The American depiction of Muslims during Gaza war: Orientalist Study

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Abstract

The stereotypic depiction of Muslim has been a major challenge that has confronted Muslim during Gaza War which has been a long fought battle between Israeli and Palestinians. This false representation has translated into widespread hate for Muslims as such increasing the rate of hate crimes directed towards them. Edwards Said in his book "Orientalism" and "The question of Palestine" sheds light into the plight of Muslims as a results of false Western representation through Media. Edward Said in his book Orientalism showed how the West through its stereotypic depiction of the East (Islam) exert control and dominance by showcasing herself in a superior light while the East (Islam) is always represented in an inferior and backward state. More so, certain narrative such as 'terrorism' and 'dictatorship' has been associated with the Orient (Islam or Arabs). These narratives has led to widespread incidence of hate directed towards Muslim, both those in Palestine and other Muslims in the West. These hate have been on the increase as a result of the Gaza war. The American Islamic Relations (CAIR) has reported an increase of over 178% increase

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in hate crime directed against Muslims when compared to same months of the previous year with the increase a consequence of the ongoing Gaza war. However, it is essential that the Arabs begins to represents itself in the global politics and ensure her visibility through intellectual discourse and also utilizing the media to showcase the reality of Muslims.

Keywords: Orientalism, Gaza war, Muslim, Israeli, Palestine.

1.0   Introduction

The Gaza war has been a long fought conflict that has existed for over 67 years since 1948 with Israel invasion of Palestine which led to the displacement of several Palestinians from their homeland and settling as refugees in Gaza. Sequel to the first conflict, 14 other wars had been fought between both parties which has led to several causalities over the years. Despite the series of these war been fought over the years while several war crimes committed by both parties, it still remains a cause of concern that the West have not made enough necessary effort to ensure a long lasting peace which bags more questions on the role of Orientalism of the West with the Palestinians bearing the brunt of America turning a blind eyes to the years of suffering inflicted on Palestinians by Israeli forces as they are held hostage within a geographic region that seems to be their home. This suffering is not only felt be Muslims in Palestine but Muslims in the West as they have become victims of increased Islamophobia attacks as a consequence of the War in Gaza.

Oriental study have attributed the less empathy for Muslims on their poor representation by Western media with literary scholar such as Edward Said voicing to buttress the representation by the West in his book titled "The question of Palestine" which builds on the foundation of the theory of Orientalism as illustrated by same author in 1979. However, to properly understand the extent of Western influence on the War between Israel and Palestine, it is essential to trace back to the

root cause of the conflict that have ensued over several decades during the formation of the state of Israel in 1948. Prior to World War I, that particular region was under the control of Ottoman Empire with control of the region later shifted to the British in the aftermath of World War I. The population of this region prior to World War I were predominantly Muslims being over 90% of the population. While after the war 1914, the number of Muslims reduced to 80% of the population. However, the large scale immigration of Jews after the holocaust led to an increase in the number of Jews within the region. After World War II, the United Nation general assemble urged the division of the land between the Arabs and the Jews while Jerusalem which holds religious significance was placed under special international administration. However, the Palestinians considering their number declined to the sharing as highlighted by United Nation. Through series of conflict, the Israeli force backed by their Western allies were able to expand their territory which showcases the influences of the West in the conflict between Palestine and Israel.

Edward Said had been a forefront advocate on the rights of the Palestinian and the negative representation of the Arab nations by the West through his work on Orientalism which has gained prominence in postcolonial discourse while his book titled "The question of Palestine" is specific to the position of the Palestinian on the conflict that have ensued over the years. Despite his book was written in 1980 which is several decades ago, but the challenges highlighted in the book still remains relevant in our current time bearing in mind that the issues emphasized by Edward Said still remained unsolved as the hate directed towards Muslims in the West is on the increase. The war not only impacted the lives of Muslim in Palestine but Muslim all over the world as the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) said on Monday it has received 3,578 complaints during the last three months of 2023, amid what it called "an ongoing wave of anti-Muslim and anti-

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Palestinian hate. "The figure is a 178% rise from complaints in the same period from a year earlier. Therefore, the current paper dives into the subject of the American depiction of Muslims as it falls within the boundaries of oriental study. The study would be analysing the book titled "The question of Palestine" which would be built on the theoretical frame work of Orientalism as specified by Edward Said to shed light into the depiction of Muslim during the Gaza war.

1.1   Objectives of the Study

The study aims to accomplish the following -

i.   To determine the impact of American depiction of Palestinians on Gaza war.

ii.   To determine the impact of the war on the lives of Muslims in the West.

iii. To determine how the concept of Orientalism explains the stereotypic depiction of Muslims.

1.2   Research Questions

iv.   What is the impact of American depiction of Palestinians during the Gaza war?

v.   Does the war in Gaza have any impact on the lives of Muslims in the West?

vi.   How does the concept of Orientalism explain the stereotypic depiction of Muslims?

2.0   Literature Review

The stereotypic depiction of Muslim by Western media has been a long time challenge that has intensified during the 9/11 bomb explosion of world trade center in United State of America. Several scholars has voiced their perspective on the role of media in portraying a distorted image of Islam and Muslim which is also playing a role in the increase prejudice and hate directed towards Muslim both in Europe and in the discussion of Muslim in international politics. Saman

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and Ali (2019) in their article on the portrayal of Islam and Muslim in the Western media noted that the media has portrayed a misconstrued image of Islam in the media as Muslims are always associated with Extremist or terrorism. The author further noted that many Muslims have attempted to distinguish themselves from radical group and even attempt to buttress that the isolated activities of some group of radicals does not represent the action of over 1.4 billion Muslims around the world, yet this depiction by Western media has led to majority of Muslims in non–Muslim countries bearing the brunt for the isolated activities of a few people. Edward Said (1989) in his book "the question of Palestinian" noted that the Western media would not pass the opportunity of representing Muslims as terrorist in their Movies.

Chaudhary (2021) carried out a study of the portrayal of Islam and Muslims in Western media with their study focused on Fox news. They noted that the Western media propaganda is leading the world towards Islamophobia as the rights of many Muslim in Non-Muslim countries are ignored with the Western media continual distorted representation of Islam as a religion of terrorism and extremist. In a world cloud of the most frequent used word to denote Muslims on Fox news, the count reveals that terrorist, extremist and Jihadist were frequent word mentioned in association with Muslim which showcases the prejudice against Muslim in the West. Brown (2019) showed the prejudice in the Western Media against Muslims. He noted that "the behavior of Western media among the non-white victim and white due to the construction of Islamic terrorists. White victim due to the construction of non –white victim as 'other' while white terrorists and White Victim as 'Us' or more relatable and sympathetic" (Brown, 2019 cited in Salem et al., 2021, p. 109). Umber and Ghauri (2020) further noted the impact of media in the portrayal of Muslims. Baboolal (2020) noted some of the backlashes as it relates to Islamophobia

to include crimes bias, hate speech, and internal community changes. Mechanisms of citizen surveillance impacted vulnerable groups via stigmatization, racial profiling, and interference with religious freedom, while damaging law enforcement and minority community relations.

3.0　Methodology

The study represents a qualitative research as data for the study was sourced secondarily from article, journals, interview and news feeds as it pertains to the subject of American depiction of Muslims prior and during the Gaza war. A discourse analysis was carried out on the book 'a question of Palestine' by Edward Said which would shed light on the plight of Muslims in Palestine and in the West. The book by Edward Said was analysed in the light of the theory of Orientalism which served as the theoretical framework of the study.

4.0　Theoretical Framework: Orientalism

The framework of Orientalism as highlighted by Edward Said is narrowed down to the Western ways of exerting dominion or authority over the East through the construct of narratives that may be built on false representation. The concept is based on the creation of binary through the development of the Orient and Occident which stands to differentiate the west from the East and placing the West in a position of power. Edward Said buttresses the lenses at which the Orient which represent the East/Arab/Muslim is shaped. This lenses includes the history, journey, the fables and the stereotype from which the Orient is experienced. This experiences shaped the language, perception, and form of the encounter between East and West (Said, Orientalism 6).

The West build strength for themselves by putting off the East which is clearly exemplified by the relationship between the Orient and Occident coming from a place of power and domineering.

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Deny Hays in Edward Said book gave a collective perception of Orientalism as the Europeans identifying themselves as "us" against "those" which are the Non-Europeans with the European identity presented as superior when compared to the Non-Europeans culture and people whom are seen as backward (Said, Orientalism 7). Edward Said indicated that the Europeans interest in the Orient was purely political, however, the culture of the Orient enabled the big European country to take an interest in the East.

> "The image of Islam was always connected with negative stereotyped concepts and thoughts. Islam is viewed as a "demonic Religion" that provides a rich, fertile environment for fanatic movements like Islamic Jihad, Hezbollah, and Hamas movement. These movements are viewed as very dogmatic and fanatical aiming to establish a closed fanatical Islamic system that denies coexistence and tolerance with the West, and also unable to accept other non-Muslim minorities in Islamic societies" (Said, 1981).

An important medium at which the West have been able to reinforce and portray the Orient in a Postmodern world is electronically through television, films and all the media resources which has aided them in creating stereotypic mold of the Orient through the forced information that gradually has become the standard at which the Orient are viewed. Edward Said claimed that so far "the Orient is concerned, standardization and cultural stereotyping have intensified the hold of the nineteenth-century academic and imaginative demonology of "the mysterious Orient." This is nowhere more true than in the ways by which the Near East is grasped" (Said, Orientalism 26).Edward Said went on to point out three factors that have contributed in making the simplest notion of Arab and Islam more political which according to the author includes: one, the history

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of popular anti-Arab and anti-Islam prejudice in the West which is clearly encapsulated in orientalism; two, the effect that the struggle in the East between the Arabs and the Zionism group in Israel have on the American Jews and also its impact on the liberal culture and the American populace at large; three, the American's absence of a proper cultural system makes it difficult to either to identify with nor do they rationally discuss the issue of Islam or the Arabs. In addition, it's not a surprise that the world power had developed an interest with the Middle East due to oil economics and politics. However, it is relatively easier for the West to back the Israeli due to their democratic system against the totalitarian practiced by the Arab and the stereotypic image of the Arabs as terrorist. Edward Said wrote the book on Orientalism and voiced his concern which he noted that "The life of an Arab Palestinian in the West, particularly in America, is disheartening. There exists here an almost unanimous consensus that politically he does not exist, and when it is allowed that he does, it is either as a nuisance or as an Oriental" (Said, Orientalism 27).

Table 1: Binary Vocabulary of Orientalism

Orientalism	Occident	Orient
Agent	American/Europeans	Arab/ Middle Easterners
	Us	Them
Location	West	East
	Here	There
Race	White	Black
Ideology	Enlightened	Eastern thought
Social Order	Democracy	Totalitarianism
	Secularism	Religious Authority
	Rule of law	An eye for an eye
Economic Order	Capitalism	" Carmel Trade"
Religion	Christianity	Islam
Orientalism	Occident	Orient
Other Collectives	Progress	Backward
Values	Civilization	Barbarism

	Power	Weakness
	Maturity	Immaturity
	Rationality	Emotionality
	Stability	Instability
	Modesty	Exoticism

Source: Schmidt, 2014

5.0 Analysis of the Book "The question of Palestine" and the current situation of Muslims

The book was written from a rich experience of the author, bearing in mind the nationality of the author, clearly indicates that his view might not be completely absolute from any form of bias judgement. However, it is important to note that the book was written to clearly state the position of the Author which to a large extent might represents the position of Muslims who forms the majority of the Palestinians in the wars that ensued between Israel and the Palestinians with a more careful look into the perspective and depiction of this category of people by the Americans while also drawing inspiration from the current situation of Palestinians in the global politics. The position of Edward Said not also placed the blame of the current predicament of Muslim in Palestine not only on the West or even on the Zionists but also on the Palestinians themselves as he exposes their inability to attract the support of the west as it pertains to their cause.

Muslim are confronted with Cultural stereotypes, political imperialism, degrading ideology of the Arab by the West and it is this web that every Palestinian feel as the cross of their destiny to bear. Edward Said noted this in his book "The question of Palestine", the hypocrisy of the western

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journalism and intellectual discourse which have seldom had negative view of the radical Zionist group. However, major rhetoric used in their journalism report have capture " Arab" terror against "Israeli civilians" or " towns" and "villages" or " schoolchildren," and the rhetoric of neutrality employed to describe "Israeli" attacks against " Palestinian positions". (Said, The question of Palestine, X). The United State, Europe and UK still reaffirm their support for Israel in the Gaza war. The united effort of the West comes despite the incessant bombing of Gaza since the entire West are in united front backing the Israeli attack (Aljazeera, 12th October, 2023).

The West attitude towards Palestinians should not be far fetch from their prejudices against Islam in which Said noted his thought that "there is the entrenched cultural attitude toward Palestinians deriving from age-old Western prejudices about Islam, the Arabs, and the Orient. This attitude, from which in its turn Zionism drew for its view of the Palestinians, dehumanized us, reduced us to the barely tolerated status of a nuisance" (Said, XIV). Edward Said has always been against such prejudices which is clearly showcased in the western media.Rane et al (2014) noted that the Western societies rely more on mass media such as television as their major source of information as regards their knowledge on Islam and the Arabs with the author providing a statistics of over three-quarters of the population depending on media for their source of information which is one of the ways that the West have dehumanized Islam and reducing the Palestinian people to a nuisance. The Western narrative of Arab and Islam as indicated by Edward Said is that:

> The Arabs and Islam represent viciousness, veniality, degenerate vice, lechery, and stupidity in popular and scholarly discourse. On this collective representation of the Arabs and Islam, Zionism, like its Western ideological parents, drew. How it drew and where it stood when it drew deserve attention here, because it is a perfect instance of how

propaganda, politicized scholarship, and ideological information have power, implement

policy, and, at the same time, can appear to be "objective truth." (26)

The depiction of Muslim by the West has proven in showcasing two narratives that impacts negatively on Muslims and even Islam as a religion. The first narrative showcases Islam as backward and archaic while the second narrative makes Zionism seam more attractive. This narratives has help the cause of Zionism as they are able to rally the support of the Western leaders. Both the West and Zionism share a similar ideology which is an antagonism towards Islam. This has led to the acceptance and sympathetic look towards anti-Semitism yet a blind eyes been turned on Islamophobia.

Schmidt (2014) noted in his book reframing the Arab/Muslim, the significant of Israel-Palestinian conflict in the global politics at large. The author also reaffirms the position of some other Orientalist Scholars on the role of media coverage in ensuring the trajectory of power between Palestine and Israel. Despite the role of media in the plight of Palestinians being immense, this role is not solely responsible for their struggle with the concept of Zionism playing a much greater role. Zionism represents the struggle of the Jewish people to establish her state and its core mandate is for the empowerment of the Jewish people. However, Zionism has lost its religious value for improvement and empowerment and has become a political ambition for an aggressive move of Israel expansion policy. The political ideology in discussion is not just limited to the Palestinian-Israel or Muslim- Jewish relationship but also translating to larger international politics.

> "Based on the political involvement of the U.S. and Europe in the Middle East, two
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> major fronts have emerged: the U.S. and parts of Europe as the Western supporters
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> of Jewish policy and Palestine as the Arab opponent on the other. This power

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division of the world with the U.S. as leading hegemon supporting Israel versus Palestine and its weaker Arab partners reflects former colonial relations" (Schmidt, 2014).

The political interplay has resulted in the false representation of Muslim in media which has led to creation of a false stereotype upon which the image of Muslim has been framed thus, making it difficult to empathize with the plight and suffering of Muslims and also enabling the justification of inhumane act committed against them. Yousef (2013) gave a perspective between the Christian West and Islamic East which has been characterized by long conflict through history. The conflict by Christian West was to get the Arab from the rule of Islam and the holy land from the control of Islam. The interest of the West was in favour of Zionism as the shared similar interest as the settlement of the Jews in Palestine serve to offset the hold of Islam within the region. This also informed the European decision to recapture, and resettle the Jews in Palestine (Said, 1978).

6.0   Conclusion

Muslims in Palestine are caught between two battles; firstly, the struggle for the land and liberation from the shackles of Israel as the have been held prisoners in their home and secondly, the false representation of Islam by the West. This stereotypic representation by the West has taken away the compassionate perspective to the plight of Palestinians, thus, justifying the actions of Zionism. Samman (2021) also shared similar view as he noted from the writing of Edward Said which buttresses the importance of reversing the negative stereotype of Muslims through the Western media. The Impact of the war and the wrong depiction of Muslims who are supposed to be victims of the war has yet not been properly showcased, nonetheless, increasing the level of hate crimes directed towards Muslims in American with several cases reported within the last six (6) months.

However, it is essential that the Arabs begin to represents itself in the global politics and ensure her visibility through intellectual discourse and also utilizing the media to showcase the reality of Muslims.

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