileges exile because it offers him aesthetic development, critical vision and resistance (2013, 240). I think these commentaries are far from being accurate and comprehensive. Such readings of Said’s view of detachments probably aim to “prove their existing qualms about Said’s position as a cosmopolitan intellectual [who] utilises a discourse of displacement that renders exile a condition of the soul: a Euro-American, Modernist aestheticisation” (Jilani, 2015: 66). Aijaz Ahmad is exemplary of critics who overlook that Said never sees detachment merely as a condition of the soul. In Ahmad’s perception, diasporic intellectuals and Third World literary figures employ detachment as a condition of the soul, which is something that characterizes these Euro-American and Modernist writing (1992: 86). Bryan S. Turner is another example of critics who claim that “being out of place [for Said] is an ethical status through which one can achieve the necessary stoical detachment to embrace humanity” (2000: 126). He contends that “broadly speaking, anybody who takes the calling of an intellectual life seriously cannot be comfortably at home in their home” (Ibid). For this reason, Turner suggests that “the persistence of the themes of homelessness and nostalgia” in Said’s works, including *Out of Place*, should not be interpreted “as actual states of affairs, but as moral and even aesthetic conditions of the soul” (Ibid).

“my [independent] identity [that] depended on” ‘resistance’ to “the sense of being infantilized, the helplessness” (Ibid: 295). Said claims that his distance from his family benefited him in terms of his national identification. It allowed him to re-establish his connection with Palestine, which his father ‘hate[d]’, and to seek his national/Palestinian identity (Ibid: 6). According to Anderson, the national self emerges from the destabilisation of a unified, coherent subjectivity; it comes out of an “estrangement” from one’s self; “nationality is necessarily an effect of the narratives we tell in the face of an incoherent sense of one’s self, a literal alienation from one’s self” (1991: 204).

Said’s identity politics and his relation with Palestine, as referred to in his memoir, illustrate this formula. He, for example, narrates:

The only hope for me as a man was in fact to be cut off from my family. My search for the freedom, for the self beneath or obscured by “Edward,” could only have begun because of that rupture, so I have come to think of it as fortunate, despite the loneliness and unhappiness I experienced for so long (Said, 1999: 294).

The rupture that Said refers to here is his detachment from his family (not Palestine) who imposed on him its own discipline and views, as well as forcing silence on the subject of Palestine. Said, in his memoir, keeps expressing his disappointment and anger at his family’s attempt to detach him from Palestine. Said’s estrangement from the Self (Edward) that his family imposed on him facilitates and allows him to retrieve and dynamically interact with the Palestinian context and identity and resurrects “the Palestine I grew up in”, and the “country [that is] lost” in 1948, “the Palestine of remote memory” (Ibid: 140, 142). What comes “out of this estrangement”, Anderson writes, is “a conception of personhood, identity, which because it cannot be ‘remembered,’ must be narrated” (Anderson, 1991: 104). The conception of personhood in Said’s memoir is the final product of his detachment from the self that has “nothing to do with ‘Edward’”, which is “a false, even ideological identity” –“devalued and doomed self, not, no never quite right, and indeed very wrong and out of place”, but “[one that relies] on the slowly forming identity of another self beneath the surface” (Said, 1999: 90, 87,

producing an archive that would prove necessary for a mass witnessing” (Ibid).

This is not to say that Palestinian authors are not critical of nationalism, neither do I mean to say that they reject the critical possibilities of detachments, but, in Anna Bernard’s words, they “are rather less sceptical about the idea of the nation, and also less sanguine about the merits of border-crossing and exile” (2010: n.p). Palestinian memoirists are critical of the notion of detachment merely as a space that offers privileges. Darwish expresses the same view on Palestinian nationalism and detachment. For Darwish, one must first have a state to think of exile as a desired position and as a space that offers possibilities for resisting and criticising nationalism and traditions at home. He quotes Jean Genet, who said that “a homeland is a stupid idea, except for those who still don’t have one”. Goytisolo, the Spanish poet, answered him: “And when they have a homeland?” Genet said: “let them throw it out the window” (Cited in HelitYeshurun, 2012: 52). This view recuperates the struggle of Palestinian writers to form, through aesthetics, “an existence which has not yet come into being”, in Mahmoud Darwish’s terms (1995: 17). It is a reflection on a despaired life and a challenge to the status quo that manifests itself in the deterioration of the Palestinian national enterprise.

It is therefore apt concluding this paper by illustrating that struggle though recalling Darwish’s words in his long poem “Tibaq” or “Counterpoint”, written in the memory of his friend Edward Said, who died in 2003:

He also said: If I die before you,
My will is the impossible.
I asked: Is the Impossible far off?
He said: A generation away.
I asked: And if I die before you?
He said: I shall pay my condolences to Mount Galilee,
And now, don’t forget:

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