

A Response to “Re-Thinking the Figure of the Humanitarian: Sahar Khalifeh’s *The End of Spring* and the Function of Human Rights Narrative” (*Postcolonial Text*. 14:1, 2019)

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I’m writing in regard to an article published in *Postcolonial Text* by David Jefferess titled “Re-Thinking the Figure of the Humanitarian: Sahar Khalifeh’s ‘The End of Spring’ and the Function of Human Rights Narrative” (1-19). On pages 8 and 9 of his article, Prof. Jefferess launches into a critique of an article I published in *Policy and Practice: A Development Education Review* titled “Activism as Development Education” (McCloskey 2012). The article reflects on how activism in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT) had contributed to development education activities in Ireland and the Middle East.

I have raised concerns below about how Jefferess frames my work and that of my organization, the Centre for Global Education (CGE), in Palestine as an apolitical aid initiative that marginalizes the voice of Palestinians and fails to locate their extreme poverty in the OPT as the outworking of Israeli state policies. Here are some of my concerns about the article.

Jefferess (9) states:

“Palestinians are reduced to a set of development ‘needs’ that are rhetorically separated from the policies and practices of the Israeli state, and the European and North American nations who support it.”

My article is quite explicit that Israel’s blockade of the Gaza Strip underpins the economic crisis that has enveloped Gaza since 2007 and remains in place today. On page 49 of McCloskey (2012), I state:

What distinguishes this crisis from the disasters and emergencies that normally push civilian populations to the edge of catastrophe is that it is not the result of a hurricane, flood, tsunami, drought or famine but the calculated policy of the Israeli government (McCloskey, 49).

This sentence is at pains to distance the social and economic crisis in Gaza from the disasters and emergencies that normally propel civilian populations into extreme poverty and necessitate a humanitarian response. The article goes on to state that the economic crisis created by the blockade has been exacerbated by Israeli military attacks:

The social pressures of poverty, isolation and economic inertia caused by the blockade have been compounded and exacerbated by three Israeli military operations in Gaza since 2008 which have collectively claimed the lives of 3,745 Palestinians and wounded 17,441. (McCloskey, 49)

I accept that the article doesn't critique the complicity of the United States and European Union in maintaining the blockade, but the article wasn't solely about the blockade of Gaza but mostly concerned with how activism can support development education practice.

Jefferess (9) states:

“For McCloskey, the response to narratives of Palestinian oppression can only be Western aid for its traumatized victims.”

This is completely false. The word ‘aid’ is not mentioned in the article and I have written critically of aid as a form of Western interventionism (McCloskey 2012). The article concludes (McCloskey, 62-63) with an exhortation to support Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS), a non-violent, Palestinian-led initiative calling for a boycott of Israeli goods, divestment by businesses from Israel and the application of sanctions on Israel until it enters into good faith negotiations with Palestinians. I quote from the conclusion:

These twin announcements by President Trump in the space of two months have dealt a deadly blow to meaningful short-term prospects of a political settlement in the Middle East and placed a greater premium on the activism of global civil society to take up the cause of BDS toward a sustainable peace in the region (McCloskey, 64-65).

Aid in itself is not a viable solution to the crisis in the OPT because the poverty and inequalities in the region have been artificially created by the Israeli state so only the change of those policies will bring about an end to the humanitarian crisis. Hence, the call to support BDS.

Jefferess (9) states:

“the rationale he [McCloskey] provides for the development model of action describes Palestinians as experiencing a ‘chronic shortage of school buildings,’ ‘mental health problems’ caused by the conflict, and chronic poverty and unemployment.”

This sentence is referring to a development education project in Gaza supported by the Centre for Global Education. I think it misrepresents the aim of the initiative and is significant for what it omits. The article does not state that the project is delivered in partnership with a Palestinian NGO which, like CGE, delivers development education activities. Yes, the need for the project is the consequence of an education system in crisis because the Israeli blockade obstructs the building of schools. But this initiative was designed and led by a Palestinian NGO as a development education response to this crisis. It was not a subjective aid project imposed by a Western donor but agreed on in partnership through discussion between CGE and the Canaan Institute. Development education as a participative methodology rooted in the praxis of Paulo Freire is not a form of humanitarian aid but community empowerment.

Jefferess (9) states:

“As Mahrouse highlights, the presence of Western activists and humanitarians in the occupied territories of Palestine is not necessarily beneficial for Palestinians; her interviews with Palestinian community organizers raises the question of whether international activists would not support Palestinians *more effectively by organizing against Israeli policies in their home countries.*”

The emphasis is mine and the inference is clear; ‘humanitarian observers’ would be better off staying at home and supporting the Palestinian cause in their own countries. I don’t agree that it’s a matter of ‘either / or’ and, in my own case, the advocacy work of my organization on Palestine has benefited from my having directly witnessed human rights abuses and met with Palestinian and Israeli activists and NGOs. The main criticism levelled at me by Prof. Jefferess is that Palestinians are ‘marginalized’ and Palestinian testimony ‘subordinated’ in my account. Yet, the article reflects upon meetings with NGOs and activists in Israel and Palestine, and a working partnership with a Palestinian NGO in Gaza. The article’s concluding call for support of BDS echoed the approach set out by Omar Barghouti, co-founder of the BDS movement in Palestine.

Jefferess (9) states:

“McCloskey’s personal narrative is overtly structured by humanitarian discourse.”

In McCloskey (2018), I frame the occupation of Palestine in a human rights discourse and quote several Palestinian and Israeli human rights organisations that questioned the legality of Israeli policies in Gaza and the West Bank. The humanitarian crisis in Gaza and the West Bank is presented as the outworking of those policies:

“This annexation has continued apace since then with the settlement of at least 600,000 colonists in settlements across the West Bank that Amnesty International (2017a) describes as illegal under Article 49 of the Geneva Convention.” (McCloskey, 47).

“According to B’tselem (2017), the blockade is illegal under the Fourth Geneva Convention which ‘imposes general responsibility on the occupying state for the safety and welfare of civilians living in the occupied territory’” (McCloskey, 48).

“Amnesty International, like many human rights bodies, has described the blockade of Gaza to be illegal under international law and called for it to be lifted without delay” (McCloskey, 50).

Conclusion

I’m accused by Jefferess of framing the occupation of Palestine in purely humanitarian terms, marginalizing and subordinating the Palestinian voice, and casting doubt on the reliability of Palestinian testimony. It is more than a little ironic then that I was deported by the Israelis in 2017 using legislation introduced by the Israeli government to ban advocates of the BDS Movement (McCloskey, 60-61). I was deported with three other Irish citizens and when this was raised in the Irish parliament, an Irish government representative said that:

Without a more specific explanation, it is difficult not to conclude that the exclusion of these persons is part of the ongoing effort to suppress scrutiny and criticism of Israeli policies in the West Bank (Oireachtas Debates).

These remarks make clear that I was deported for political reasons as I had drawn upon repeated visits to the OPT and the agency of my organization to critically interrogate Israel’s occupation and support for BDS. My article also makes clear:

- My support for BDS as a Palestinian-led initiative toward a sustainable peace in the region – is this not amplifying Palestinian voices?
- That CGE operates in partnership with a Palestinian NGO in the Gaza Strip not as a subjective, dominant donor dictating the terms of work;
- That my visits to the OPT informed the development education activities of CGE in Ireland;
- That it is imperative to frame the conflict in the context of international law; hence my citing several human rights organizations in the region and beyond on this score;
- That rather than separating the humanitarian needs of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank from the

policies and practices of the Israeli State's policies, I clearly frame these needs as the consequence of Israeli states policies.

In short, Jefferess (2019) misrepresents the work of the Centre for Global Education and the aims of the article. The CGE initiative in Gaza is underpinned by an empowering educational methodology designed to equip learners with skills, values, knowledge and understanding commensurate with Freirean pedagogy. This is a form of solidarity and empowerment, not charity. The article similarly uses a Freirean approach to identify Israeli government policies as the root causes of inequality and injustice in the OPT.

Works Cited

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