



Why the Solidarity?: South Asian Activism for Palestine

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Abstract: In the essay “Why the Solidarity? South Asian Activism for Palestine,” Srikanth offers some reasons for the compelling hold of the Palestinian cause on South Asian academics and activists. Referring to India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh in particular, she discusses the extent to which the colonial and neocolonial experiences of these three nations parallel life under Israeli occupation of the Palestinian people. The essay also traces Srikanth’s own personal journey of coming into consciousness about Palestine and ties this personal awakening to her role as a teacher.

In *Memory for Forgetfulness*, Darwish’s lament and anguished plea for the city of Beirut and the Palestinians living there in exile, he constructs a conversation with the famous Pakistani poet, Faiz Ahmed Faiz:

[O]ur great friend from Pakistan, Fayiz Ahmad Fayiz, is busy with another question: “Where are the artists?”

“Which artists, Fayiz?” I ask.

“The artists of Beirut.”

“What do you want from them?”

“To draw this war on the walls of the city.”

“What’s come over you?” I

exclaim. “Don’t you see the walls tumbling?” (*Memory for Forgetfulness*, 65)¹

Fayiz, or Faiz, as his name is more commonly spelled, lived in self-exile in Beirut from 1979 to 1982, where he edited *Lotus*, the publication of the Afro-Asian Writers’ Union. (Faiz left Pakistan to escape the oppressive leadership of President Zia Al-Huq.) The calamitous and destructive bombing of Beirut in August, 1982, led Faiz to write the poem (in Urdu) “For the Palestinian Martyrs,” whose concluding lines read:

Wherever I unfurl

The banner of my blood,

There flutters the flag of Palestine.

Rajini Srikanth is Associate Professor of English and director of the Honors Program at UMass Boston. Her research and teaching explore the intersections of literature and politics. She is deeply committed to the idea of global citizenship, stressing in her writings and teachings the need for a thoughtful, attentive, and responsible engagement with “unfamiliar” histories, cultures, and geographies. Srikanth specializes in Asian American Literature, Native American Writing, literature of the American South, South Asian Diaspora; Race; and theories of pedagogy. She is author of *The World Next Door: South Asian American Literature and the Idea of America* (Temple UP, 2004); *White Women in Racialized Spaces: Imaginative Transformation and Ethical Action in Literature* (SUNY Press, 2002); and *Bold Words: A Century of Asian American Writing* (Rutgers UP, 2001).

One Palestine has been destroyed
 By my enemies
 But my agony has given birth
 To Innumerable Palestines.²

Faiz is among numerous South Asian writers, scholars, and activists who find the predicament of the Palestinian people profoundly disturbing. In 1947, when the British left South Asia after 200 years of their presence and colonial rule, the Indian subcontinent was torn in two, and the nations of India and Pakistan were born (and, further, in 1971, Bangladesh was engendered out of East Pakistan). These births were fraught with bloodshed and slaughter. Partition, as the 1947 event signaling the emergence of two nations is known, was accompanied by dislocation and division along religious lines, with many hundreds of thousands of people moving in either direction of an arbitrarily drawn geographical boundary. The devastating deaths accompanying Partition, the loss of property, the breakup of families, with some members remaining on one side of the border and others on the opposite side, are traumas of such magnitude that even today, 62 years later, memories of that horrific time haunt the two nations. Likewise, the birth of Bangladesh in 1971 was a bloody rupture of the Bengali-speaking Pakistanis from their largely Urdu speaking compatriots in the western part of the nation.

The loss of homes, the shock of a life pulverized—these are the actual and inherited experiences that preoccupy large numbers of South Asians. Bollywood and independent films revisit the legacy of Partition (e.g., in the films *Veer Zaara*, *Ghoom Tana*, *LOC Kargil*, *Dhoop*, and *Ramchand Pakistani*), a testament to the enduring hold of this defining moment in the recently decolonized nations' lives. Perhaps the nearness of this history in our collective conscious-

ness is the reason that South Asians are drawn to the struggles of the Palestinian peoples.

Or it may be the experience of colonization and then decolonization. Perhaps the Palestinians are a compelling reminder of what can happen when an erstwhile colonizer leaves a messy political situation behind. The Palestinians are the visible and everyday evidence of injustice endorsed and accepted by the majority of the international community and transmuted into international approbation. And this acquiescence to injustice by numerous governments stands as an affront to many South Asians, who remember in their muscles and bones what it means to be coerced to leave one's home and land. But let me caution that I am not suggesting an exact parallel between the postcolonial situations of India/Pakistan and the circumstances of present-day Palestine. When the British left the Middle East in 1948, not only did they leave behind a situation of unimaginable turmoil by neglecting to articulate clearly the political rights of Palestinians, but also they and the governments of the West implicitly anointed the state of Israel the new colonizer, giving to it the kind of international legitimacy and latitude in its seizure of erstwhile Palestinian territory that was denied the Palestinians, hundreds of thousands of whom had fled their homes during the Israeli attack and longed to return to their, in many cases, ancestral dwellings. The neo-colonialisms that Pakistan (tied as it is to United States' dictates) and India (becoming embroiled in the economic net of global market economies and moving away from its previous proudly held non-aligned status to closer economic and political dependency/ cooperation with the United States) find themselves ensnared in are of a different kind altogether than the neocolonialism that the Palestinians suffer. The Palestinian people are in the grip of the occupying force of the Israelis – as evidenced by the settlers in the Occupied Ter-

ritories and the checkpoints and the panoptic surveillance of every aspect of Palestinian life. Thus, when I point to the resonance for South Asians of the unfortunate fallout from imperial practices that the Palestinians suffer, I don't mean to gloss over specific differences. The commonality of experience lies in this: imperial and colonial powers have decided (with disdain and superficial understanding) the fate of South Asians and Palestinians.

However, despite having spent the first 19 years of my life in India and having been born only 10 years after the nation's independence, my recognition of kinship with the Palestinian people was late. Palestine was the hole in my knowing, the question I didn't even know I had to ask, the domain of knowledge that I didn't realize existed. So total was my ignorance, growing up as I did in Bombay (now Mumbai) in a U.S.-centric context in the expatriate community (as one of the few privileged "local" families) of the multinational oil company Esso in the 1960s, that I had no knowledge of the predicament of the Palestinian people. When I first stumbled upon Palestine, viewing the photographs of refugee camps at an exhibition in another Indian city, Bangalore, the shame I felt was necessarily humbling. It made me realize the extent of my ignorance and forced me to acknowledge the unacceptability and inexcusability of my intellectual vacuum. That was when I realized that education can provide darkness as well as illumination. I knew a great deal about the founding of the state of Israel. But I knew nothing of the associated narrative of the Palestinian people. I lived in India, but like many westernized Indians, I was socialized into a particular way of being and knowing that privileged a European and American world view. The school I went to had been set up for expatriate Americans, so it is no surprise that though one colonizer had left India, my consciousness was colonized by a new power.

In the last 15 years, I have had a bracing education in what it means to understand the suffering and the resistance of the Palestinian people. Growing in complexity as an educator, I have learned to listen for silent narratives, to probe the shadows of images hidden in the corners. I have learned to read history as I read the classroom—attentive to the smallest nuance in my students' tones, their posture as they speak with me or with one another, the questions they pose and responses they make to the readings. It is not that my prior indoctrination into support for Israel has been simply replaced by indoctrination into support for Palestinians and their longing for a homeland; it is, rather, that I see now the seductive power of language and the politics of the dissemination of information. The challenge lies in attempting to escape the unstoppable avalanche of anti-Palestinian rhetoric in the mainstream U. S. media. For the most part, even among those who are fierce activists against injustice of all kinds, thinking critically and fighting for justice stops at the Palestinian situation. This is why people like my friend R do what they do.

R is my fearless South Asian friend. She speaks her mind, pursues her causes, and has a clear and lucid understanding of what's fair and just. She tells me a story that I marvel at, because it stands in contrast to my own careful and cautious approach to things. R believes that the times call for a bold declaration of principles. She may sound unattractively militant, but R is a person of unshakable integrity. I, on the other hand, with my restraint, could be guilty of silent complicity; or so it would appear to someone like R. On a recent bus trip from New York to Boston, R is with her partner, Matt.³ Two young women board the bus with, as she describes it, their "Israel birthright" T-shirts. They are young, enthusiastic, eager and flush with the memories of their recent trip to the "ancestral homeland." R is outraged: she imagines the

Palestinians who cannot return, the residents of refugee camps in Lebanon and Jordan and in the Occupied Territories, and she cannot keep silent. So she begins to talk, loudly so as to be heard, addressing herself to Matt. "Isn't it interesting that some people can go visit a homeland whereas those whose homes were once there cannot even return?" She makes other observations in the same vein. R does not tell me what reaction she gets from the women, whether they even realize that they are the target of her commentary. I don't ask, because I am imagining whether R would have dared such open critique if Matt had not been white, if he had looked obviously Arab. I don't mean to doubt R's courage, but I wonder to what extent Matt's white body serves as a shield. Even as I admire what she does, and I say so to her, I want to ask, as well: "Would you have been so vocal if Matt had looked like a Mansoor?" There is also the part of me that wonders whether this approach, where we instruct through creating discomfort, is necessarily the most productive or constructive mode of engaging those whom we wish to jolt into introspection and examination of their hitherto un-interrogated practices. R's tactic is harsh, and it could in the long-term prove a powerful tool in tearing away the young women's romanticized veil, but it could also cause them to become further ensconced in their unquestioning and sentimental attachment to the state of Israel.

When I relate R's story to my activist and anti-Occupation Israeli friend, she tells me that ignorance can be deliberately cultivated; one can choose not to know, and one can consciously adopt such a stance as a very young person. She did, she says. She was 10 years old when many Palestinian families around her were dispossessed. She could have absorbed more of the reality of their pain, but she chose not to. She observed it clinically, dispassionately, almost as though it were a scene unfolding in her midst to which she had no connection. She

is still struggling, almost 50 years later, with her complicated and entangled emotions, loving the Israeli homeland for what it offers to the Jewish people, deeply critical of it for what it does to the Palestinians. It was she who told me about the "everyday indignities" the Palestinians have to endure; the slow gradual wearing away of their self-respect, the inexorable chipping away of dignity.

Careful, says my Palestinian friend. The issue is not simply one of restoring dignity. Don't forget the political questions that form the foundation of any self-dignity. I recognize the truth of what she says. One can become seduced into self-approbation simply by being respectful to individuals, recognizing their humanity, and paying homage to their personhood. But this self-approbation can be an end point in itself. It can fail to deliver on the truly urgent issues of power and political and civil rights. The return of property. The creation of conditions for economic sovereignty. The right to self-rule. The right to decide one's own fate. My Palestinian friend reminds me that it is not sufficient merely to be treated with dignity and humanity. More important and more critical is the difficult and complex acknowledgement that Israelis need to make to themselves to recognize the ways in which they have systematically denuded the basic fundamental political right of self-determination of the Palestinian people. In most "research" situations that bring Israelis and Palestinians in face-to-face encounters, the emphasis is on the psychological interpersonal dimension; there is little attention paid to the asymmetrical power relationship between the two groups and the fundamental political reality of Israeli privilege and Palestinian disenfranchisement. (See, in this regard, Ramzi Suleiman's essay "Jewish-Palestinian Relations in Israel").⁴ Until the asymmetry of power is recognized and acknowledged by the Israelis, and the intersection of the psychological and political realms enabled, the situation

is not likely to improve for the Palestinians. Treating your neighbor with dignity requires you to accept his/her desire for self-determination, requires you to interrogate yourself to see whether and how you have impeded her/his right to civil and political liberties and economic and social justice. Every person is entitled to certain rights as a result of his/her humanity; therefore, “rights-holders” presume the existence of “duty-bearers,” individuals whose duty it is *not to prevent* the attainment of these rights.⁵ At a psychological level, each of us has the capacity to execute the duty of recognizing another person’s humanity and claim to rights. This intimate psychological bond between the rights-holder and the duty-bearer provides the foundation on which the edifice of law and political structures can be erected to fulfill the rights of an entire people.

My Palestinian friend mourns the loss of the fierce nationalist spirit that animated those of her father’s generation, their hope and aspiration for an independent Palestine crushed. She cannot bear to see the resignation in the elders, the capitulation to the harsh trajectory of circumstances. I listen to her and I wonder how she can persevere in what she does—believing in and working for the future of her people. She said once, “Palestine cannot remain just an idea; it has to become a reality” or words to that effect. I am reminded of what another dear South Asian friend once said, “There are good nationalisms and there are bad nationalisms.” Fanon’s distrust of the nationalism of newly decolonized nations notwithstanding, I have to concur with my friend that the struggle for a Palestinian state is necessary; it is imperative, because it is about a reclamation of that which was taken away unjustly and it is about returning to one’s rightful home.

Nationalism is a complicated notion. Some people in India argue that India is an artificially constructed nation. We were, they say, a collection of many princely

states before the British arrived; to force the idea of a single national identity on such a diverse mix of cultural and linguistic groups is untenable, and sooner or later the country will unravel. However, as historian Ramachandra Guha has argued, it is precisely India’s recognition of its multiple cultural centers and diverse linguistic practices that has enabled it to survive as a nation more than 60 years after the British departed. Regionalism is as potent a force in India as nationalism, with the regions being carved out largely along linguistic lines. But a national identity is a powerful source of coherence in the face of external threat and oppression. Thus, when my friend and colleague spoke about “good nationalisms” he was differentiating between the nationalism of superpowers with their hegemonic aspirations and those of embryonic and aspiring states that wish to realize their basic right to self-governance and reclaim the resources that have been usurped. Nationalism for Palestinians is about the right to return to their own homes and to their land, and to govern these according to their best interests as a people *without interference and impediment*. South Asians recognize this kind of nationalist aspiration. It resonates profoundly for us.

When we South Asian academics and activists invest passionately in the cause of the Palestinian people, we run the risk of being perceived as appropriating someone else’s pain and trauma to give meaning to our lives. But we are not ambulance chasers seeking to aggrandize ourselves in “doing right” for others. Instead, like the Indians in South Africa who belonged to the African National Congress and fought side by side with the black South Africans against the apartheid state, we feel the hunger for homeland of the Palestinian people and understand their outrage at the turmoil left behind by imperial powers playing fast and loose with their lives and desires. How else can we explain Faiz’s poem? How else explain Pakistani American Tahira Naqvi’s

short story “Thank God for the Jews”?⁶ How else can we explain the impassioned monologue of the Bangladeshi American young man, Rizwan, in Sharbari Ahmed’s play “Raisins Not Virgins” who leaves New York for the Occupied Territories and decides he cannot return:

I wish I could explain everything to you. Once you’ve seen what I have, you can’t just go back to the past. There are no men over fourteen left in the camp. Soldiers just come and take them away. And the ones left behind, they have nothing left distinguishing them as men, except, well...that, and what the hell good is it anymore? And the checkpoints, [...] That’s what people don’t know about. The humiliation, the true nature of the oppression is played out at those checkpoints. Women and men not allowed to go to work, children not allowed to go to school. Little girls leered at and taunted with guns, little boys challenged unfairly to prove their manhood. I can’t come back. I can’t live the way I did, insulated and soft. [...] The other day I asked an Israeli doctor—his name is Ben—what I could actually do. And he said, “pay attention, and be useful.” It occurred to me that’s really what anyone should try to do in this world. So, that’s what I am doing. I have my eyes open now and I am trying very hard to be useful. I work with Israeli doctors who come into the camps every day and take care of the wounded children.⁷

For me, teaching about the Palestinian situation is a moral obligation. To do it in a way that my students perceive as a genuine invitation to explore and examine their own perspectives is a pedagogical obligation. It is, in the final analysis, a human obligation.

In his poem “I Talk Too Much,” Darwish gives voice to this human obligation. He poses a challenge to his readers/listeners: “*Is it true, good ladies and gentlemen, that the earth of Man is for all human beings/ as you say? In that case, where is my little cottage, and where am I?*” (13).⁸ It is a compelling question to ask, because this desire for home, this need for a place to call one’s own is universally human. I have found it to be the most effective way to introduce students of all backgrounds to the discussion of the Palestinian question. They are outraged that one can be forcibly removed from one’s home and not allowed to return. They understand the human rights violation of such an act. And so, when Darwish says, “We travel like everyone else, but we return to nothing” (11)⁹, he underscores both the commonality of Palestinians with all other peoples *and* the poignant separateness of their current “homeless” and stateless condition.

ENDNOTES

1. University of California Press, 1995.
2. Translated by Daud Kamal. The translation was given to me by Faiz’s niece, Farida Ahmed.
3. Matt is a pseudonym.
4. See, for instance, chapter 2 “Theories of Human Rights” in Jack Donnelly, *International Human Rights* 3rd Edition (Westview Press, 2005), 21-35. Ramzi Suleiman, “Jewish-Palestinian Relations in Israel: The Planned Encounter as a Microcosm.” In *Israeli and Palestinian Identities in Dialogue: The School for Peace Approach*. Ed. Rahah Halabi. Rutgers University Press, 2000. 31-47.
5. The story can be found in the collection *Dying in a Strange Country* (Toronto: TSAR Publications, 2001).
6. Sharbari Ahmed’s play has been performed several times in New York and Boston. It is currently available as an unpublished manuscript.
7. Mahmoud Darwish, *Unfortunately it was Paradise: Selected Poems*. Trans. and Ed. Munir Akash and Carolyn Forché. University of California Press, 2003.
8. Mahmoud Darwish, “We Travel Like All People.” *Unfortunately it was Paradise: Selected Poems*. Trans. and Ed. Munir Akash and Carolyn Forché. University of California Press, 2003.