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Undertaking Partition: Palestine and Postcolonial Studies

Salah D. Hassan

The Declaration of Principles, signed by Yitzak Rabin and Yasir Arafat in Washington D.C. on September 13, 1993, presented itself as the foundation of a new logic for Israeli-Palestinian relations and also positioned itself as the beginning of the era of peace, putting “an end to decades of confrontation and conflict.” As is tragically evident now, but was readily apparent to some even at the time of the Arafat-Rabin handshake, the narrative of peace that opens officially with the Declaration of Principles and takes as its unofficial title “the Oslo Process” is a continuation of partition and is premised on the same “ideology of difference” that Edward Said associated with Zionism in an 1985 Critical Inquiry article. Rather than opening an era, the peace documents translate the narrative of partition and occupation into the acceptable language of negotiation. But the rhetoric of negotiation also seeks to revise and supplant the archive of U.N. resolutions on Palestine, which provide the international legal framework for implementing partition (1947) and for challenging the Israeli occupation of East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip (1967). In other words, the Peace Process is a continuation of partition and occupation, but under a different form and with a distinct set of legitimating texts. From the outset, the Israeli-Palestinian peace process has been, therefore, a subtle reworking of the historic narrative of partition and an assertion of a violent cartography of cultural difference. Since the Palestinian uprising that began in September 2000, one can plainly observe the map produced by a peace that allows Israel to close off

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Palestinian towns and villages, while the construction of Jewish settlement continues unabated in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

In February 1999, an interdisciplinary conference titled “The Uncertain State of Palestine: Futures of Research” was held at the University of Chicago where scholars were invited to elaborate critical approaches to Palestine in ways that take into account the shifting conditions created by the Oslo Agreement. At the time of the conference, there was a growing sense that the Peace Process had failed, but that the situation on the ground was no longer the same. The objective of the conference was to assess the impact of the Peace Process on the existing historical, political, and cultural frameworks used to explain the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While Oslo produced new diplomatic and security arrangements between Israel and the PLO, the prevailing feel of the conference suggested another force of change on the contemporary analysis of Palestine. The conceptualization of panels and papers indicated that the appearance of poststructuralist theory in the U.S. academy in the 1970s and its gradual filtering into Mid-East Studies have perhaps more significantly transformed the “futures of research” on Palestine than the Oslo Agreement.

Critical historiography, critical geography, critical legal studies, and critical anthropology, along with the non-disciplinary fields of diaspora studies, border studies, hybridity studies, and postcolonial studies, set the tone of the conference and furnished terminology for revved-up examinations of “violence,” history, “memory,” “identity,” “cities,” “activism in academia,” “exile and return,” “colonialism/postcoloniality,” “masculinity,” and “representing Palestine” — each of these reimagined, recovered, re-structured, (re)constructed, deterritorialized, or fractured. These critical-theoretical trends, clearly in evidence at the “Uncertain State of Palestine” conference, constitute an important break with the descriptive tendencies that have long dominated Mid-East Studies, and testify to the efforts of some specialists on the Mid-East to participate in reassessing research in the humanities and social sciences in light of the 1980s theoretical eruption. Despite the possible advances of “theory” in Mid-East Studies — or the advance of Mid-East Studies in theory — poststructuralist approaches cannot be made to harmonize with the area studies model that conditions most research on Palestine.

One of the key contributions of the most influential poststructuralist theoretical projects has been to expose and critique the determinations of academic disciplines set to work by an unexamined historical and linguistic chain of cultural values that justifies the division and order of knowledge. The conceptualization of the Middle East as a unit of study, as Said demonstrated in Orientalism more than thirty years ago, is inescapably founded on a tenacious cultural opposition between the Occident and the Orient, between Europe and non-Europe, that is fundamental to the structure of imperial knowledge. Partly a response to Orientalism's argument, postcolonial cultural studies can be understood as an attempt to move beyond the limits of area studies by disavowing the cultural opposition between First World and Third World; but as I argue below, the foundations and practices of postcolonialism often perpetuate a geography of cultural difference. Despite the radical ambitions of postcolonial studies, it fails to break free of a mode of thought informed by the cultural partitioning of the globe that underwrote imperialism.
This essay is especially concerned with Palestine and postcolonial studies.3 Generally, I am interested in examining the postcolonial logic of cultural differentiation signaled by references to Palestine, presented as an exceptional case against which the postcolonial can be defined. I argue that despite its borrowings from poststructuralist theories, postcolonialism constitutes a general field of study and produces its object in terms of a geography of cultural difference that partakes of the older models of Commonwealth and Third World. Like the new critical trends in Middle East Studies and all other area studies, intrinsic to postcolonialism is the contradiction between its critique of essential cultural difference and its reinvestment in the structure of Europe/non-Europe. To make this point, I analyze various attempts to define the postcolonial field and the peculiar figuration of Palestine in those definitions. I discuss briefly the U.N. Partition of Palestine, which instituted a new political geography in Palestine and, in the era of Peace, remains a continuing reminder of the political effects of cultural differentiation. Through an analysis of two early works by Ghassan Kanafani, the Palestinian writer assassinated in Beirut in July 1972, I propose that these literary texts — emerging between partition and occupation — represent and seek to escape the mode of cultural thought that persistently divides the world.

1. Contours of the Postcolonial

Although postcolonialism poses as a school of criticism and quickly assumed the status of a new theory, it does not designate a critical or theoretical practice in the way that, for instance, formalism, structuralism, or Marxism do.4 Postcolonialism can make no claim to a general disciplinary method, such as archival research in history, field work in anthropology, or explication in literary studies, although it borrows from all of these. In some respects, postcolonial studies resembles, for example, romanticism studies or modernism studies more than any discipline in the human sciences. It defines itself in terms of a historically specific cultural phenomenon, and not unlike romanticism and modernism, postcolonialism has great difficulty getting a clear focus on the identity of the cultural phenomenon that is its object. There is, however, a well-established consensus about the philosophical and aesthetic ideals of romanticism and modernism, but no such consensus exists in the case of postcolonialism. Postcolonial literature does not have a representative style, does not express a common set of thematic concerns, and does not belong to a specific period. Consequently, postcolonial cultural studies might perhaps be better compared to those broad interdisciplinary projects that construct their object in terms of a geographic region or an ethnic identity, as is respectively the case with Latin American Literary Studies or African American Literary Studies. Like these two fields, the category is derived from the ethnic identity of the author or the geographical provenance of the works in the field, and not from the stylistic, formal, or thematic particularities of the texts, nor from the historical contexts of their production, their involvement in intellectual movements, or their connection to other similar literary works beyond the geo-
graphical or racial category. These fields, as well as Ethnic Studies and Women's Studies, contest historical exclusions and can produce radical transformations in the study of literature, but they can also reproduce exclusivity grounded in racial, gendered, or geographical determinations.

The contours of the field of postcolonial studies are most apparent in its two main objects of analysis: European representations of the colonies and non-European self-representation. Through the study of these two areas, the postcolonial project accentuates imperial themes in western literatures, emphasizes a history of cultural exclusions, and draws on an anticolonial legacy to reformulate the humanities. Edward Said's *Orientalism*, which appeared in 1978, quickly became the model for postcolonial studies. This point is confirmed by Fredric Jameson's comparison of Roberto Fernández Retamar's "Caliban" to *Orientalism* in the introduction to the 1989 English translation of *Caliban and Other Essays*, which incidentally positioned the now famous Cuban essay, originally published in Spanish in 1970, as a key bridge text between Latin American revolutionary writing and the critique of empire. Said's revision and application of Michel Foucault's theory of discourse to textual representations of the "orient" combined a contestatory rhetoric and a mastery of poststructuralist theory to produce an intervention that altered the discipline of contemporary North American cultural criticism in the late 20th century. He explains in the introduction the centrality of the notion of discourse to his critique of Orientalism: "My contention is that without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage — and even produce — the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post–Enlightenment period" (3). Said's argument asserts the political instrumentality of Orientalism, the precursor to Mid-East Studies, which is premised on the essential difference between Europe and the Orient: "For Orientalism was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, ‘us’) and the strange (the Orient, the east, ‘them’)" (43). He continues later along the same lines, asking: "Can one divide human reality, as indeed human reality seems to be genuinely divided, into clearly different cultures, histories, traditions, societies, even races, and survive the consequences humanly?" And responds:

By surviving the consequences humanly, I mean to ask whether there is any way of avoiding the hostility expressed by the division, say, of men into "us" (Westerners) and "they" (Orientals). For such divisions are generalities whose use historically and actually has been to press the importance of the distinction between some men and some other men, usually towards not especially admirable ends. When one uses the categories like Oriental and Western as both the starting and end point of analysis, research, public policy ... the result is usually to polarize the distinction ... and the limit of human encounter between different cultures, traditions, and societies. (45-6)

As these quotations indicate, Said fully perceives the consequences of a geography of cultural difference, yet even as he underscores the violence linked
PALESTINE


- Proposed Palestinian state
- Proposed Jewish state


According to the partition recommendation, Jaffa was to be part of the proposed Palestinian state, even though it lay outside the boundaries of that state. Jerusalem and Bethlehem were conceived as a corpus separatum under UN jurisdiction.

Credit:

From before their *Diaspara: A Photographic History of Palestinian, 1876–1948*, Valid Khalid; Institute for Palestine Studies.
to the division of humanity in academic study and politics, he reinscribes it in the idea of a “human encounter.” He proposes, for example, that the ideal solution lies in uncovering a project that can do justice to representing human diversity: “Perhaps the most important task of all would be to undertake studies in contemporary alternatives to Orientalism, to ask how one can study other cultures and peoples from a libertarian, or nonrepressive and nonmanipulative, perspective” (24). Postcolonialism may be the putative libertarian alternative to Orientalism, but it is not its antithesis, which would entail the rejection of the “study [of] other cultures and peoples” and, as Said later more radically suggests, the elimination of “the ‘Orient’ and the ‘Occident’ altogether” (28).

The most important effect of colonial discourse analysis has been its redistribution of cultural value by opening a breach in the canon and making room for alternative or postcolonial texts. The postcolonial critique of European imperial culture is, thus, doubled by recovering the “non-European” voices of colonial or postcolonial subjects. This move subtly re-articulates and reverses the value of the cultural opposition between Europe and non-Europe. Postcolonial studies creates in this gesture a new subfield within the discipline of literary studies that is sometimes denominated “emergent” or “transnational” literatures, terms that oddly correspond with the language of international finance (emerging markets and transnational corporations). The study of “emergent literatures” is an especially troubled endeavor that in its most reductive moments, simply reproduces the Europe/non-Europe binary and at the same time privileges precisely those regions and literatures that manifest most obviously the cultural effects of colonialism, such as the literatures of former British and French colonial territories. According to this mode of postcolonial criticism, a literature that does not show signs of a massive linguistic dislocation, that does not succumb significantly to the colonial language, fits awkwardly in the field. International literatures, such as Arabic, Bengali, Hausa, Vietnamese, and Chinese, and many more are generally excluded from postcolonial cultural studies. They do not bear witness to linguistic colonization, and their exclusion from the field discloses one of the defining characters of “emergent literatures.” Salman Rushdie’s comments about changes in the characteristics of the English language resonate with the postcolonial preoccupation with writing in the language of the colonizer: “those peoples who were once colonized by the language are now rapidly remaking it, domesticating it, becoming more and more relaxed about the way they use it — assisted by the English language’s enormous flexibility and size, they are carving out large territories for themselves within its frontiers” (64). Rushdie’s cartographic metaphors are characteristic of a certain postcolonial cultural sensibility that sees the occupation of the colonial language by the formerly colonized as something like a reversal of the colonial process.

This sensibility is central to the definition of postcolonial literature presented in The Empire Writes Back. The authors note early in the book that “[w]hat each of these literatures has in common beyond their special and distinctive regional characteristics is that they emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonization and asserted themselves by foregrounding the tension with the imperial power, and by emphasizing their differences from the
assumptions of the imperial centre. It is this that makes them distinctly post-colonial” (2). The claim that postcolonial literatures “emerged in their present form out of the experience of colonization” and function dialectically in “tension with the imperial power” and in opposition to “the imperial centre” implies that postcolonial literatures continue the relationship established by Europe’s conquest of the globe. “Their difference” can only be some pre-colonial cultural identity that is preserved and carried into the postcolonial present. For Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, these distinctly postcolonial literatures are “the literatures of African countries, Australia, Bangladesh, Canada, Caribbean countries, India, Malaysia, Malta, New Zealand, Pakistan, Singapore, South Pacific Island countries, and Sri Lanka” as well as the literature of the U.S. (2).

Within this Anglo-centric variant of postcolonial criticism,7 the expansiveness of the British Empire and its contemporary legacy in English language literatures set the borders of the field. For my purposes, what is equally relevant in this definition of postcolonial literatures is the passing qualification, “beyond their special and distinctive regional characteristics,” which tries to establish diversity within unity. Postcolonial literatures are presumably unified by association with and in opposition to metropolitan English literature; conversely, they are different from each other because of “their special and distinctive regional characteristics.” The anglophone writings of African, Caribbean and Asian authors, such as Chinua Achebe, Wilson Harris, and Salman Rushdie, occupy an important place in this trajectory of postcolonial studies, which competes with the older colonial category of Commonwealth Literary Studies and the now increasingly discarded category of Third World Literatures.
In this regard, Linda Hutcheon casts postcolonial criticism “as a broad anti-imperialist emancipatory project [that] has thereby added a more overtly politicized dimension to related work in the field of Commonwealth studies” (8). And Anne McClintock comments speculatively that “post-colonial’ is arguably more palatable and less foreign sounding to a sceptical dean than ‘Third World Studies’” (262). Whereas McClintock proposes that postcolonial is less ideological than Third World, Hutcheon argues that the term is more political than Commonwealth. In neither case, is it apparent in what ways the field of postcolonial literary studies constitutes a politics of any sort, beyond a reform of the literary canon that seeks to include more “non-European” texts. Furthermore, even if “postcolonial” updates in different ways the ideas of Commonwealth and Third World, it does not break free of these two historic geo-political formations, both of which figure in the background of postcolonial studies.

To get a sense of the field and the place of Palestine in postcolonial studies, it is necessary to think about the postcolonial occupying a cultural space on the left of Commonwealth and on the right of Third World, but always designating the regions of non-Europe. Commonwealth studies is a particularity of Britain and its emergence has to do with reformulating the opposition between metropolitan and colonial cultures after the collapse of the Empire. As such, the Commonwealth is nothing more than a liberalization of the old colonial model. By displacing the Commonwealth, postcolonialism contests the primacy of Britain and the continuation of the imperial authority in a new form. Nevertheless, as just pointed out with reference to The Empire Writes Back, postcolonialism also perpetuates a model based on the British Empire.

In contrast, postcolonialism’s displacement of the concept and project of the Third World as the vanguard of political opposition to the history of colonialism carries with it a different set of effects and implications. The idea of the Third World has its origins in the context of the Cold War and comes into being in association with the non-aligned movement in the mid-1950s. It assumes the more radical connotation of popular insurrection after the Cuban revolution, but is politically dissipated by the mid-1970s. It is at this time that Third World literary studies begins to make its short-lived appearance in the academy. It is also in the 1970s that one witnesses the elaboration of dependency theory, especially in connection with conditions in Latin America, and the critique of unequal development. The rise of postcolonial studies in the 1980s initially coincides with the downward movement of these approaches to the political-economic legacies of colonialism in the Third World. In contrast with earlier forms of Third World studies, postcolonial criticism rarely uses “Third World” as a political-economic category, but rather studies the formerly colonized regions of the South as a source for hybrid cultures.

Whereas Third World literary studies remained open to literatures in all languages of the formerly colonized zones — an internationalist alternative to the Eurocentric tradition of comparative literary studies — the category of postcolonial emergent literatures produces an exclusion that stems from the privileging of those literatures that instantiate the problematic of hybridity made manifest through the use of colonial languages (especially English, but also French and Spanish) by non-Europeans. It would seem that Third World
gave way to postcolonialism, only to make room within the newly established field for the literatures of settler colonies, such as New Zealand, Australia, and Canada. This development reasserts the idea of the Commonwealth and pushes the comparative project of Third World literary studies further into the background.

By the early 1990s, “Third World” had been all but eclipsed by the more modish term “postcolonial.” Ella Shohat has argued that postcolonialism might more appropriately be labeled “post-Third Worldist, as coming after the decline of Third World nationalism” (Introduction 9). But just prior to the widespread abandonment of the term “Third World” and the ideals that it represented, one can identify a number of “general-focus” literary journals that published special issues on the topic and included articles on Arabic literature and notably on Palestinian intellectuals and writers. The Winter 1988 special issue of South Atlantic Quarterly, titled Third World Literary and Cultural Criticism included two articles, one by Mary Layoun and another by Barbara Harlow, which address political aspects of Arab cultural production. In Spring 1989, Modern Fiction Studies put out a special issue titled Narratives of Colonial Resistance with an article by Harlow on “Stories from the Palestinian Intifada.” These examples reveal that the Arab World in general and Palestine in particular are accommodated with ease in the categories of the Third World and sites of colonial resistance, but they have remained marginal areas of inquiry within the field of postcolonial cultural studies. None of these comments are intended to suggest that somehow “Third World” is preferable to “postcolonial” as a cultural category. Nor do I wish to imply that postcolonialism can somehow transcend its structural limits by adding more territories, national literatures or ethnic identities to its field, repeating as it revises the imperial conquest of the globe. Postcolonialism absorbs Third World “oppositionality” — the antithetical relationship with colonialism; at the same time, the postcolonial displaces Third World and becomes the metaphor for the “emerging” cultures of non-Europe. The specter of the Third World lies at the very core of the postcolonial project; and postcolonial studies can never disconnect itself from a certain idealization of the Third World, the original conceptualization of the totality of non-Europe as a subject of history.

The postcolonial map is more expansive than that of the Commonwealth and more constrained than that the Third World, but it basically functions according to a similar logic of field definition. To be sure, the most demanding work in the field of postcolonialism is critical of geographical determinism and linguistic essentialism. Nevertheless, critical attention to cultural influence, ambivalent positionality, or in-betweeness, all imply that the postcolonial “location of culture” is at the crossroads of metropolis and former colony. This implication is made explicit in Homi Bhabha’s reinterpretation of Frantz Fanon’s Black Skin, White Masks, which seeks to “give poststructuralism a specifically postcolonial provenance” (Location 64). Critics, like Bhabha, who have promoted the idea of the postcolonial are aware of the problems of constructing a field or discipline, and have critiqued it, but cannot evade the problematic of cultural difference in defining the postcolonial. As Bhabha has observed: “In order to be institutionally effective as a discipline, the knowledge of cultural difference must be made to foreclose on the Other; difference and otherness thus become the fantasy of a certain cultural space or, indeed, the certainty of a
form of theoretical knowledge that deconstructs the epistemological ‘edge’ of the West” *(Location 31)*. To secure its authority, postcolonialism too must have its other and its other is on both sides of the colonizer/colonized (imperial First World/subaltern Third World) divide.

2. Palestine and Postcolonial Studies

In a 1992 lecture, Bhabha outlines the parameters of the postcolonial field:

The term *postcolonial* is increasingly used to describe that form of social criticism that bears witness to those unequal and uneven processes of representation by which the historical experience of the once-colonized Third World comes to be framed in the West. The postcolonial perspective, as it has been more recently developed by cultural and social historians and theorists, departs from the traditions of the sociology of underdevelopment and dependency theory. As a mode of analysis, it disavows any nationalist or nativist pedagogy that sets up the relations of Third World and First World in a binary structure of opposition, recognizing that the social boundaries between First and Third Worlds are far more complex. It is from the experience of a productive hybridization of cultural influence and national determination that the postcolonial attempts to elaborate the historical and literary project.

*(Critical 63-4)*

This quotation presents in a usefully schematic manner the five constitutive elements that Bhabha associates with the project of the postcolonial as “a form of social criticism”: 1) a preoccupation with western representations of the once-colonized Third World; 2) a distancing from the frameworks of underdevelopment and dependency; 3) a disavowal of “nationalist or nativist pedagogy”; 4) a rejection of the First World/Third World binary; and 5) a valorization of cultural hybridization. Bhabha defines postcolonialism negatively against a grid of earlier critical positions (sociology of underdevelopment, dependency theory, nationalism and nativism, and Third Worldism) associated more with the study of economics, geopolitics, and sociology than culture. The first and final points offer, however, a positive definition of the postcolonial as a dual enterprise that is concerned with the relationship between colonization and representation, on the one hand, and the contradiction between cultural influence and national determination, on the other hand. Whereas the first point takes as its object the archive of European colonialism and the western framing of the “experience of the once colonized Third-World,” the latter is organized around the “experience of a productive hybridization” that is presumably an effect of the cultural flows made possible through colonialism and its “unequal and uneven processes of representation.”

The first and the final points are linked by the repeated reference to “the experience” in the singular, which provides the bridge connecting “the once-colonized Third World” to “productive hybridization.” “The experience,” construed in culturalist terms, is the ground of the postcolonial, produced out of
and somehow embodying a uniformly direct knowledge of colonization and hybridization. Bhabha’s description of the postcolonial suggests that the concept designates primarily the once colonized and now hybridized Third World. Despite his efforts to dispense with the First World/Third World binary, it remains crucial to this definition of the postcolonial, whether it be in terms of “the experience of the once colonized Third World” or in that of “productive hybridization.” By advancing the idea of hybridity as central to the constitution of the postcolonial, Bhabha leverages the critique of the “nationalist or nativist pedagogy” that historically informed Third World anti-colonialism. Hybridity is posited as a cultural condition, but it always refers to its original structure: colonizer/colonized, West/East, Europe/non–Europe.

The anti-nationalism characteristic of much of postcolonial studies found expression in Nation and Narration (1990), an important collection of essays edited and introduced by Bhabha. Early in his introduction, Bhabha writes that “[t]he representative emblem of this book might be a chiasmatic ‘figure’ of cultural difference whereby the anti-nationalist ambivalent nation-space becomes the crossroads to a new transnational culture” (4). Conditioned by Bhabha’s introduction and his more elaborate final essay, “DissemiNation: time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation,” the collection formulates the postcolonial critique of the nation as narrative, an idea that draws heavily on Benedict Anderson’s theorization of the nation as “imagined community.” According to Bhabha, “the nation, as a form of cultural elaboration (in the Gramscian sense), is an agency of ambivalent narration that holds culture at its most productive position” (3).

Bhabha cites Edward Said to register the ambivalent character of the nation: “a force for subordination, fracturing, diffusing, reproducing, as much as producing, creating, forcing, guiding” (3-4). Later, in the concluding lines of the introductory essay to Nation and Narration, he again quotes Said, but makes reference to the Palestinians and their exclusion from nationhood:

Amidst these exorbitant images of the nation-space in its transnational dimension there are those who have not yet found their nation: amongst them the Palestinians and the Black South Africans. It is our loss that in making this book we were unable to add their voices to ours. Their persistent questions remain to remind us, in some form or measure, of what must be true for the rest of us too: “When did we become ‘a people’? When did we stop being one? Or are we in the process of becoming one? What do these big questions have to do with our intimate relationships with each other and with others?” (7)

While this passage expresses solidarity with the Palestinians and “the Black South Africans,” by turning inward and reflecting back on the national self, the gesture chokes off a relation between the critic and “those who have not yet found their nation.” To seize the peculiar significance of this passage in connection with the Palestinians, one needs to hold together that which they “have not yet found” and “our loss.” “Nation” is oddly positioned as the object of the
verb “found” — to recover, but also to establish — which evades the history of Palestinian loss — the denial of a nation-space as a result of the 1947 U.N. Partition Plan and the creation of Israel. The name “Palestinian” is the designation of a nation dispossessed of a nation-space. This historic loss vanishes behind “our loss,” which is actually an act of exclusion (“unable to add their voices to ours”) that is only partially corrected by citing Said.

The last lines in the quotation are from Said’s 1986 book After the Last Sky, which details the history and contemporary conditions of Palestinian existence, in exile and under occupation. Bhabha discreetly cites a passage from Said’s book that blends into the fabric of his text, stripped of the specificity of the Palestinian situation and reduced to a series of universal questions (“what must be true for the rest of us”). In “DissemiNation,” Bhabha similarly quotes a line from Darwish’s famous poem, which provided the title for Said’s book, as an example of the Palestinian nation’s “transnational” existence in the communities of “scattered people”: “The gathering of clouds from which the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish asks ‘where should the birds fly after the last sky’” (291). Darwish’s poem questions the destiny of the stateless subject in a world of nation-states, and the implied answers are “return” and national self-determination, the in-gathering of Palestinians in historic Palestine, the national territory partitioned by the community of nations. Said’s After the Last Sky invokes Darwish’s poem to reinforce a late twentieth-century narrative of the statelessness of the Palestinian nation that takes shape in the photographs of Jean Mohr. The positions represented in the writings of Said and Darwish attempt to situate Palestinians in Palestine, and to express without equivocation the unity of the nation. These are national narratives without ambivalence that work against a legacy of imperialism, but cannot easily be translated into post-colonial critical rethinking of the nation that appeals to a “new transnational culture.”

Palestinian Youth Raises Flag; Credit: JC Tordai
The Palestinian struggle against Israel that developed especially after 1967 has always been focused on reclaiming land and establishing a nation-state, but Palestinian nationalism emerged within the internationalist movements of Pan-Arabism, non-alignment, and Third World revolution. At least until the 1980s, the Palestinian national movement, embodied in the PLO, represented the continuing struggle against world imperialism in the postcolonial era. Zionism, by definition a Jewish nationalist movement, has also been an international project, but it is linked historically to late nineteenth-century imperialism and has benefited from the unrestrained support of the U.S., the great imperial power of the late twentieth century. National identity, nation-state formation and national liberation are the principal stakes on both sides of the conflict, but Zionism has fulfilled its ambition in alliance with imperialism and exists in the territory where Palestine had once been. A postcolonialism that differentiates Jew from non-Jew, Palestinian from non-Palestinian, but does not distinguish between Zionism and Palestinian resistance, both reduced to a dreaded nationalism, surrenders political critique to the pursuit of the myth of “a new transnational culture.”

From within this political context, the Arab Jew has served as a representative figure of “the new transnational culture” in the on-going contest between Israeli and Palestinian nationalisms. Ella Shohat put forward this position in an essay modeled on Said’s 1979 Social Text article, “Zionism from the Standpoint of its Victims”: “I would like to extend the terms of debate beyond earlier dichotomies . . . to incorporate an issue elided by previous formulations, to wit, the presence of a mediating entity, that of the Arab Jews or Mizrahi/Oriental Jews, those Sephardi Jews coming largely from the Arab and Muslim countries” (“Sephardim” 39). The idea that the Arab Jew might be situated as a mediating entity is theoretically provocative, but it too falls back on the idea that the mark of cultural difference can produce a politics that undermines the Arab/Jew dichotomy. There is first the problem of construing all Jews from “the Arab and Muslim countries” as a distinct cultural community within Israel that is defined also against many other cultural religious identities, such as Latin American Jew and Ethiopian Jew, but also Arab Druze and Arab Christian, as well as the bi-national identities of Armenian Arab and Israeli Arab. More importantly, Shohat’s positioning of the “Oriental Jews” is premised on the idea that they stand equally between the European Jews and the Arab non-Jews. That “Oriental Jews” are subject to racism in Israel, not unlike the racism experienced by Palestinians, exposes the Zionist myth that all Jews are equal in Israel; nevertheless, for all Jews in Israel, the sense of peoplehood derives from their identification with Zionism and their citizenship within the Jewish state, which is mirrored in the statelessness of the Palestinians: “The vicious entwining of language, people, and the state appears particularly evident in the case of Zionism” (Agamben 68). Shohat hopes to bring to light the injustice of Israeli politics beyond the conflict with Palestinians, but this refocusing on “Oriental Jews” links Sephardim to Arabs on the basis of a presumed cultural affiliation that can operate as a wedge against Ashkenazi Zionist politics.

In her 1992 article “The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term Postcolonialism,” Anne McClintock refers to the Palestinians in an attempt to produce a finer definition of the postcolonial, and at the same time she reveals the prob-
lems associated with the usage of the term as “a singular and ahistorical abstraction” (255). McClintock's main critique focuses on the expansive and imprecise application of postcolonial, but does not challenge the fundamental logic of postcolonialism; rather, she “admires” the theoretical merits of work done in the field:

My misgivings, therefore, are not about the theoretical substance of “postcolonial theory”, much of which I greatly admire. Rather, I wish to question the orientation of the emerging discipline and its concomitant theories and curricular changes, around a singular, monolithic term, used ahistorically, and haunted by the very image of linear “progress” that much of that same work challenges theoretically. Nor do I want to banish the term to some chilly, verbal Gulag; there seems no reason why it should not be used judiciously in appropriate circumstances, in the context of other terms, if in a less grandiose and global role.

(257)

McClintock's corrective presumes the “theoretical substance of post-colonial theory,” a redundant formulation that hints at the absence of an identifiable postcolonial critical method. The ostensible content of postcolonialism — its system, its conceptual apparatus, its operational hypothesis, its object — passes without examination, floating loftily in the ether of theory above the questionable uses of “the term.”

By circumscribing the use of the term, McClintock hopes to “question the orientation of the emerging discipline.” But as I stressed at the outset, postcolonialism is no more a discipline than it is a theory. Nevertheless, this point is not McClintock’s concern; her main argument is against the application of the term to a broad range of historical situations. She proposes a more sensitive and less ambitious use of the term in “appropriate circumstances.” Accordingly, “the pitfalls of the term postcolonialism” can be overcome through an act of redefinition that determines what can and cannot be appropriately “served under the single rubric ‘post-colonial’” (260). Written in the wake of the Gulf War, the essay makes timely reference to the Middle East and invokes the Palestinian situation to emphasize the limits of the term “postcolonial.” At one point, McClintock develops the rather simple, but rhetorically powerful, assertion that Palestine cannot be postcolonial because it has not achieved national liberation: “for the inhabitants of British-occupied Northern Ireland, not to mention the Palestinian inhabitants of the Israeli Occupied Territories and the West Bank, there may be nothing ‘post’ about colonialism at all” (McClintock 256).

Although colonialism persists in the North of Ireland, Palestine, and many other places, this line of argument emphasizes too narrowly the chronological sense of postcolonial. McClintock's attempt to expose “the very image of linear ‘progress’” returns implicitly in her redefinition, which takes the postcolonial as the terminus in a narrative that begins in the pre-colonial and passes through the colonial. One of the problems of this type of chronology of the postcolonial is that it can generate a historical vision that fantasizes about a precolonial past and succumbs “to the nostalgia for lost origins” that Spivak has
critiqued (Critique 146). From a distinct historical perspective, one can periodize the postcolonial from the historical break with colonialism as a valid political project. In other words, if the postcolonial era has a beginning, it might be identified as that event in which the ideology of colonialism and its colonial institutions are internationally discredited and are forced to maintain their existence in concealed forms. As a global era, the postcolonial could be said to open, at least nominally, with the U.N. General Assembly Resolution 1514 of December 1960, the “Declaration on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples.” But even as the General Assembly “[s]olemnly proclaims the necessity of bringing to a speedy and unconditional end colonialism in all its forms and manifestations,” it acknowledges the continuation of colonial practices. The question with regard to Palestine is not whether it is postcolonial, but whether the 1947 U.N. partition of Palestine and the 1967 Israeli occupation are recognized as colonialism or as something new and distinct, a more pernicious form of territorial conquest. The question poses itself, therefore, in relation to the meaning of the creation of Israel and the Israeli occupation of East Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and not in relation to the condition or identity of “Palestinian inhabitants of the Occupied Territories.”

For Bhabha and McClintock, Palestine serves as a geographic and ethnic reference, like “the Blacks of South Africa” or “Northern Ireland,” to an unnamed colonialism in the era of postcolonialism, but it is not an “appropriate” site of postcolonial analysis. Palestine is made to articulate the theme of colonialism in the postcolonial era, and because it has “not found its nation” or is not adequately “post,” the Palestinian situation is not suitable for postcolonial analysis. It is not particularly important that Palestine and the Arab World are on the periphery of the main currents of postcolonial studies. It is, however, important that, given the U.S.’s imperial role in the region, notably its unconditional economic and military commitments to Israel, there is not more criticism of Israel in those quarters of academic study that claim to oppose colonialism in all its forms. Postcolonial disengagement from Palestine is especially striking when one considers the role of Edward Said in shaping the field. Said’s prestigious position has resulted in some symbolic support for Palestinians, as is evident in the essays of Bhabha and McClintock, but there is scant postcolonial interest in Palestinian literature or in representations of Palestine in the U.S. Even in a collection of essays titled Cultural Readings of Imperialism: Edward Said and the Gravity of History, only one essay out of fifteen takes as its topic the Palestinian-Israeli context. Ella Shohat’s essay provides an important critique of the assumed opposition between Arab and Jew, but it emphasizes Israeli appropriations of the Spanish reconquest of Andaluz. In a collection of essays motivated by Said’s work, the absence of a substantial discussion of Palestine or the Arab World is difficult to bring into line with Said’s outspoken participation over the last 30 years in Palestinian politics.

Since the publication of “Zionism from the Standpoint of its Victims” in the first issue of Social Text, Palestinian politics has never been separate from Said’s work in literary criticism. Even in Orientalism, one can observe the centrality of Palestine to Said’s project; toward the end of the Introduction to Orientalism, in a note on “the personal dimension,” Said writes: “My own experi-
ence of these matters are in part what made me write this book. 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 as a nuisance or as an Oriental" (27). Beyond the motivating aspect expressed in this passage, there is more pertinently the observation that Palestinians in the U.S. are denied political existence, which I take to mean that there is no representation or narrative in which Palestinians in North America recognize their political ideals. In fact, Said's writings on Palestine, such as *The Question of Palestine, After the Last Sky*, or *Peace and Its Discontents*, address this problem, but this aspect of his critical output, which employs the methods of literary criticism, has been used to discredit it him.

One of the only significant cultural studies engagements with Said's thinking about Israel and Palestine appeared during Year Two of the first *intifada*, in the Spring 1989 issue of *Critical Inquiry* under the title "An Exchange on Edward Said and Difference." The "exchange" included two articles, one by Robert J. Griffin and another by Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin, as well as Said's response. The "exchange" centered on an article by Said titled "An Ideology of Difference," published in a 1985 issue of *Critical Inquiry* and later reprinted in the collection *Race, Writing, and Difference*.

The *Critical Inquiry* "exchange" possesses the momentary but passing excitement and interest of any urgent political polemic. It also indicates the degree to which Zionism, even of the most liberal sort, such as that represented by the Boyarins, does not recognize its violence and consistently conceals the operation of difference behind a cloak of Jewish pluralism. Said's original essay makes the point directly and the rebuttals of his critics merely confirm his argument by defending Israel and Zionism as the legitimate expressions of Jewish nationalism. In the original essay, "An Ideology of Difference," Said states that "if a Jewish state is created by and for the Jewish people, then it must be the case that non-Jews are posited as radically other, fundamentally and constitutionally different" (42). And later adds: "To be non-Jew in Palestine/Israel is first of all to be marked negatively" (43). In opposition to difference, Said proposes the "forging of connections and, more important, the existential need to form modes of knowledge, coexistence, and justice that are not based on coercive separation and unequal privilege." He also suggests that "we can reinterpret ideologies of difference only because we do so from an awareness of the supervening actuality of 'mixing,' of crossing over, of stepping beyond boundaries, which are more creative and human activities than staying inside rigidly policed borders" (43). Said's critique of Zionism as an ideology of difference and his call for coexistence is equally directed against certain forms of Palestinian and Arab nationalism. Coexistence requires that Israelis give up the Zionist dream of a purely Jewish state and that Palestinians enter "a community with Zionist and non-Zionist Jews on the land of historical Palestine" (57). Said articulates the possibility moving beyond the Jew/non-Jew opposition, beyond the Zionist logic of difference that so disastrously shaped the 1947 U.N. Partition Plan and provided a framework for the so-called Peace Process. Said's call for coexistence is rhetorically impressive, but "coexistence," like the idea of a "human
encounter between different cultures,” is also premised on sustaining the values of difference. And it is precisely by appealing to the notion of coexistence that the U.N. justified the partition of Palestine into a Jewish State and an Arab State.

3. Undertaking Partition

The partition of British Mandate Palestine was the expedient by which the United Nations addressed the crisis of a retreating colonialism. The United Nations General Assembly Resolution 181,12 adopted on November 27, 1947, “[r]ecommends to the United Kingdom, as the mandatory Power for Palestine, and to all other Members of the United Nations the adoption and implementation, with regard to the future government of Palestine, of the Plan of Partition with Economic Union set out below.” The U.N. Resolution 181 justifies the recourse to partition as a means of addressing a vague crisis, “the solution of the problem,” characterized in the following manner: “the present situation in Palestine is one which is likely to impair the general welfare and friendly relations among nations.” The only feature of the “problem” explicitly mentioned concerns “the declaration by the mandatory Power that it plans to complete its evacuation of Palestine by 1 August 1948.” From the first sentence of the Resolution, which raises “the question of the future government of Palestine,” to the last sentence, which authorizes a $2,000,000 budget to implement the U.N. “resolution on the future government of Palestine,” Resolution 181 rarely makes mention of Jews or Palestinian Arabs, but rather focuses on the termination of the British Mandate and the need to establish the framework for the “future government of Palestine.” Resolution 181 proposes partition, but it is written in the language of decolonization.

The Plan of Partition attached to U.N. Resolution 181 makes evident, however, that the pseudo-decolonization of Palestine, or in the terms of the U.N. Plan, the “Termination of the Mandate,” does not lead directly to “Independence.” Rather, “Termination of the Mandate” and “Independence” are separated by the process of “Partition,” the central term that ironically is intended to provide the passage from Mandatory regime to the “future government of Palestine.” The Plan is divided into four parts: Part I, Future constitution and government of Palestine; Part II, Boundaries; Part III, City of Jerusalem; Part IV, Capitulations. Part I is the most substantial and provides the general framework for the creation of two states and economic union. Section A of Part I addresses the “Termination of Mandate, Partition and Independence” and provides a schedule to complete “the undertaking.” Subsection 3 makes the most succinct statement on the modalities of partition:

Independent Arab and Jewish States and the Special International Regime for the City of Jerusalem, set forth in part III of this plan, shall come into existence in Palestine two months after the evacuation of the armed forces of the mandatory Power has been completed but in any case not later than 1 October 1948. The boundaries of the Arab State, the Jewish State, and
the City of Jerusalem shall be as described in parts II and III below.

(REF)

The Partition Plan speaks of Palestine as a unit, recognizes the integrity of the colonial state under Mandatory rule, and aims at maintaining some form of territorial coherence by way of economic union, but it also calls for the creation of boundaries that serve to demarcate culturally exclusive states. Section B, subsection 9, hardens the borders between the two states: “During the transitional period [from the end of the British Mandate until the establishment of independent governments in the new states] no Jew shall be permitted to establish residence in the area of the proposed Arab State, and no Arab shall be permitted to establish residence in the area of the proposed Jewish State, except by special leave of the Commission.” Nevertheless, subsection 10.e of the Plan also states that “Preserving freedom of transit and visit for all residents and citizens of the other state in Palestine and the City of Jerusalem, subject to considerations of national security, provided that each State shall control residence within its borders” (emphasis added). In the language of the Plan, Palestine is the only name for the territory that is being subject to Partition; it is the map of Palestine upon which the U.N. Commission draws the boundaries for the two culturally distinct states. The reference to “the other state in Palestine” vividly registers the cartography of cultural difference in the Plan of Partition; from the perspective of Zionists, “the other state in Palestine” is the Arab state, and from the perspective of Palestinians, it is the Jewish state. Ultimately, the Partition Plan reveals the success of Zionism in establishing its program of cultural differentiation as the dominant international approach to Palestine.

The U.N. Partition Plan in May 1948 may have spelled the end of British colonial rule in Palestine, but it did not give rise to an independent Arab State. Implementation of Partition had three immediate consequences for the “future government of Palestine”: the creation of Israel on most of the territory of British Mandate Palestine; the Jordanian annexation of East Jerusalem and the West Bank; and Egyptian domination of the Gaza Strip. The disastrous outcomes of Partition (i.e. the 1948 War, the 1967 occupation, and 1993 Oslo Agreement) shift the status of Palestine from territorial unity under a British colonial regime to fragmentation and non-being, dismembered and effaced from the geopolitical map of the world. About the immediate aftermath of partition, Edward Said has commented that “Palestinians were essentially silent and unknown, that is to say, they were so shattered by the loss and the destruction of their society that they essentially went into a state of almost blankness” (The Pen 24). There is no adequate word to describe the situation that obtains in Palestine after 1948.

Early developments in post-Mandate Palestinian history, and Israel’s later occupation following the 1967 June War of the Palestinian territories of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, precluded the formation of a Palestinian State in the years when most of the older colonies of Europe achieved national independence. In effect, the period from 1947 to 1967 corresponds more generally to that hopeful, but hapless era of “decolonization,” “national liberation,” and the emergence of the “Third World,” whose great emancipatory promise is
matched only by the colossal failures and betrayals of the neocolonial period. The years from 1947 to 1967 were also informed by the dominating structure of a bi-polar world in the age of nuclear weapons that witnessed the rise of an international order built on the old colonial empires. The postwar competition between the U.S. and U.S.S.R. that took shape during this period had not, however, become completely polarized when the General Assembly of the United Nations voted to partition Palestine. The Soviet Union and the United States both supported the partition of Palestine in 1947, and when Israel declared independence on May 14, 1948, the U.S. recognized the newly created nation-state immediately and three days later the U.S.S.R. did the same. Moreover, the position of many European leftists who sided in large part with the Algerian FLN in this period saw no contradiction in either supporting the creation of Israel in Palestine or abstaining from criticism. While “the Arab-Israeli conflict” became one of the key sites of U.S.-U.S.S.R. military tension after 1967, in the first twenty years of the Cold War (1947-67), Palestine disappeared largely from world affairs.

In the Arab World, the U.N. partition plan of 1947 and the Arab-Israeli armistice of 1949 exposed the bankruptcy of the old regimes, monarchies and republics subject to the lingering rule of France and Britain. The Arab defeat in June 1967 revealed the military weaknesses of the “Arab Nation” and, perhaps more significantly, exposed the myth of revolutionary Pan-Arabism, represented in the figure of Gamal Abdel Nasser. If 1947 catalyzed the emergence of a Pan-Arabist challenge to the legacies of imperialism, which became a constituent element in the broader Third World configuration, 1967 opened the fault-lines in the myth of a unified Arab front marching beneath the banner of the Palestinian revolution. From 1947 to 1967, the idea of Palestine provided the core content of an otherwise hollow Pan-Arabist politics, which spoke the language of liberation and at the same time produced national regimes of repression.

In the years between partition and occupation, Ghassan Kanafani’s writings criticized the logic of partition and the limits of Arab politics. Kanafani is one of the few Palestinian writers whose works have made their way beyond the specialized field of modern Arab literary studies and into postcolonial studies. A good deal of Kanafani’s work has been translated into English, and his critical conceptualization of the idea of “resistance literature” was brought into circulation by Barbara Harlow’s book on the cultural politics of Third World revolutionary movements. For these reasons, Kanafani’s writing can be situated astride the border of postcolonial studies. Before concluding, I want to focus briefly here on two texts, which in my view question the cultural map produced by partition and postcolonial studies. Kanafani’s most famous work is Men in the Sun, a novel that first appeared in Arabic in 1962, and has become (both in Arabic and English translation) the representative narrative of Palestinian political dislocation. “A Hand in the Grave,” an obscure and largely ignored short story, came out in the same year. Hilary Kilpatrick’s English translations of both works were published under the title Men in the Sun and Other Palestinian Stories in 1978, the same year that Said’s Orientalism appeared. Men in the Sun and Other Palestinian Stories was reissued in 1999. While the publica-
tion of the original Arabic texts occurs in the context between partition and occupation, the 1978 printing of the English translations correlates with the political context of the Camp David Accords and the beginnings of postcolonial studies. The 1999 reissue of the English collection circulates within the atmosphere created by the Oslo Agreement and competes with the narrative of Peace that refuses to acknowledge its debts to partition.

Men in the Sun is a tragic story of three Palestinians who travel from their homes to Iraq where they seek illegal passage to Kuwait and a life of gainful employment in the booming oil industry of the 1950s. The precise historical and geographical mapping of Men in the Sun, from Ramleh to the H4 pumping station on the IPC pipeline in Jordan to the Shatt el-Arab, describes the terrain and the treacherous borders of a divided Arab East across which the three Palestinian migrant workers travel to an awful death trapped in a tanker truck at the Iraq-Kuwait border crossing.

Before arriving at this terrible end, however, the narrative of each man exposes its beginning by making reference to the catastrophe of the 1948 War, an event that had occurred ten years earlier. Abu Qais remembers the death of the village teacher, Ustaz Selim, “one night before the wretched village fell into the hands of the Jews” (23). Unlike Abu Qais, who is forced into exile and the wretchedness of the refugee camps, Ustaz Selim “stayed there” (23). In Assad’s story, reference is to the decisive battle at Ramleh.— “In fact we fought in Ramleh ten years ago” (29) — and to the uprooting of Palestinians. An English tourist who agrees to give Assad a lift to the Jordan-Iraq border bears witness to the effects of partition: “Oh. Ramleh is a very long way away. A couple of weeks ago I was in Zeita… I stood in front of the barbed wire. A little child came up to me and said in English that his house was a few feet beyond the barbed wire” (34). Partition enters Marwan’s narrative by way of his father’s opportunistic marriage to a second wife, the daughter of an old friend “who had lost her leg during the bombardment of Jaffa,” “amputated at the top of thigh” (40). Physical amputation here and elsewhere in the novel is an evident metaphor for the partition of Palestine, but not always to the same effect.

The three narratives are brought together by the character of Abu Khaizuran whose memories of 1948 also are represented in connection with the image of amputation: “For ten long years he had been trying to accept the situation? But what situation? To confess quite simply that he had lost his manhood while fighting for his country? And what good had it done? He had lost his manhood and his country, and damn everything in this bloody world” (53). Abu Khaizuran’s attempt to identify “the situation” leads to a conflation of his personal loss and national defeat. In his confused and despairing mind, castration and partition are indistinguishable. The surgical removal of Abu Khaizuran’s manhood, the amputation, and its justification — “it’s better than dying” (53) — correspond with the act and rhetoric of partition, “the situation” that “he couldn’t even accept… when he was under the knife” (53).

The novel can be read, however, as a critique of Abu Khaizuran’s inability to dissociate his personal situation from the political situation; after all, his body is not the land of Palestine, and his experience of castration figures the patriarchal fantasy of nationhood as manhood. Abu Khaizuran cannot make sense of his situation or the situation resulting from the partition of Palestine,
and as is evident in the conclusion, his confusion is evocative of the self-interest and cynicism that characterized Arab World politics in the period between partition and occupation. At the end of the novel, Abul Khaizuran is too exhausted to bury the bodies and decides to dump the three dead Palestinians on the municipal rubbish heap outside of Kuwait City. The novel is not simply a commentary on the legacy of the partition of Palestine, it is also a critique of the national borders of the Middle East, which become the tripwires of those three undocumented migrant Palestinians, following the pipelines from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf and to their death at the Iraq-Kuwait border. The three Palestinian men suffocating silently in the depths of a truck detained at the border is also “an exorbitant image [of] the nation-space in its transnational dimension” (Bhabha, Nation 7).

Unlike Men in the Sun, “A Hand in the Grave” does not address the consequences of partition and has not attracted any critical attention. Nor does it possess the contextual specificity that characterizes Men in the Sun. Moreover, the narrative playfulness and apparent ideological innocence of “A Hand in the Grave” contrasts with the historical gravity and political salience of Men in the Sun. By most measures, Men in the Sun is a serious political narrative and “A Hand in the Grave” appears to be apolitical or at least unconcerned with Arab World politics. In the introduction to Men in the Sun and Other Palestinian Stories, Kilpatrick comments on the ostensible suspension of the political in the short story: “That Kanafani was not concerned with politics to such an extent that all his writing was invaded by it can be seen from stories such as A Hand in the Grave” (5). For Kilpatrick, Kanafani’s work is political only when it explicitly deals with the effects of Israel’s implantation in historic Palestine. All other manifestations of tension and struggle are relegated to the non-political literary space.

“A Hand in the Grave” is an absurd account of two medical students who set out before dawn to rob a grave. Set in an unnamed Arab city, the narrative provides no indication that the two students are Palestinian or that the events take place after partition. The story is built around the seven-year old memories of Nabil who describes the morning that he and his friend, Suhail, set out to obtain a skeleton for their studies. One of the principal themes of “A Hand in the Grave” is the relationship between education and superstition, an opposition that is undone by the end of the story. Superstition and education combine to evoke a series of social tensions that have to do with the class ambitions of two young Arab men and their struggle against patriarchal authority.

Nabil and Suhail are lower middle class students economically dependent on their older male relatives. Suhail’s uncle and Nabil’s father are petty, mean-spirited, and ungenerous. The argument between Nabil and his father in the story’s opening scene stages the opposition between the older man and the younger as a conflict between superstition and science or between a religious education and secular education:

“God curse the hour when I enrolled you in the medical faculty. You want to steal a corpse, do you? Thief! Godless sinner! Haven’t you read what God said in . . .?”

“I have. I’ve read all God’s Word, but God isn’t against the medical faculty. They require the skeleton, just as the sheikh used to require you to
know the section of ‘Ain Min’.” He gave me a look of disapproval for intruding into his past with this levity.

(70-71)

By drawing an analogy between his studies in the medical faculty and the father’s Qur’anic studies, Nabil locates science and religion within the same field of education. The crisis in the narrative is caused, not by the father’s beliefs, but by the two students’ fear: “[Suhail] was as frightened as I was” (92). The climactic moment, which occurs when Suhail reaches his hand through a hole in the crypt and touches what he believes to be the eyes of the corpse lying in a fifty-year old grave, changes the lives of the two students. Suhail goes mad and is removed from the college. He could not stop “explaining in amazing detail how he had put his fingers into the eyes of the corpse. The University found itself obliged to expel him from the medical faculty after all hope of curing him had been abandoned.” And Nabil is troubled by an insurmountable fear and transfers from the medical faculty to the law school after he discovered that he “could not stand the sight of a skeleton” (97). The source of their fear also provides the inspiration for the father’s religious devotion. According to Nabil, his father “praised God at length when he heard the story, and observed that the thieves had received their due reward from the dead man and the grave. Thus he came to believe that the grave we had desecrated was that of a saint and took to visiting it every dawn to receive blessing from its earth and sand and pray beside it” (97).

The story does not conclude, however, until Nabil reveals the nature of the grave and it is at this point that another image of cultural difference enters the narrative:

Yes, it was both a just and stupid fate. For only yesterday, after more than seven years had passed, I learned by chance the story of the graveyard we had visited.

It was not a real graveyard. It was a kind of wasteland belonging to a Turkish peasant who, during the periods of famine, had taken the trouble to construct earthen graves which were actually no more than covers for small storage spaces where he kept wheat and flour to avoid its being stolen or confiscated. The Turk had left a will that was only opened yesterday, when he died, and the secret was contained in that will.

Only yesterday, the heirs took possession of the ground to remove the grave and begin cultivating it.

The city’s newspapers published the news on their front pages.

(97-8)

These are the last lines of the story. The key figure in this denouement and perhaps in the entire story is the “Turkish peasant,” whose presence in the city points indirectly to the long history of Ottoman rule in the Middle East and to cultural difference structured in terms of Arab/Turk. This conclusion indicates that the deceased Turkish peasant and his heirs live among the Arabs and belong equally to the land, and that the land is not divided according to ethnic
identity, but according to the laws of property rights and inheritance, which pose a distinct set of questions having to do with hierarchies of capitalism and patriarchy. From another direction, the conclusion can be read as a statement about the continuity of historical time, the past seeping up from the burial site and acquiring a new meaning and form in the present. “A Hand in the Grave” differentiates between modes of understanding, but it does not create a hierarchy of cultural identities. Moreover, the story operates outside of the limited historical vision of partition, and imagines other narrative possibilities that revolve around social transformations taking place in an indeterminate context. Finally, the reference to the Turk demystifies the legacies and permanence of Empire.

“A Hand in the Grave” focuses most obviously on those sites of fracture, tension and discord that are located beyond the Arab/Israeli divide. As with some of Kanafani’s other less familiar stories, such as “The Falcon” and “If You Were a Horse,” the political content of “A Hand in the Grave” is located in its attempt to escape the determining logic of partition that produced the fragmentation of the Arab East, a region traversed by nation-state borders imposed first after World War I and then again in the wake of World War II. These stories connect with and complicate ideas explored in works like *Men in the Sun*, “The Land of Sad Oranges” or “Umm Saad,” revealing the broad political concerns of Kanafani’s work, critical of the rhetoric of Arabism and Zionism. I want to suggest that the disarming power of “A Hand in the Grave” stems from its resistance to the cartography of cultural difference that operates under the surface of postcolonial studies and is fundamental to the U.N. Plan of Partition and the Oslo Peace process.

As the Oslo process limped from a U.S. mediated crisis to complete collapse, the historical effects of partition and occupation have always towered in the background, casting long shadows over what has so far been written in the name of peace. Palestinian statehood, Israeli settlements, Jerusalem, refugees, and the right to return are the recurring motifs that make manifest the partition-to-occupation narrative in the post-peace era. Partition and occupation provide the historical coordinates of a narrative that connects the political dislocation and territorial dispossession of Palestinians to the story of Israel’s creation and expansion. But the partition-to-occupation narrative, documented in U.N. Resolutions and the personal testimony of Palestinians, has been severed from the Peace narrative that has dominated public discourse on Palestine since 1993; the story of Palestine’s erasure has itself been effectively erased and in its place stands the narrative of a doomed peace that merely legitimates partition. In the era of peace, the cynical language of partition and occupation — and their heroic counterparts solidarity and resistance — are replaced by statements of “mutual recognition” and “cooperation,” the idiom of a legitimating narrative that seeks to rewrite the past and foreclose the potentialities of an unimagined future. In the words of Mahmoud Darwish: “the nakba [the catastrophe of May 1948] is an extended present that promises to continue in the future.”17 Just as the Peace Process is founded on the legacy of partition, postcolonial studies has reproduced the First World/Third World cultural opposition. To break with this cartography of difference and inaugurate a new international politics, it will
be necessary to find a critical language that can speak of the past without reiterating it.

Notes

1. These topics, in addition to the more familiar Mid-East issues of "state formation" and "land and water," are the titles of the 10 panels.
2. I am referring especially to Foucault's analysis of discourse and Derrida's deconstruction of language. Given the tendency to reduce all forms of poststructuralist critique to "postmodern theory," it is worth noting that the methodological distinctions between Derrida and Foucault are significant and numerous. Still, their work shares a common project of unsettling the ground of the modern humanist intellectual tradition, a tradition that both totalizes and divides "human reality." See for example, Derrida's critique of philosophical anthropology in "The Ends of Man" and Foucault's "archeology of the human sciences" especially in the last chapter of The Order of Things.
3. This essay is a substantial revision of the argument that I presented at "The Uncertain State of Palestine" Conference (February 20, 1999). My paper opened the "Colonialism/Postcoloniality" panel and emphasized the marginality of Palestine within postcolonial studies. That argument now seems to me to be somewhat beside the point.
4. Discourse analysis (Said), deconstruction and Marxism (Spivak), and psychoanalysis (Bhabha) have provided the theoretical supplement for the most important contributions to the field of postcolonialism.
5. Anne McClintock makes a somewhat distinct point when she states: "If [postcolonial] theory promises decentering of history in hybridity, syncretism, multi-dimensional time and so forth, the singularity of the term effects a re-centering of global history around the single rubric of European time. Colonialism returns at the moment of its disappearance" (255).
6. On postcolonialism and globalization, see Arif Dirlik's "The Postcolonial Aura."
7. Another example of this approach is John Thieme, ed. The Arnold Anthology of Postcolonial Literatures in English. This sense of the postcolonial is also evident in the unwieldy Modern Language Association division, "English Literature other than British and American." The Modern Language Association has yet to recognize postcolonial as a division.
8. For a summary of the conceptual and the political history of "Third World" and its relation to literature, see Harlow (Resistance Literature 5-7).
9. The PMLA published a special issue titled Colonialism and the Postcolonial Condition in January 1995. In the introduction, Linda Hutcheon makes two observations that confirm the popularity of postcolonialism. She points out in a footnote that "[t]he 6 essays included in this issue were among 117 submitted for this special topic, a record number" (12). Hutcheon notes also that "Critical Inquiry, Social Text, Diacritics, and Yale French Studies — to mention only a few other general-focus journals [...] have recently given special attention to this topic" (12). A search of the relatively limited MLA bibliography
for the years 1981 to 1998 turns up over 1050 records in English that include either the term postcolonial or postcolonialism. The vast majority (1031) of these articles, dissertations and books were published after 1987. (A similarly restricted survey of the MLA bibliography using the search string “nation OR nationalism” turned up 2,796; and a search using “Third World OR Third Worldism” identified 304 records.)


11. The West Bank along with the Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem are of course the Israeli occupied territories, which Israel conquered in the June 1967 War. It is not clear to me why McClintock distinguishes the West Bank from the occupied territories.


13. Both the forced departure of some 780,000 Palestinians and the Zionist conquest of additional Palestinian lands, beyond those granted to the Jewish State, were the immediate consequence of the implementation of the Partition Plan. The transfer of Palestinians from Palestine has historically been central to Zionist designs in the Middle East. See Masalha’s Expulsion of the Palestinians.


15. Nasser’s regime is the most infamous. Following the 1956 Suez crisis — the failed British, French and Israeli invasion of Egypt — Nasser stated in his “Morrow of Independence” speech that “this phase of the revolutionary endeavour will need to draw upon all the experience of the Arab nation” (80), but only a few years later in 1959, the same government crushed the Egyptian Communist Party (Amin 141).

16. In the June 1967 war, Israel also occupied the Syrian Golan Heights and the Egyptian Sinai Peninsula. Israel annexed the Golan Heights. Following the Camp David Agreements signed in 1978, Israel began its withdrawal from Sinai, returning the peninsula almost completely to Egyptian control by 1982, the same year that Israel invaded Lebanon and established its 18 year occupation of southern Lebanon, which ended in May 2000.

17. Darwish’s speech was delivered and broadcast on May 15, 2001, on the occasion of the 53rd anniversary of effective partition and the creation of Israel, the catastrophe or nakba of the Palestinians. The speech appeared in English in Al-Abram Weekly On-Line (May 10-16, 2001). The text of the speech was also published before its delivery in a shortened and different translation in The Observer on May 13, 2001.

Works Cited


