

7 October 2023 and Its Aftermath Through Edward Said's Lens

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Abstract

The Palestinian tragedy meted out by Israeli settler colonial domination has lasted for many decades. Increasing Israeli atrocities against Palestinians range from targeted killings and settler violence to mass murders, destruction of builtscapes, and denial of basic necessities of life such as food, water, healthcare, and communication systems. After innumerable episodes of calculated unilateral escalation of military violence against Palestinians, Israel has exhibited an increase in its aggressive behaviour in the ongoing genocide in Gaza. Had Edward Said been alive today, he would have taken great interest in interpreting the current events in the region. However, he identified a pattern in Israeli behaviour which has remained unjust to Palestinians since long before the 7 October 2023 event. Israel's characteristic hostility to Palestinians examined by Said helps us understand its genocidal crimes, which this essay explores.

Keywords

Edward Said, dehumanisation of Palestinians, Palestinian urge for reconciliation, Israeli military and epistemic violence, genocide in Gaza, courage and resilience of Palestinians

Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that the late Palestinian-American literary scholar Edward Said was probably the world's best known intellectual around the time of his death in 2003. Like other Palestinians, he was a victim of Zionist settler-colonial expansionism. He could not continue his early education in Jerusalem, a city "in which [he] was born and where for a time [he] grew up" (Said, "The Current" 60). Dispossessed of his homeland forever, he later made a name for himself as "a true polymath intellectual, one who consciously defied the isolation that accompanies academic specialisation" (Tregear 203). He had the ability and

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acceptance to reach “the international market of readers” with his “riveting essays” that revealed the cruelty of the state of Israel against Palestinians and the hypocrisy of its Western backers (Sheble 267). Driven by a single-minded sense of his identity as a Palestinian in exile, Said became arguably the most articulate commentator of successive Palestinian catastrophes and a passionate advocate for justice for Palestine. Death ended his distinguished career as well as his agony and outrage as an out-of-place Palestinian, and Palestine lost its most consummate chronicler of the sufferings of its people.

During his active writing career, whenever Palestinians were subjected to heavy bombardment, widespread airstrikes, major violence and mayhem, and other shattering experiences at the hands of Israeli soldiers and settlers, Said appeared with his opinion pieces to give a voice to the Palestinian narrative of suffering. He left many writings that conceptualise the Palestinian resistance movement and document continued steadfastness in the Palestinian struggle for freedom and human dignity. Since Said left this world, Israeli hostilities have continued to flare up and remained an outstanding characteristic of its (mis)treatment of Palestinians, but we have had to live without his thoughts and reflections on Israel’s hostilities.

Palestinians have been facing Israeli attacks on two fronts simultaneously: Military and settler assault on one hand and epistemic/discursive violence through media and academic publications on the other. Against the backdrop of this dual violence, Said presented distinctive analyses of the interplay between “the discursive and the active [military] aspects of Israel’s [oppressive] policies” (Khalidi 57). As he is no longer around to give us revealing insights into Israel’s genocidal violence and into the undeserved hardships of Palestinians, it is perhaps worth discussing his painstaking efforts in protesting Israel’s protracted occupation and systematic destruction of Palestine and in countering the disinformation of the Israeli propaganda machine.

Faced with the horrors of indescribable levels of devastation in Gaza and the West Bank, we miss Said’s multimodal assessment of Israel’s tyrannical dominance over Palestinian life. However, his comments on Israel’s apartheid-colonial practices and innumerable past massacres of Palestinians help better understand the Zionist state’s ongoing genocide in Gaza and that started in early October 2023. It is in this light that this essay seeks to revisit some of his views about the Israel-Palestine issue in order for us to gain a deeper understanding of Israel’s chronic belligerence and increasing intransigence vis-a-vis Palestinians.

Israeli intent to destroy Palestinians

Since Said’s death, Palestinians have gone through many massacres and mass murders – big and small – and targeted killings by Israeli occupation forces,

especially those in 2004, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2018, 2021, and 2022. However, the frequency, scale, and intensity of the ongoing, post-7 October 2023 Israeli genocidal violence has dwarfed major war crimes and crimes against humanity that Palestinians suffered earlier at the hands of the British in 1936-39 and at the hands of Israel in 1948, 1967, and 1982 – all during Said’s lifetime. Israel’s long catalogue of brutalities and injustices against Palestinians² by which the apartheid state “maintains its hold on their lives and land” (Said, “The Current” 71) are driven by a motive to achieve its overall objective of ethnic cleansing – a euphemism for genocide in this case. For decades Israel has tortured and attempted to humiliate Palestinians in Palestine and in Israeli dungeons. It has long sought to depopulate Gaza and the West Bank of their native inhabitants, “to exterminate the Palestinian national identity” (Said, “The Voice” 48), and finally to consolidate the Israeli occupation enterprise. Said and other commentators pinpointed Israel’s genocidal campaign against Palestinians decades and decades ago – long before the 7 October 2023 event and its aftermath.

The actions of successive Israeli governments and statements of innumerable Israeli politicians vindicate Said’s and others’ assertions about Israel’s genocidal intent. Recently, in a statement on 19 May 2025, the Israeli politician Bezalel Smotrich (1980 –) threw off the mask and openly declared that Israel entered Gaza this time around to “conquer, clear, and stay” (Drop Site). Soon afterwards, responding to this statement, British journalist Piers Morgan (1965 –), apparently shifting away from his earlier stance, posed the following rhetorical question: “How can anyone listen to what Smotrich says here and not conclude he sounds like a genocidal maniac?” (Morgan). A couple of days later, in a talk show on the Piers Morgan Uncensored YouTube channel, Morgan said to the fellow journalist Mehdi Hasan (1979 –), “Listen, you and I have talked about this war in Gaza ever since it started.... I have resisted going as far as you have done in your criticism of the Israeli government. I resist no more” (Zeteo). For a long time, people like Morgan held views that fly in the face of reality. They seem to comprehend Israel’s calculated genocide and depopulation agenda only now, and this perhaps tells us about their level or lack of insightfulness. Morgan and his likes have woken up to the wrongness of the actions of Israel nineteen months into its genocide in Gaza, but Said and other thinkers who share a commitment to the freedom of Palestinians and emancipatory change in the region identified Israel’s genocidal intent decades ago. In other words, the latter

²For a compact discussion of a series of gross human rights violations that Palestinians have suffered at the hands of British and Israeli governments, see my essay “Cataloguing Israeli Atrocities Against Palestinians in Kamal Hassan’s ‘Complaining to Iqbal’” (2024).

did not need to see Israel's recent genocide to read the mind of the Zionist state. If viewed from a different angle, Said and other advocates for justice for Palestine who passed away before 7 October 2023 were fortunate that they did not live to share our helplessness and to process the horrific cruelty of Israelis and the calamity of Palestinians.

Sparing Said the pain of witnessing this genocide

As regards Israel's oppression of Palestinians, there have been many occasions – since Said's death – when many of us had an intense yearning for his perceptive critique of the decades-long problem. Many admirers of Said would probably say that they would have taken certain pleasure in sadness – the pleasure of sighs – by reading his perspectives on Israel's ongoing genocide against Palestinians, especially those in Gaza. But I would like to be kind and considerate to him in an unusual way by having a different take on it. To make my point concrete, I mention below what I wrote in a previous essay about another lover of justice for Palestine, Mohd. Kamal Hassan (1942–2023):

[I]t gives me some relief that Hassan and other kind souls like him who passed away before 7 October 2023 do not have to deal with the pain and helplessness that many of us are experiencing while Israel is committing, and its backers are abetting, a genocide and gloating over the suffering of Palestinians. (Hasan, "Cataloguing Israeli" 11)

In some way or other, it is comforting that Said did not have to see a longer episode of Israeli massacres of tens of thousands of Palestinian children and the killings of their parents and grandparents. I tend to let out a sigh of relief that he is not around to bear the news of Israel's daily killings of Palestinians in scores and hundreds that started in early October 2023 and continue as I am writing this essay in late May 2025. His death spared him the agony of witnessing more of Israel's murderous aggression and wanton destruction of Palestinian lives and landscapes.

Said went the extra mile to articulate Palestinians' dignified endurance of the wrongs done to them, but the extraordinary courage and resilience of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank this time overwhelms human ability to describe it sufficiently. The pre-October 2023 Gaza Strip consisted of "two cities (Gaza, Khan Yunis), two towns (Rafah, Dair al-Balah), more than ten villages and eight refugee camps" (Al-Astal 31) and totalled about 360 km² "with a length of 45 km and a width between 6 and 12 km" (Aish, Ayesh, and Al-Najar 1). Israel's years-long genocide has now destroyed most of them.

The concentration of Israel's genocidal attacks and bombings chiefly with US-made sophisticated weapons on such a small, densely-populated piece

of land and for such a long time makes the deaths and destructions all the more grisly and woeful. This is perhaps the longest and most intense genocidal violence against a repeatedly-displaced group of people. In such a state of affairs, understandably, those in search of justice for Palestine feel the need for the presence of Said who continued working on multiple fronts – for over a decade defying leukaemia and the effects of its sleep-inducing drugs – to tell the world “the truth about the Palestinians suffering at the hands of Israel” and to gain their “right to dialogue and representation” (Sheble 267). However, despite his mastery of words and repertoire of linguistic resources, coupled with an extraordinary ability to express his ideas clearly, Said would probably be dumbfounded and grope for the right devices in a bid to provide an account of the extremity of Israel’s current violence especially in Gaza and the West Bank.

Although Said lived most of his life in exile and far away from Palestine, the fight for freedom for his homeland remained at the centre of his intellectual efforts. Despite his victimhood as a displaced Palestinian, the yardstick by which he approached the Israel-Palestine situation was justice, mutual understanding, and reconciliation between Israelis and Palestinians, on which the following section focuses.

Said’s cry for unity and reconciliation

Despite suffering a severe personal loss because of the establishment of Israel in the Arab land of Palestine, Said took a conciliatory approach when addressing the Israel-Palestine issue. For example, in a 1995 essay titled “The Current Status of Jerusalem,” Said states: “I will not deny at all what many scholars and religious experts have said, that Jerusalem occupies a special place in the Jewish religion and tradition” (63). Lisa Sheble confirms Said’s open-arm gesture and regards him as a “complex, elegant writer/thinker who stretches the reader’s mind” and “gives presence to his trajectory toward inclusive unitive possibilities” (255). Said consistently strove for harmony and peace between Israelis and Palestinians and appealed to the apathetic heart of Israel to a true appreciation of the need for empathy and compassion. But all his pleas and appeals for a just settlement based on equality between the two parties went largely unheard and unheeded by the Zionist state.

In fact, dispossessed and displaced by Israel, the vast majority of Palestinians have remained nonviolent, clinging to their hope for freedom without eschewing civility. As one of them, Said outlines their collective reconciliatory attitude to Israelis in the following way:

We have accepted Israel’s existence, we have said we are willing to live in peace and co-existence, we have spoken positively about mutual

recognition and mutual self-determination, we have said we would negotiate a final settlement of the conflict directly with Israel, we would accept UN auspices, internationalization, demilitarization. Israel will not give up the military occupation, will not recognize Palestinian rights, will not deal with Palestinian representatives, will not — even in principle — accept the idea of a Palestinian state. (“The Challenge” 176)

According to Said, the dominant Israeli view about Palestinians is that they are “a lesser race of human beings” (“The Current” 68). What Said and we find unacceptable is Israel’s refusal to accept Palestinians as equal human beings or simply as human beings, as a major Israeli politician, Yoav Gallant (1958 –), used the phrase “human animals” to describe them (McGreal). Israel has been unwilling to relinquish its control of Palestinian land and resources and to end its structure of domination. It has continued to breach the human rights of Palestinians through a “willful and insensitive act ... of dispossessing” them and denying “a longer, more continuous Muslim presence [in Palestine], and certainly a very dense Christian one too” (Said, “The Current” 63). Said worked for “peace and real reconciliation between Palestinians and Israelis” (68) but saw such a possibility thwarted again and again because of the absence of a sense of equivalence between Israelis and Palestinians as two peoples. He succinctly describes the unequal relations between Israelis and Palestinians and Israel’s discriminatory treatment of the latter in the following way:

At the core is something I learned about Israel years and years ago, namely, the rigorous distinction between Jew and non-Jew. Many anomalies, unique to Israel and uncommon elsewhere, flow from this: the notion that Israel is not the state of its citizens but of the whole Jewish people, the statutory discrimination against all Palestinians (including those who are Israeli citizens) as a lesser, less privileged people, and so on. (Said, “The Current” 70)

Said makes it clear that he and other “Palestinians have accepted Israel as a sovereign state entitled to peace and security” but have realised in anguish that there has been no “comparable undertaking from Israel” (“The Current” 68) to guarantee their human rights and dignity. In this regard, he cites the case of Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat (1929–2004) who spoke of “peace and coexistence” with Israel despite the occupation of his people and territories by the Israeli army (Said, “The Challenge” 175). But all such Palestinian peace gestures were never reciprocated by Israel (even though certain media outlets often attempt to highlight a perceived victimhood of the Jewish state). Nor have they been given proper attention by world powers or the (dominant) international media. In other words, it is Israel’s reluctance to reciprocate Palestinians’ urge for

equality as human beings and refusal to accept them on equal terms that has perpetuated the Israeli-Palestinian blood feud and caused the 7 October 2023 and other pre- and post-crises. Said's call for equal treatment of Palestinians and respect for their fundamental rights fell on the deaf ears of Israel and its Western allies. Instead of giving his call a fair chance of success, the Israeli establishment and its agents continued to vilify Said, which the following discussion illustrates.

Vilification of Said and insensitivity to Palestinians

Israel's wholesale tendency to characterise all Palestinians as terrorists did not spare even a celebrated scholar like Said. He devoted much of his scholarly work to spreading a correct understanding of the Israel-Palestine issue and to aiming to liberate Palestinians from Israeli occupation. This led him to be "criminalized" and characterized as "delinquent" as if his "sole purpose in life [was] to kill Jews" so his office at Columbia University in New York City was "raided and vandalised" (Said, "The Voice" 40). He was frequently called "a terrorist" and "an agent for terrorism ... by polemicists and even other scholars who prefer to do that rather than try to engage with [his] ideas" (41). Said puts his "astonishment at the injustice of it" in the following words:

Here I am, a child of a people that's been kicked out of its own land, forbidden to return.... And if they are Jewish just by the fact of being Jewish, born in New York of Jewish parents, they are entitled to go to Israel or Palestine as I call it, become Israeli citizens at any time they wish. I was born there, my father was born there, my grandfather, great-grandfather... and I can't return. I don't have the same right. The law of return somehow covers them, and my people, my family, were kicked out of there and there are books accusing me of terrorism. The enormity of the whole thing just baffles me at the same time as it strikes me very strongly. (41)

Like other conscientious advocates of the cause of human rights for Palestinians, Said was fully aware of occasional violent resistance activities pursued by certain Palestinian groups who are dispossessed, embittered, desperate, and militant. He regarded such measures as "random, stupid and unpolitical" and separated them from "the struggle against an oppressor," stating that he was "obviously for the latter and totally against the former" (45). While deploring the deliberate targeting and killing of civilians by any group, Said exposed the "ignorance or hypocrisy" of dominant media outlets that in general assume that "it is acceptable for Israel to kill say, four hundred civilians in one bombing raid" but inundate their audience "with pictures of grieving Israeli families when one Israeli civilian is killed" ("The Challenge" 173). A recent example may help illustrate a pattern in

Israeli violence against Palestinians and what Said regarded as media insensitivity to its Palestinian victims.

On 18 March 2025, Israel in its characteristic style unilaterally broke a ceasefire (that it had signed with Hamas on 19 January 2025) and killed at least 404 and injured at least 562 Palestinians in Gaza. Many of the victims were children (Aljazeera). Having been used to receiving news about such mass murders – some other ones being even more gruesome – by Israel, my reaction was understandably one of helplessness mixed with disbelief about the extent of cruelty of one human group (Israelis) against another (Palestinians). Feeling outraged and hurt about Israel's deliberate violence, I took to the websites of dominant media outlets and found that this hideous massacre did not appear as the leading news in many of them.

Now let us reverse the scenario and imagine a comparable incident where the victims are not Palestinians. Let us say, in the span of one day, over 400 Israelis (or even Ukrainians) were killed and over half a thousand injured by Palestinians (or by Russians in the case of Ukrainians). It is not difficult to imagine the extent of coverage that such a tragedy would rightly receive from the international media. Sadly, the deaths of Palestinians do not trigger a comparable media flurry. The fact that Said and other commentators specified this media insensitivity to Palestinians decades ago suggests that this is not a new (or post-7 October 2023) phenomenon. It goes without saying that Israeli cruelty and media bias against Palestinians do not need to be prompted by an incident like Hamas's 7 October 2023 attack on Israel. In a 1989 essay titled "The Challenge of Palestine," Said talked of Israel's policy of forbidding media coverage of its atrocities against Palestinians and "cutting off of water, fuel, electricity and telephone links" (177). Israel perpetrated then and is perpetrating now all these and other crimes even though they are universally prohibited by international laws and condemned by international bodies. It has long been behaving in a way that suggests that it is above the international rules-based order, thanks to the complicity and support it has been receiving from powerful Western nations.

While the violent actions of some Palestinians – like Hamas's 7 October 2023 attacks on Israel – are wrong and counterproductive, the long history of Israeli oppression of Palestinians and refusal to talk peace makes it clear that the apartheid state has been committing massacres and crimes of genocide in Palestine both with and without provocation. Without exception, Israel has routinely used incidents of provocation as excuses to justify its disproportionate use of force and to perpetrate collective punishment, mass murders, and mass destruction. As Said puts it:

I certainly must say that I have been much more, much much more, impressed by the cruelty and, above all, the extent of Palestinian suffering at the hands of the Israelis, than the other way round. The ratio is infinitely greater. The Israelis have made no secret of it; that they have always killed Palestinian civilians, sometimes at the rate of a hundred to one Israeli death. (“The Voice” 46)

Various statements by Said, such as the one quoted above, suggest that Israel’s post-7 October 2023 genocide in Gaza is not new or an exception. It has been committing genocide and other crimes against Palestinians for a very long time, but has been matched or outdone by the courage, resilience, and resistance spirit of the indomitable Palestinian people which I describe below.

Fearless Palestinians

Since the start of the current phase of genocide in early October 2023, Israel has killed tens of thousands of – perhaps over a hundred thousand – Palestinians, destroyed almost all their homes and critical infrastructures including hospitals and religious and educational institutions, and butchered hundreds of journalists, health care professionals as well as UN aid workers. Palestinians who have survived and lived in the sites of destruction have eye-witnessed the massive scale of Israeli brutalities committed in their land. But they have stayed put, defied Israeli atrocities, and readied themselves to die for their land. This proverbial courage and resilience of oppressed Palestinians resonates with what Said celebrated long ago in the following words: “[Palestinians] message, as they understand and live it, is that, ‘we will not go away, we will not submit to tyranny, we will resist’.... After every preventive measure... the uprising continues, stronger than before” (“The Challenge” 177). So the courage and fearlessness that Palestinians in Gaza are currently showing is not new.

According to Said, Palestinians have kept up the resistance to Israeli oppression over lengthy periods even though the difference in weaponry between them and the Zionist state is staggering. They have “no air-force, no navy, no tanks, none of that stuff” but have continued fighting off the “immense Israeli concentration, which depend[s] on Phantoms and cluster bombs and remote control devices to kill, just kill, large concentrations of Palestinians” (Said, “The Voice” 46-47). Said dealt with the question of what makes Palestinians brave the Israeli aggression and (pre-emptive) retaliation. The answer lies in the fact that decades-long abuse, persecution, and mistreatment – physical and psychological – by Israel have driven the fear out of the minds of Palestinians.

Said argues that there is “a kind of heroism” among Palestinians and “everybody feels he or she is willing to make sacrifices” (“The Voice” 49). He

regards it as a “miracle” that Palestinians’ “spirit as a people has not been broken, that [they] have not capitulated” despite the world’s silence “about Israeli contempt for Palestinian human rights” (Said, “The Challenge” 174). This persistent note of determination, confidence, and hope rang true during Said’s lifetime and is unmistakably evident in the collective consciousness of Palestinians now. Especially since 7 October 2023, we have been watching two different extremities – Israel’s extreme ability to be cruel to Palestinians, and the Palestinians’ extreme determination to stay put and be ready to make the ultimate sacrifice for their land. Palestine is a site of resistance against an ongoing apartheid-colonial system. The undeterred fortitude and strong will that Palestinians continue to demonstrate in braving unbearable challenges posed by Israel’s violence gives rise to Said’s hope that justice for Palestinians will prevail and Israel’s colonial project will fail “the way all colonial adventures were doomed” (“The Challenge” 178).

Conclusion

Edward Said died twenty years before the 7 October 2023 incident and the onset of Israel’s ongoing genocide in Gaza. However, his assessment of Israel’s extraordinary capacity for cruelty and atrocity against Palestinians remains true to this day. There is a pattern in Israel’s genocidal behaviour that was, according to Said’s observations, apparent in its treatment of Palestinians long before the current episode of violence. Being a Palestinian academic in exile, Said had the ability to articulate the Palestinian position in an intellectual way which was not previously possible because of the insufficient number of competent scholars to represent the Palestinian cause and perspective.

Even though Said has long departed, his work still resonates with the human condition in Gaza and the West Bank and provides us with a profound understanding of a pattern in Israeli policies that is belligerent and hostile towards Palestinians. Based on Said’s writings, this essay has argued that Israel’s refusal to accept Palestinians as equal human beings and to reciprocate their gestures and pleadings for harmony and reconciliation lies at the core of its apartheid-colonial strategies in the region. What is more, Said’s writings show that Israeli atrocities against Palestinians did not need the trigger of the 7 October 2023 event. They are decades-long and driven by a desire to depopulate and occupy the land of indigenous Palestinians. Against such a backdrop, Said saw a strong resolve in the Palestinian spirit for liberation, and his celebration of Palestinian heroism is confirmed by the indomitable bravery and determination that the people of Gaza have displayed, especially since 7 October 2023.

On a final note, when I wrote “Writing in the Time of Mass Murder” for the December 2023 issue of *Asiatic*, I thought the essay would be a one-off exercise to make a case for committed literature in the light of Israel’s mass murders of Palestinians. I did not imagine even in my wildest nightmare that Israel would increase the severity of its genocidal violence and continue to kill more and more Palestinian children, women, and men in such numbers and to such an extent. Amid the silence and complicity of powerful nations capable of stopping the genocide, Palestinians have demonstrated an extraordinary degree of courage and love for their land, defying the fear of death and destruction. They have not given up on their rights to life and human dignity and have set a heroic example and established a model of resistance worth following by other persecuted groups in other parts of the world.

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