



CATASTROPHE **REMEMBERED**

**Palestine,
Israel
and the
Internal
Refugees**

ESSAYS IN MEMORY OF EDWARD W SAID

Edited by NUR MASALHA

About this book

The war of 1948 is known to Israelis as the “War of Independence”. But for Palestinians, the war is forever the *Nakba*, “The Catastrophe”. The conflict led to the creation of the state of Israel and resulted in the destruction of much of Palestinian society by Zionist forces. Approximately 90 per cent of the Palestinians who lived in the major part of Palestine upon which Israel was established became refugees. The minority of Palestinians – 160,000 – who remained behind, are one of the main subjects of this book. Many of them were forced out of their homes and became second-class citizens of the state of Israel. As such, they were subject to a system of military administration between 1948 and 1966 by a government that confiscated the bulk of their lands.

For the Palestinians, both refugees and non-refugees, the traumatic events of 1948 have become central to Palestinian history, memory and identity. Moreover, in recent years Palestinians have been producing memories of the *Nakba*, compiling and recording oral history and holding annual commemorations designed to preserve the memory of the catastrophe, while emphasising the link between refugee rights, identity and memory. In the absence of a rich source of Palestinian documentary records, oral history and interviews with internally displaced Palestinians are a critical and natural source for constructing a more comprehensible narrative of their experiences.

This collection is dedicated to the memory of Edward W. Said (1935–2003), whose voice articulated the aspirations of the disenfranchised, the oppressed and the marginalised, and whose message was humanist and universal, extending beyond Palestine to touch wide audiences.

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Foreword • Edward W. Said, Scholar-Activist

Naseer H. Aruri

It is only fitting that this collection, dealing with Palestinian internal refugees, identity and memory, oral history, indigenous rights, and international protection, is dedicated to the memory of Edward W. Said. At least half of the collection deals with Palestinian oral history and memory, which, together with issues such as the Palestinian *Nakba* (catastrophe), indigenous rights and international protection, right of return, and eventually the one-state solution, constituted much of Said's concerns, expressed in numerous oral and written works that span the past three decades. Indeed, Said played a key, if not indispensable, role in transforming the international discourse on all these issues.

The voice of Professor Edward W. Said articulated the aspirations of the disenfranchised, the oppressed, the marginalised, and the voiceless, whose predicament he presented in ways that no one else could. He was, after all, a voice for the ideas, hopes and visions that diverse oppressed and indigenous people came to hold dear and cherish. His message was humanist, universal, and conciliatory, focusing on, but also extending beyond Palestine to touch a wide audience and to resonate in the hearts of all those for whom the pursuit of justice and human dignity was a compelling priority.

Edward was one of the twentieth century's greatest thinkers, who has who has left a unique and indelible legacy in numerous fields and across many disciplines: he was an internationally renowned literary and cultural critic, a philosopher of history, a music critic, a Middle East specialist, a political theorist, an activist, and a most deeply humane voice of conscience. Rarely does one come across someone who combines such an exceptional diversity of talents, devotion to

principles and just causes, boundless energy, intellectual resources, and analytical prowess.

Edward's great writings appear in 26 languages in the most prestigious and widely read periodicals, newspapers and scholarly journals. He authored more than 20 books and over 250 articles and presented at least 50 endowed lectures in the last 25 years of his life. In addition to having served as University professor at Columbia University (the highest academic rank), he had been a visiting professor at Yale, Harvard, and Johns Hopkins as well as a fellow at numerous centres of learning and advanced studies around the world. He was general editor of a book series for Harvard University Press titled *Convergences: Inventories of the Present*. He wrote a regular music column for the *Nation*, and a regular column for *Al-Abram* in Cairo, as well as contributing articles to many other journals, magazines, and newspapers, including *Le Monde Diplomatique*, the *London Review of Books*, and other prestigious publications.

It was this rich diversity and his ground-breaking contributions that gave Edward his unique character. One readily sees in his many writings the interplay of politics, culture, psychology, and the arts – in his works *Orientalism*, *Culture and Imperialism*, *After the Last Sky*, *Representations of the Intellectual*, *Covering Islam*, and *Beginnings*, as well as his books on the Palestine question and Oslo, among others.

One of his everlasting contributions is likely to be his demonstration of how the justification for empire building was embedded in the Western cultural imagination during the age of empire, and how even today the imperial legacy colours relations between the West and the formerly colonised world, at all levels. His comprehension that all cultures are interdependent, and consequently that the West and its former subjects must recognise that the true human community is global, also testifies to the genius of Edward.

Together with a few colleagues, he was responsible for creating the basis for post-colonial studies as a new discipline. He provided the linguistic and methodological tools to help us understand the nature of imperialism and its malignant impact on colonial societies throughout the world. His articulation of the relationship, indeed the linkage, between culture and power marks another of his major contributions to knowledge. In both, *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*, he demonstrates how the concept of empire was ever-

present in the literary works of the age. The falsely claimed knowledge of the “orient” created a perspective that enabled the West to exercise power over the East, spreading its hegemony in destructive ways that distorted the political development of colonial societies and fragmented their very existence. So central is the emphasis on culture in Edward’s work that he founded an entirely new school of thought for the study of imperialism that integrated major diverse disciplines into a coherent analytic paradigm focusing on culture and power.

In addition to Edward Said the world-renowned scholar, there was also Edward Said the enthusiastic activist. “Scholar-activist” is indeed a hyphenated description rarely-applied to people of Said’s stature. Although Edward’s manner, appearance and lifestyle were seemingly aristocratic, his writings, lectures and activism consolidated an integral relationship between the academy and civil society. Edward was the scholar-activist *par excellence*. He bridged the gap between the underprivileged and the ivory tower. He took up the cause of Palestine in venues that are usually closed to the underprivileged: the lecture theatres, the concert stages, the highbrow journals, the principal television shows, the numerous occasions honouring him and celebrating his work worldwide. Thus, in many ways, he allowed Palestine to ride on his coat-tails rather than the other way around.

He did not detach himself from the politics of Palestine, and this required him to travel to distant and sometimes not easily accessible places, sleeping in simple hotels, putting up with mundane and sometimes intolerably sectarian discussions, subjecting himself to tedious arrangements, and having to endure on occasion endless speeches filled with bombast and triumphalist declarations. This is not to say that such politics was the hallmark of the Palestinian national movement to which he belonged, but simply to underscore the rare tolerance of an inevitable dimension of *all* politics by a scholarly giant for whom such endeavours could be very taxing.

Edward Said was described by the *New York Times* as “one of the most influential literary and cultural critics in the world”. Yet he did not hesitate to lend his name to the Palestine National Council, our parliament in exile, with all its pitfalls, tedious procedures, and monotonous discussions. For him, it was still the only available representative forum for a people who suffered physical and legal fragmentation, in addition to dispossession and disenfranchisement.

Edward was typically described as “the conscience of Palestine”, having delivered the kind of eloquent message perhaps unheard since that of the late Fayez Sayegh. Like Fayeze, he was an independent, who lent his name to Palestine, the idea, the nation, the identity, not to this or that Palestinian “front” or *tantbeem*. Referring to some Palestinian intellectuals who headed new non-governmental organisations, he once told me: “We don’t have to have shops (*dakakeen*) – we’re independent.”

Edward’s message was so universal and straightforward that, on occasion, it provoked the wrath of strange bedfellows, who could not deal with his fierce nationalism, conciliatory demeanour, and empathy for both Jewish suffering and Palestinian misery at the same time. Like Gandhi’s position on Zionism, Edward’s opposition to the Zionist project and adherence to the “requirements of justice” did not stand in contradiction to his expressed sympathy for “the life-long persecution of the Jews”.

That reality was underscored by the fact that Edward’s Israeli-Argentinian friend Daniel Barenboim, the distinguished pianist and Chief Conductor for Life of the Staatskapelle Berlin, played four pieces of Edward’s favourite music at his funeral in Riverside Church near the Columbia campus, where he had lived and taught for four decades. Together, for the previous five years, Barenboim and Said had organised the East-West Divan Workshop in order to train young Arab and Israeli musicians. That project will remain forever a testimony to the fact that the future of Palestine must be charted by a joint struggle for equal co-existence, the only alternative to oppression and perpetual conflict.

Those who described Edward in the 1980s as Arafat’s spokesperson in New York forgot to add that Edward was never a mouth-piece for anybody. Nor was he a speechwriter for Arafat when he wrote his famous “Gun and Olive Branch” General Assembly speech in 1974, or when in Algiers he drafted the Palestinian Declaration of Independence (1988). These were Palestinian documents reflecting the spirit of the age.

When Arafat abandoned the Palestinian consensus, opting for the open-ended Oslo agreement, Edward could not tolerate that new low in the lengthening record of Palestinian concessions. Edward’s sharp criticism spared neither Arafat nor his associates, whom he publicly

named as complicit. I will never forget Edward referring to these Palestinian intellectuals and luminaries by name at a panel we shared together during the mid-nineties in Washington. On that occasion, Edward's rebuke of Arafat's pandering to Washington included certain words that elicited a shy smile from Edward's daughter sitting in the front seat as well as a disclaimer from the president of the Arab-American organisation sponsoring the event. Edward said: "Even Adeed of Somalia told the Americans to f__ themselves." The break with Arafat resulted in the banning of Edward's books in Arafat's domain, Edward's native homeland.

It is rather ironical that Edward's battle against leukaemia and what some have described as "the cancer of Oslo" began two years prior to the "historic handshake" of Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat at the White House on 13 September 1993, ushering in the ill-fated Oslo process. In the context of the anticipated Madrid Conference held in October/November 1991 under the auspices of the US and the ailing USSR, which opened up fruitless negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians in Washington for the next eleven months, Edward invited a group of us to a meeting in London on 6 September 1991, one of his "what is to be done" sessions that he would convene when the going was rough. Sadly, he received the ominous news of his leukaemia during that very session. He had invited some twenty-four Palestinians from four continents to put our heads together in order to face yet another challenge. At our opening session, Edward outlined the goals of the meeting:

The PLO is in bad shape, but we are not focusing on criticism now. We are not here to discuss strategies of the peace conference, and how to reform the PLO. We need to coordinate our efforts ... and create a model of cooperative work ... Can we lift an inch of the occupation? There is a need to connect Israel with the occupation ... we need to share knowledge and experience, to create a permanent network to acquire resources, to provide a model for others – a collective will to make a difference, ... to de-legitimise the occupation.

At that meeting, a speaker from the African National Congress, invited by Edward, helped set the tone: "When we began to relate to the diplomatic dimension in 1989 because the world was changing and insisting on peaceful resolution, we did not abandon the struggle, the people." The message was very clear: You do not sign away your