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Edward Said's Thoughts and Palestinian Nationalism

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Abstract: *The Palestinian Nation has been haunted by an extremely embarrassing situation for a long time, and the goal to build a state is out of reach. Edward Said was a Palestinian-American intellectual, and he plunged into the specific history of the Palestinian liberation struggle. Said's understanding of Palestinian nationalism is filled with contradictions. He was unequivocally opposed to nationalism in theory, but in practical political activities, he had a strong and sincere feeling of national identity in the Middle East identity which determines his national emotional trends. After studying Said's thoughts in the context of Palestinian nationalism, this paper will tap deeply into Said's sense of national crisis as well as the content of the struggle to arouse the people together and to inspire greater understanding and peace-loving people to support the Palestinian cause of liberation.*

Key Words: *Edward Said; Middle East; Nationalism; Palestine*

Franz Kafka wrote in his diary in October 1921 that "he who cannot cope with life when he is living needs to slightly stop his despair of his own fate with one hand, ... and at the same time, use the other hand to remember what he sees in the ruins, because he could

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do something different and something more than other people." (Kafka, 1988: 67). Edward Said (1935-2003) was such a scholar. He has been one of few American contemporary prominent intellectuals who had critical awareness, and who also was the main academic spokesman of the Middle East and Palestine in the West. Whenever a major event of Palestine or the Middle East occurred, the Western media and the public all wanted to know his views and he became the opinion leader for the Middle East and indeed a "Voice of Palestine." Said's works showed the complicated relationship between cultural academics, politics and history. Through his writings, he did not only point out the complicated social, political and cultural relations and the possibility of cultural discursive intervention, but also in the face of the double morality of the history and politics, intellectuals should "speak the truth to the power. Said also was the first Palestinian to publicly appeal to each other in English to acknowledge the sufferings, seek common ground, and undertake peace talks. When political power and cultural identity have been submerged in the Middle East, Said plunged into the specific history struggle of the national liberation. His theory came from practice, and at the same time, it served and guided practice, which could be called a model combination of theory and practice. He urged the Islamic world to carry out equal dialogue and have a critical study on the Arabs living environment, Palestinian history and the reality of Israel. He believed that the only way to ease the endless war was through peaceful dialogue. As the active supporter and participator in the Palestinian struggle for liberation, Said was regarded as the voice of violence and terrorism by many Westerners and Jews. Nevertheless, he still actively involved himself in the Palestinian liberation movement, and with vision and maverick courage, he spoke words that others were afraid to say. This paper examines Said's ideas in the context of the Palestinian nationalist ideology and finds the meaning of the national sense and struggles to arouse the people together in Said's thoughts in order to inspire more peace-loving people to understand and support the liberation of Palestine.

I. The Content of Palestinian Nationalism

Nationalism refers to the thought or activities that self-nation is taken as the main body of the supreme political, economic and cultural value. Because people usually have their own regional experience to define nationalism, it is difficult for us to represent and define nationalism. In this paper, the definition of the British ethnologist Anthony Smith is regarded as the reference: "Nationalism is an ideological movement with the aim of a social group to seek and maintain autonomy and individuality and some members have their expectations to form a de facto or potential nation." (Smith, 1998: 126). The performance of nationalism has various forms which can be divided into two types: rational and irrational nationalism. The former one has a positive meaning to fight against foreign invasion, defend national dignity, and promote national progress, norms to defend basic human values. As in the Western colonialism history, nationalism had spread from Western Europe to elsewhere in the world, and had become the key power to fight against colonialism and imperialism as well as to establish modern nation-states. Irrational nationalism plays a damaging role, which is blindly arrogant, conservative, hostile to aliens and even leads to conflicts, war and other negative consequences. Typically, political science (and the media) tends to pay attention to extreme types of nationalism, such as separatism, xenophobia, irredentism and militarism; in extreme cases, it even includes ethnic cleansing. In addition, since nationalism which appeals to the interests of the nation emerged after the modern nation-state, it has a strong personal feeling and is permeated with the group unconscious of social consciousness.

Since the mid-20th century, the Arab-Israeli conflict has been a major event caused by nationalism the Middle Eastern history. As the two sides have not considered each other as a real nation and having no right to establish a nation, so conflicts and war have continued. The "Six-Day War" in 1967 had a far-reaching impacts on the Middle East situation, one of which has been the decline of secular Arab nationalism and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. Prior to this, the

pan-Arab nationalism represented by Gamul Nasser preached Palestine liberation and modernization by way of national unity and socialism. However, the war demonstrated the bankruptcy of this theory. After the death of Nasser, no one could raise the banner of Arab unity once again. In this situation, Islamic fundamentalists took the opportunity to explain that the reason of the failure was that the Arabs abandoned the purity of its religious path. The outcome was that Islamic fundamentalism began to have increasing influence among the lower classes. The "Muslim Brotherhood" which had been subjected to severe pressure in the era of Nasser's Egypt rose again, and provided moral supports to Hamas and Hezbollah. Since the late 1980s, the religious color of the Arab side in the Arab-Israeli conflicts became increasingly evident. In this process, Hamas, Hezbollah and other "non-state actors" had replaced the traditional Arab nation regime and become main factors affecting the regional situation.

Palestinian nation-building has gone through a difficult and lengthy process, and it has a particularity that the nation formation has been before the state, which is different than most state-building processes in which "national building" and "state building" are synchronized and conducted. Therefore, the Palestinians have been called academically "a nation without a state" (Rourke, 2005: 179). Palestinian nationalism has been formed in the process of the aggression against Western colonialism and Zionism, seeking political equality and national independence. As a movement of social thought and political events, it originated from Ottoman doctrine in the late 19th century and early 20th century (Yang & Ma, 2002: 44). Before the first Middle East war in 1948, Palestine used to launch a massive armed uprising against the British Mandate authorities' suppression in 1936-1939. After the uprising was suppressed, the Palestinian national movement had been in a hard time. After the first Middle East war, Palestine's land was divided into three parts; the Palestinians were no longer geographically as a whole and more than 700,000 Palestinians were forced to leave their homes to Jordan, Syria, Egypt and Lebanon as refugees. Since then, the Arab nationalism and Arab unity

advocated by Nasser and the Arab Socialist Baath Party have gotten on the stage. As the Palestinian-American professor at Tel Aviv University Nadeem Rouhana pointed out that: "the common aspiration of most Arab countries is to be against Zionism and to realize the Palestine liberation by the Arab unity, the Palestinian people do not deny their own Arab properties, they place their hopes to the overall strength of Arab country, and dilute their national identity " (Rouhana, 1977: 67).

However, after the Six-Day War in 1967, the Palestinian national consciousness has been greatly enhanced, and the whole nation has awakened, and nationalism has come into a new period of development. Before the war, Palestinians relied heavily on Arab countries to restore their rights, but they decided to rely on their own, and clearly indicated their identity and the goal of the political struggle, which was to build an independent Palestinian state.

In 1968, the "Palestinian National Charter" which was modified under the nationalism organization had made a definition of the Pakistani identity that is "the Arab people who had been settled in the Palestinian since 1947 are Palestinians; after 1947, no matter where he was born, as long as the Father is the Palestinian people, he was also considered as the Palestinian people." At the same time, they had taken the "armed struggle" as "the only correct way" in the liberation of Palestine (Yang, 2006: 19). The Six-Day War had also created conditions for the development of Palestinian nationalism and a number of resistance groups had been established. In February 1969, the nationalist organizations represented by Fatah mastered the PLO leadership and Arafat was appointed as Chairman of the Board, which showed that the Palestinian nationalism entered a new historical period.

After then, the PLO led by Yasser Arafat had remarkable achievements. They turned the revival aspirations into actions. They saved the nation from the "brink of extinction," and put the Palestinian people into the national liberation movement which was recognized by the international society, and in the world they turned the refugees to state members (Zhao, 2007: 22).

During the process of state-building in Palestine, there were several Palestinian-Israeli conflicts, and the most influential one was the anti- Israel movement in the end of 1987. The movement turned the Palestinian people in the West Bank and Gaza Strip into real Palestinians. Palestinians asked to consolidate their own national identity and separated from the Israeli system to establish their own nation. They showed their solidarity and courage when they fought the heavily armed Israeli soldiers with stones, which brought dignity and self-identity to Palestinians in the occupied territories. That is to say that the movement did not only publicly express their recognition of Israel (Brynen, 1991: 68), but also further recognized the Palestinian people as a nation. More importantly, the movement encouraged Arafat and the PLO to abandon the idea of the whole Palestinian liberation and took the road toward the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks. In short, the Palestinian nation became the foundation of Palestinian nationalism, while the development of nationalism also played an important role for national development and maturation.

II. Said's Main Ideas of Nationalism

For a long time, the Palestinian Nation was confronted with the extremely awkward situation: the Israeli army known as the first in the Middle East. In contrast, Israel had the economic strength with the long-term support from the United States and the United Kingdom. Palestine had many economic difficulties with no regular army while most of the surrounding Arab countries (such as Egypt and Jordan) had become reconciled with Israel, and Iran which had been against Israel was far away, so the founding goal was out of reach. The Six Day War in 1967 was one of the major events in the political life of Edward Said.

As Said had said, "Before that, I behaved neatly in the College who did all things neatly - going to the college, getting the Master's degree and Ph.D., finding a job, getting grants, and writing a book - but then in 1967 I know that world was completely falling apart. Israeli occupied more Palestinian areas - the West Bank and Gaza Strip

- I suddenly found myself torn back to that area. I have never taught Middle Eastern literature - although I have taught some English translations of Arabic works, but basically all my work was Western literature, so I began to adapt to the Arabic parts." (Said, 2003: 449). Indeed, the war in 1967 completely changed the situation in the Middle East. Said was also deeply involved in the Palestinian national liberation struggle and the cause of peace in the Middle East. Since then, Said began to shift from a pure literary to political activism. He began to write to Arabs, especially to Palestinians to fight for rights and interests of all Palestinians. Said had written numerous monographs, theses, newspapers and political commentary in magazines, news analysis in English and Arabic and had statements in the world's major media, which severely criticized the old and new colonialism and imperialism in the Middle East. He had used all possible opportunities and places to put the aspirations of the Palestinian people to the international community. Said had expanded his vision of literary studies, and even put Western classical literatures into the criticism of Orientalism and colonialism. He wrote: "the modern history of the literature study is within the framework of the cultural nationalism; the primary purpose of cultural study is to safeguard the national classics, and to maintain its excellence, authority and aesthetic characteristics." (Said, 2001: July 5). Only in this way could literature study become a means to build the national culture and identity.

Said had no intention to become a formalist or aestheticist, and it was the reality of political issues, especially the prospect of Israeli-Palestinian peace that he put his heart on. The Palestinian national independence Declaration in 1988 clearly argued that: the fight we are going to fight is secular, and democratic rights should be granted to all people, men and women, people with different religions, beliefs and sects. For Said, the most practical goal in his criticism was to restore the rights that Palestinian people had to return and build their own homes. Palestinian nationalism is not small or humble nationalism, but a great and important struggle. He stated: "The Palestinian nationalism has two levels: on the one level, it is an urgent

need for the people. Due to various reasons, today most of these people do not have any rights, such as there had been more than 400,000 Palestinians in Lebanon, who all exist in a stateless manner. The document reads them "without nationality"; on the other level, if conditions permit, the Palestinian people could build a traditional nation with national identity. However, because Palestinian nationalism could lead to all kinds of abuse, people had complex feelings towards this nationalism. Palestinians' struggle is very difficult; the first reason is that it is a secular struggle carried out by the religious nationalism, not a religious movement. It is the nationalist movement fighting for democratic rights; the second one is that it is lack of democracy in the Middle East political environment, it is a difficult situation (Said, 1973).

Although Said advocated Palestinian national liberation, he felt uneasy about nationalism: "Nationalism can easily degenerate into chauvinism. When you are attacked by all parties, especially in the Palestinian movement, we really do not have too many friends, the result is those who have diffident thoughts with you are all enemies, especially people in the Arab world. In general, the operation mode of the nationalist movement is that: they will become smaller, more specific and homogeneous over times. Such as Yugoslavia which used to be a multicultural, multilingual country and now needed 'ethnic cleansing'. And Lebanon which originally was a pluralistic society, there had been Christians and Muslims, but later became a daily slaughter field. According to the so-called 'identity', If someone wants you to produce ID cards, once the name or religious could not match, you will be killed on the spot. All of those suggest that identity politics has become political separatism ones, and then people retreated into their own small circle." (Viswanathan, 2006: 261). This embodied the irrational nationalism; of course, it is also the most important aspect that Edward Said criticized in discussing nationalism.

Said made efforts to find a solution to the current Palestinian situation. He pointed out that "there will be no peace in Middle East, if the Palestinian problem was not solved. It takes time to solve this problem. We must consider the historical facts of Palestine and the

current situation. The Palestinian Arabs used to live in the original place which was called Palestine, but is now called Israel and the West Bank and Gaza Strip occupied by Israel after 1967. All along, the people of this nation of Palestine had been expelled by the Israeli occupation. Since then, they did not become second-class citizens in Israel, but became refugees throughout the Arab world or the population under occupation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. They are not international and they have no shelter for the people. Their situation is different than the local people who have nationalities. Even in the Arab countries, they have been separated out, so the Palestinians strongly felt that only they could establish their own country to get out of the harsh reality of exile and homelessness. They need a Palestinian homeland or country, and they can re-establish relations with the land." (Said, 1996: 213). Geographically speaking, Said thought that this homeland should be arranged in the occupied territories as there are most Palestinians in that place.

To achieve this goal, he believed that they should rely on the PLO led by Yasser Arafat. "Various polls have shown that this group mastered many official and unofficial resources. Despite there are internal divisions and differences, in the minds of all, there is no doubt that the PLO represents the Palestinian people." (Viswanathan, 2006: 321). However, the Western world and the Palestinians themselves have had different views on the PLO. Even within the Western world, Said also felt the difference between them. "First, the views of the internal Palestinian, the Arab world, the non-aligned world, the Islamic world and the developing countries about the PLO, this is one thing; on the other hand, the views from the West or the United States view of the PLO - which is quite different with France and the UK's views. In the United States, the PLO has been considered as a terrorist organization. However, that is not true, whether we like it or not, the PLO should be an international organization. Perhaps we do not like the PLO who image is not good, it gives bad impressions in the media. Nevertheless, it is still a representative organization." (Viswanathan, 2006: 416).

Said opposed the connection of terrorism and anti-nationalism in

the Palestinian-Israeli issue. Because radical nationalism led to escalating violence and separation tendencies, it provided no help for the formation of the political coexistence. The attitude of Said toward extreme nationalism is that he did not advocate violence, bleeding or other extremist ways against Israel, because these could not only lose real home for life, but also would worsen the international image of the Palestinian people, and they could not get moral support from the international community (Said, 2002: February 4). When international public opinion identified Hamas as a terrorist organization, Said made every effort to maintain the status and reputation of Hamas. He proposed: "Most activities that Hamas was doing have nothing to do with terrorism; they created economic opportunities through education, day care centers and supply of food which the government cannot or will not provide. This is their way to develop. They created opportunities when you had economic situations or were in a political stagnation and when you are a citizen who does not have any possibility of the development " (Said, 1998: June 25-July).

If Palestine establishes its own nation, hopefully, there will be greater peace and stability in the Middle East. "Now what is harm to the Middle East is an intolerable frustration, which is the reason of the extreme religious recovery. However, it is not entirely confined to Islam, Christianity, Jewish extremism were spread in the region, where there is a sense of powerlessness and stagnation. Especially the Palestinians, they are the most expressive in the Arab society in the Middle East and they feel the injustice strongly and their problems are always controlled by the west, and are indefinitely delayed by the United States and its ally Israel. Definitely, the establishment of a Palestinian state does not mean that all problems will be solved. Other issues such as poverty and inequality, economic injustice and social deformities, will continue to exist. But I think what is very important for Palestinians is: there should be a solution, and should be a fair one." (Viswanathan, 2006: 367). Moreover, the Palestinians have the right to perform and speak for themselves, and are eligible to relate their own history which has its own value and uniqueness (Said, 1999: Spring). Although the history of Palestine and Israel has some

connections, the Palestinian voice has not gotten Said's "narrative license" in the West and the world media. Even with such permission, it must be balanced by the voice against Israel. For the Palestinians, this narrative is certainly not fair.

Despite the difficulties, Said still has confidence on the Palestinian issues: "I think that everything which seems to be frozen, reversed, unchanged, and recalibrated is likely to be changed. There is one wish: there are many ways to consult; the priority is to discover as much as possible to change the will. Unfortunately, now with the unlimited support from the US, Israel has all the advantages of power, military and economic power. There are only a few brave people who do many extremely important works - political organization, witnesses and assisting to reduce tensions in the occupied territories, but generally speaking, Israel's position is insensitive, and it has power " (Said, 1984: Spring).

III. The Paradox of Said's Nationalist Ideology and their Reasons

Nation is a historic construction, although it cannot deny that it has been brought the positive side to cultural and racial reality, as recognition, especially as a deep-rooted ideological concept, it should be considered its limitations. Said pointed out that "despite (the nationalism) has effect in nature, it also has great limitations in knowledge and politics, which has relations with the idolization of the national identity. National identity does not only become idols, but also an illusion. In my view, the attendant is what I call an extreme religious sentiment, which though not all fundamentalism, but it is an important part." (Said, 2001: 76). Therefore, Said was explicitly opposed to nationalism, "I hate it (nationalism) very much, and it is the first subject of those illusions which I am against in my intellectual, moral and political mind. Although nationalism is necessary for anti-imperialist struggle, it turned out to be a weapon that is anti-national nature and identity. Of course, the opposite of imperialism is nationalism which could be many things. Obviously, on

one hand, it is a reactionary phenomenon; on the other hand, it is the voice for the identity recognition. The identity issues set a wave of cultural and political work in the early stages of the national struggle against European colonialism, which had been experienced in Algeria, Malaysia, and the Philippines. You could figure out that in every aspect of the Arab world, and in the Caribbean area. "(Said, 2001: 174). Admittedly, because of the hatred of the separatism triggered by nationalism and the devastating effects of religions, in the face of the complex relationship of nation, religion and nationalism, Said insists to pursue certain universal values, that is human universal ones including respect for freedom and democracy and "human rights." Because these values are the common wealth and guidelines which belong to the mankind, and there is no boundaries of national distinction. Visibly, the moral boundary of nationalism is the moral bottom line of humanitarianism which does not allow tyrannical power regardless of the basic norms of human civilization, and the use of state violence and human rights abuses.

Thus, Said is full of contradictions in his understanding of nationalism. On one hand, he affirmed the positive role of nationalism in the process of decolonization and resistance to colonial oppression; on the other hand, he even used "disgust" and other words, when he was aware of their negative effects. In fact, Said has a clear understanding of nationalism; on the contrary, both the formation and communication of Said have close relations with Palestinian nationalism. Although he was unequivocally opposed to nationalism in theory, the Middle East complex and national sense of identity are bound to his national sentiment tendency in actual political activities. In the early stages of dabbling in politics, his nationalist tendency was very serious: he defended Nasser's socialism and Arab nationalism, and supported Palestinian nationalism and Intifada activity.

After the Six-Day war, for the first time Palestinian nationalism became an independent force in the Middle East. Said was very pleased that the future of Palestine had never been so promising. His sense of belonging to Palestinian nation, proud of their heroism, the pains of their sufferings and frustrations, and all of them reflect the

true feelings which are: as follows Said opposed narrow nationalism and at the same time he successfully defended the Palestinian national interests; he opposed nationalism and advocated multiculturalism, but what was a more inspired nationalism in the Middle East and other parts of the world. He claimed that his position represented a free and independent intellectual, but he could not be consistent to speak as a spokesman on the position of the Palestinian people; he criticized Orientalism which he thought was the deformation of European and American nationalism; however his sincere national feeling could not shake off the shackles of nationalism. Although Said fought against extreme nationalism, he was not in favor of canceling nationalism, but to advocate multiculturalism. That is to say, the coexistence of multiculturalism is more tolerant to nationalism. In other words, one nation allows its own nationalism, and also allows other nationalisms and tries to establish a dialogue mechanism among various nationalisms, and avoids national culture conflicts (Wang, 2006: 226). When we give credit to the Said's contributions, we should be fully aware of his own contradictions, especially his narrow national interests which might have potential harm and his shortness in the post-colonial criticism.

There is always profound psychological background for any human behavior. For Said, the Middle East complex and the contradictorions of the western discourse were always accompanied with his academic activities and political career. On the one hand, the Middle East complexity had a great relationship with his personal life experience: "My personal complex in my research had been all from the Orient consciousness received in two British colonies, and I never forget my personal experience of the Oriental cultural reality" (Said, 2001: 176). Edward Said is a direct product of the Palestinian experience. He recommended that: "Islam should be shared by all Arabs, and is an integral part of our identity" (Said, 2001: 182). Therefore, Said's Middle East complex is full of deep Arab Oriental sense, emotions and ideas; the psychological tendency and mindset are deeply rooted in their Islamic spirit. Although it is not certain that Said had the position to speak for the Middle Eastern Arabs, it fully

reflected the natural solidarity of the motherland to the individuals, which is the soul desire. Whenever there were major events, he could not help but always demonstrate his concerns. That is why his sayings have always been connected with the Middle East. On the other hand, the Western discourse refers to Said's acceptance of Western culture, religion, language, and educational expression. Thus, the western consciousness is as the first self-conscious, the Middle East one as the second one, and the two have alternately led his heart. The dual authenticity of the Middle East complex and the western discourse has played a dominant role in Said's different life stages, or different aspects of the same stage, which formed Said's different academic achievements, social behavior and psychological feelings. He was moving across different cultures without belonging to any one culture. Different personalities made him uneasy and kept him isolated, so it formed his arrogant and unyielding character. The result is the emergence of the third self-Said: an exiled secular critic and remote intellectual.

IV. Conclusion

Needless to say, the Palestinian-Israeli issue is complicated, and a variety of factors (historical, realistic, religious, ethnic, and geographic factors) staggered, and it is not enough to have only good intentions and wishes. It does not only need the foundation of public opinions, the international community's efforts, but also needs wit, courage and force of both leaders. Said reiterated many times that there had been no moral foundation for the killing of Israeli civilians, and persuaded Palestinians to treat the catastrophic Israeli history correctly, opponents still labeled him with the label "terrorist professor." He always criticized the Arab world's negative attitude toward the Palestinians, which was called "deafening silence." Said used to firmly support the "two states solution" for the Palestinian independence, but after the "Oslo Accords," especially when Israeli settlements had continuous expansions, he felt that the original concept had gone to a dead end. After he was inspired by the new South Africa experience,

he reverted to a bi-national state that is "one country, two nations." Jews and Arabs could co-exist in a secular democratic system. "At the end of the border, where should we go? In the last sky, where should the birds fly?" (Said, 2006: 23). In 2003, it had been 55 years since the establishment of the Israeli nation. While he might not have been obsessed with his own contributions in the field of literary criticism and the theory of Orientalism, he could not return to his homeland Palestine thousands of miles away.

In June 2009, the new US president Barack Obama had his first state visit to the Middle East, and his speech in Cairo on June 4 had outlined his American Middle East eight point position. What was exciting was his position about the Palestinian state. In his view, the situation of the Palestinian people was intolerable, and the US had ignored the Palestinian pursuit of dignity, opportunities and their own legitimate aspirations of establishing their nation. Although the US also raised some hopes of the Palestinians, especially Hamas, it can be seen that the Obama administration tried to avoid leaving the impression of favoring Israel to the world. If the US economy would have rebounded, Obama might have some achievements on the Palestinian nation, which might have comforted Said's soul, because his life had been involved with excellent knowledge and practice, as well as the most sensitive and intense disputes. He relied on a rebellious spirit under the terrible and oppressed environment, and made painstaking efforts for the Palestine liberation. This spirit included his knowledge, perseverance, courage, sensitivity and integrity. Regardless of failure or success, people should always respect him.

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