

78. A semiological analysis of *Exodus (1960)*¹

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Abstract

This paper aims to present a semiological analysis of the film *Exodus (1960)*. The representation of Arabs in the twentieth century, especially in the second half, is very much in parallel with the political developments of the period. After the First World War, the Ottoman Empire, which had ruled the region for centuries without any significant turmoil, lost its lands in the Middle East where different races had co-existed in peace for generations. The Western powers quickly filled the power vacuum, redesigned the Middle East and created new mandates. The British Government promised the Jews to create their own state in one such mandate, Palestine, in 1917. Conflicts arose between Arabs and Jews when the latter began to purchase lands and settle in Palestine in increasing numbers. The founding of the state of Israel after the Second World War only contributed to the bloodshed. The image of Arabs as bloodthirsty terrorists begins to appear in the Western media and especially in the Hollywood films in this period. The present study undertakes to explore one such film, *Exodus (1960)*, in terms of its treatment of Arabs. The film relates the incidents that take place not long before the founding of the state of Israel in 1948.

Keywords: Semiological analysis, Representation of Arabs, Peaceful co-existence, State of Israel

Exodus (1960) filminin semiyolojik analizi

Öz

Bu çalışma *Exodus (1960)* filminin semiyolojik bir analizini sunmayı amaçlamaktadır. Arapların temsili yirminci yüzyılda ve özellikle ikinci yarısında dönemin politik gelişmeleri ile büyük ölçüde paralellik gösterir. Birinci Dünya Savaşı'ndan sonra bölgeyi önemli bir kargaşaya meydan vermeden yüzyıllarca yöneten Osmanlı İmparatorluğu, farklı ırkların nesiller boyunca barış içinde yaşadığı Orta Doğu'daki topraklarını yitirmişti. Batılı güçler oluşan güç boşluğunu çabucak doldurmuş, Orta Doğu'yu yeniden dizayn etmişler ve yeni manda yönetimleri kurmuşlardır. İngiliz Hükümeti 1917'de Yahudilere Filistin'de kendi devletlerini kurma sözü vermişlerdi. Yahudiler Filistin'de artan sayılarda arazi satın alıp yerleşmeye başladıklarında Araplar ve Yahudiler arasında çatışmalar çıktı. İkinci Dünya Savaşı'ndan sonra İsrail Devleti'nin kurulmasından sonra bu kanlı çatışmaların artmasından başka bir sonuç vermedi. Kana susamış teröristler olarak Arap imajı Batı medyasında ve özellikle Hollywood filmlerinde bu dönemde ortaya çıkmaya başlamıştır. Bu çalışma böylesi filmlerden biri olan *Exodus (1960)* filmimde Arapların nasıl ele alındığını araştırmayı amaçlamaktadır. Film İsrail Devleti'nin 1948'de kurulmasından kısa bir süre önce meydana gelen olayları konu edinmektedir.

¹ This study is based on the PhD dissertation entitled *Cinematic Representations of the Orient and Orientals* supervised by Prof. Dr. Eugene Steele

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Anahtar kelimeler: Semiyolojik analiz, Arapların temsili, Barışçıl birlikte yaşam, İsrail Devleti

Introduction

Semiotics is the study of signs and sign systems, and it investigates their function in the production of meaning. A sign is anything that stands for something else other than itself. In cultural studies, semiotics is a very useful tool to approach media texts, films, ads, fashion, etc. Its place in understanding meaning and culture is defined as follows; "It may not be an exaggeration to suggest that semiotics is the single most important set of theoretical tools that is available to cultural studies, precisely because of its power to recognize and analyze meaningful relationships in a vast range of human activities and products" (Edgar and Sedgwick, 2008, 306).

Ferdinand de Saussure is regarded as the founder of semiotics. In his dyadic model, a sign is comprised of two aspects; the signifier aspect of the sign is associated with the physical or material side of it. For example, the sound image or the visual image, or the written form of the word 'chair' is the signifier and the concept of a chair is the signified. He argued the signifier and the signified of a sign is inseparable like the two side of a coin and the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary. There is no logical explanation for why we call a chair a *chair* in the English language and not, for instance, *hairc*, or *hacir*, or *hcrat*. The proof of this argument is that the words signifying the concept of a chair are quite different in every language. It is *la silla* in Spanish, *chaise* in French, *кафедра* in Russian and so on.

James Peirce (1839-1914), an American philosopher and mathematician, proposed a triadic model of semiotics, in which a sign refers to an object (other than the sign itself) and that sign is processed in the mind of the interpretant. In order to illustrate this, let us imagine that the person A utters the word or draws the picture of a chair(sign) which refers to an actual chair in the world (object) and the interpretant is the mental image created by this process of semiosis. Peirce also distinguishes between three types of signs; icons, indexes, and symbols. Icons have a likeness of the objects they refer to. They bear a direct resemblance to their objects. For example, the round object with spikes emanating from it in a weather forecast resembles the sun and is an icon of the star in our solar system.

An index is a sign that shows a causal relationship between the index and its object. For example, an appetizing smell coming out of a kitchen is an index of a delicious meal. Finally, the relationship between a symbol and its object is dependent on convention. For example, a white dove is traditionally a symbol of peace.

Another influential figure in semiotics is Roland Barthes (1915-1980). He thought that a sign has a denotative and a connotative value. Denotation is the immediate meaning a sign brings to the mind. Connotation, on the other hand, refers to a deeper level of meaning. The denotation of a pair of sunglasses is that they are something you wear to protect your eyes from the sun. However, since anyone wearing them may claim to have a mysterious air to themselves, sunglasses ultimately may gain a status of an object that imparts its wearer a mystique of cool, distant and mysterious personality. This is the connotation level of the sign 'sunglasses'. Myth happens when the connotation of the sign is transformed into its denotation. That is, people begin to look at a pair of sunglasses not as something you wear to protect your eyes from the harmful radiation from the sun but as something that renders its wearer a cool person.

Historical Background

'Sick man of Europe' in the words of the Russian Tsar Nikolai I, the Ottoman Empire was afflicted with many problems on her receding borders towards the end of the nineteenth century. Egypt was lost to France under Napoleon in 1798. Although it was won again in 1801, Mehmet Ali Pasha of Kavala, the Ottoman governor, felt strong enough to defy the central government and later took full control of Egypt and made demands on Syria. Greece gained her independence from the Empire in 1828. The War of 1877-1878 with Russia led to further loss of territories in the Balkans, and Serbia, Montenegro, and Romania became independent. The Middle East was a peaceful province of the Empire at the end of the nineteenth century. "At the time, the political landscape of the Middle East looked different from that of today. Israel, Jordan, Syria, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia did not exist then. Most of the Middle East still rested, as it had for centuries, under the drowsy and negligent sway of the Ottoman Empire, a relatively tranquil domain in which history, like everything else, moved slowly." (Fromkin, 2001, p. 25)

The western part of the Arabian Peninsula is called the Hijaz, where the holy cities of Mecca and Medina are situated. Sharif Hussain was appointed by Sultan Abdul Hamid as the Grand Sharif of Mecca in 1908. However, Abdul Hamid was deposed several months later by the Committee of Union and Progress. Because the leaders of the Committee of Union and Progress began to follow a policy that emphasized Turkish nationalism, Arabs in Hijaz were alienated, which eased the way for the Arab Revolt in 1916.

The Young Turks replaced the traditional Muslim identity that had united Turks, Arabs, Persians, and other groups in the historical Muslim empires with a nationalist, secular Turkish state that sought dominance over its territories. Under the new regime, Arabs were discriminated against and persecuted politically and culturally. The use of Arabic for official communication was banned, as was its teaching in schools. This provoked a backlash of Arab nationalism and greater antipathy for the Ottoman occupation (Wynbrandt, 2010, p. 174).

Britain declared war on Germany on August 4, 1914. When the Ottomans sided with Germany in the war, the British declared their support for Arab independence in an attempt to foil the Sultan's call for jihad against the British. This strategy worked and Sharif Hussein was offered a kingdom of his own by the British if he did not respond to the Ottoman call for jihad and start a revolt against the Ottomans. The British provided Hussein with money and weapons. The Arab forces under Hussein's sons, Faisal and Abdullah attacked Turkish positions in June 10, 1916 but the Arab forces were mostly comprised of undisciplined Bedouin tribes, whose immediate motive was less freedom than easy loots and they tended to lose heart and dissolve in the face of smallest obstacles. The irony, however, was that the British had already made an agreement in May 16, 1916 with France as to how the Middle East was to be shared between the allied forces; Britain, France, and Russia.

The agreement derives its name from the representatives of British and French governments; Mark Sykes and Georges Picot respectively. According to the Sykes-Picot agreement, Britain is given the mandates of (Mesopotamia) Iraq, Palestine, and Jordan, and France is to have Syria and Lebanon. Russia was promised the north-east parts of the Ottoman empire where Kurds and Armenians lived predominantly.

When the October revolution took place in Russia in 1917, the new government withdrew from the war. London decided to send Lawrence, one of his ablest men, to shape the Arabs into a semblance of an army. Lawrence, from the Arab Bureau in Cairo, met Feisal and together, they won an impossible victory. They crossed hundreds of miles of desert and launched a surprise attack on the Turkish garrison at

Aqaba on July 6, 1917. This was a turning point in the progress of the war. From there, Feisal and Lawrence began their march towards Jerusalem and Damascus. Faisal entered Damascus on October 1, 1918 before the allied forces. He expected to be given the land of Syria to rule. Arabs expected the British keep their promise of a united Arab kingdom. They felt bitter when they learned that Britain and France had already decided on the future of the Middle East.

Since Britain desperately wanted to remain in control of the Suez Canal to protect her links with her colonies in India, she needed to recruit all the help she could. So, Britain made another agreement in 1917 with Zionist leaders, which went down in the annals of history as the Balfour declaration, and promised them a national home in Palestine. Zionism is a political movement that aimed to bring an end to persecution of Jews and unite all the Jews of the world in a national state. Theodor Herzl (1860-1904) was one of the most influential Zionists of the nineteenth century. He organized the first congress in Basel Switzerland in 1897. At the Congress, several options such as Uganda and Alaska were discussed as potential sites of a national home, but they eventually decided on Palestine for its religious and historical relevance.

After WW I ended on November 11, 1918, the allied powers held Paris Peace Conference to divide the former Ottoman territories among themselves. Of these, the Middle East, which had seen centuries of peace, was destined to witness endless wars and turmoil for land and domination in the coming century. "The glories of the Levantine world were only Ottoman tradition; and the centuries of peace and discretion of an imperial kind were over." (Goodwin, 2003, p. 321). Iraq and Palestine became British mandates. Arnold Wilson was put in charge of the mandate. He believed in the direct British rule until Iraqis learned to rule themselves. Arabs thought otherwise and a revolt broke out in July 1920. It was crushed in three months by the British. Winston Churchill thought the direct rule of Iraq is not a good solution and it was better to put an Arab in charge of Iraq, who would comply with British interests in the region. To this end, Faisal, Sharif Hussein's son, was made the king of Iraq in August 1921. Hussein's other son Abdullah was made the king of Jordan in 1922 as a British mandate. It remained a mandate until 1946.

Another British mandate was Palestine between 1919 and 1940. The population mainly consisted of Muslims and Jews were only a minority. The British allowed the Jewish immigration to Palestine and the Jewish population grew to be a third of the total population. As their population began to increase, Arabs grew nervous about the new situation and acts of violence took place during the 1920s and 30s. In 1936, Arabs revolted against the British, which continued until 1939 and was crushed with the help from the Zionist militia. In an effort to appease both sides,

The British issued the 1939 White Paper which stated that Jewish immigration to Palestine would be limited to 75,000 permits over the next five years. Any subsequent increases would require the permission of the Arabs, but it was highly unlikely that this would be granted. The White Paper also stated that it was not British policy that Palestine should become a Jewish state. Rather, within ten years an independent Palestinian state should be established in which Jews and Arabs would share government. (LeBor, 2007, pp. 74-75).

The White Paper satisfied neither side. Palestinian Arabs were unsympathetic to wait for another ten years to have their own state and Zionists interpreted this as a betrayal of the British promise made in the Balfour declaration. Jewish militia organizations, Haganah, Irgun, began to attack British targets. In one of the first terrorist acts of the modern era in the Middle East, they bombed the King David hotel and killed 91 and injured 45. With the start of WWII, Jewish persecution at the hands of Nazi Germany grew intense. Nearly six million Jews were annihilated in the Jewish holocaust.

Eventually, the UN accepted a partition plan of Palestine into two states in 1947. The UN partition plan gave 45 percent of the Palestinian land to the Arabs and 55 percent to the Jews. Jerusalem was to be left for international supervision. On May 14, 1948, the British left Palestine, and the state of Israel was founded. The next day, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Jordan attacked Israel. The war took a year and ended with the victory of Israel. The 45 percent land given to Palestinians was now reduced to 22 percent. Jordan took control of East Jerusalem and the West Bank and Egypt seized Gaza Strip. Over 700.000 Palestinians became refugees in the neighboring Arab states. In 1952, Free Officers in Egypt deposed King Farouk by General Negib, who was to be overthrown by Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1954.

Nasser was a charismatic and inspiring leader and advocated Arab nationalism. He even managed to unite Egypt and Syria under one political entity: The United Arab Republic (UAR) for a brief period from 1958 to 1961. He nationalized the Suez Canal, which had been under British and French control. France, Britain, and Israel took the control of the canal by taking military action. However, they had to withdraw their troops under pressure from the USA. In 1967, Israel and Arab states went to war again. This time, Israel occupied East Jerusalem, West Bank, Gaza Strip, Sinai Peninsula and Golan Heights. The UN stepped in and issued the Resolution 242 requiring that Israel withdraw from the occupied territories and Arab states recognize Israel's right to exist. "Soon after the war, the heads of the Arab states met in Khartoum, Sudan, to negotiate a unified position. At Khartoum, Arab leaders decided on the famous "three nos": no negotiations with Israel, no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel." (Gelvin, 2011, p. 287).

The Arab world was shocked and humiliated by the outcome of the 1967 war. Leaders of Egypt and Syria desperately needed to restore the lands they lost to Israel and the heal the wounded pride of Arab nationalism. They launched a surprise attack on October 6, 1973, on the Yom Kippur Day. Arab forces gained significant victories in the early days of the war. But, Israel recovered from the initial shock and received considerable military aid from the USA. When the war ended on October 25, there were no significant territorial losses or gains on either side.

The Yom Kippur War was a stalemate-the Arabs had not won, but, for the first time, nor had they lost. The Yom Kippur War was a profound shock to Israel. Sadat had destroyed the myth of Israel invincibility, a necessary precursor, many believed, for any long-term peace agreement between Israel and its neighbors. (LeBor, 2007, p. 230).

Arabs felt so strongly about Palestine and hated Israel so much that any Arab leader talking about peace and compromise were regarded as a traitor to the cause. Anwar Sadat's visit to Israel and addressing the Israeli Parliament Knesset in 1977 shocked the Arab the world. He signed Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty in 1979 with Israeli Prime minister Menachem Begin, and thus Egypt became the first Arab nation to recognize the state of Israel. "The treaty was greeted with fury in the Arab world, Sadat was denounced as a traitor and Egypt was expelled from the Arab League" (LeBor, 2007, p. 236). In return, the Sinai Peninsula that was lost to Israel in the six-day-war in 1967 was returned to Egypt. Sadat was killed in a military parade commemorating the eighth anniversary of Egypt's success at crossing the canal. The assassination was carried out by the Egyptian Islamic Jihad for his efforts at making peace with Israel and betrayal of the Palestinian cause. Disillusioned with the Arab states as their sponsors, Palestinians began forming resistance movements in late 1950s, the chief of which was Fatah founded by Yasir Arafat.

In the early 1960s, Arafat and his people numbered only a few dozen members. They were in their thirties, mostly from refugee families who in their youth experienced uprooting and loss of home. The sons of the "generation of defeat," they had seen their parents conquered in battle and unable to build

new homes in the neighboring Arab countries. ... From the moment they formulated a political philosophy based on the need to crystallize a united Palestinian entity by means of a violent struggle against Israel, they challenged their whole environment: Israel, the Arab states, the Arab rulers and that ideology of the Arab states which had neglected the Palestinian cause. (Rubinstein, 1995, p. 47).

The late 60s and early 70s saw the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) rise to prominence. “In October 1974, the Arab heads of state, meeting in Rabat, recognized the PLO as the “sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people on any liberated Palestinian territory.” (Goldschmidt, 2010, p. 353). It consisted of several resistance groups such as the Marxist-Leninist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), Popular Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PDFLP), Arab Liberation Front (ALF) supported by Iraq, the Syrian-sponsored group SAIQA, Arafat’s Fatah and the most notorious of them all, the Black September, which was created after the PLO was forced to leave Jordan. Its first terrorist act was to gun down Jordanian Prime Minister Wasif al-Tel in 1971 in Cairo as a revenge act for PLO’s expulsion from Jordan. However, it is most well-known for its massacre of eleven Israeli athletes in 1972 Munich Olympics.

When the radical Black September organization killed several Israeli athletes at the Olympic Games in Munich in 1972, Arafat promptly stated that the PLO was not responsible for the attacks. Arafat closed down the Black September organization in 1973, and in 1974 he ordered the PLO to restrict its violent attacks to Israel, the Gaza Strip, and the West Bank. (Tucker and Roberts, 2008, p. 783).

After the PLO was driven out of Jordan in 1970, they moved their headquarters to Lebanon. However, their presence there led to further complications in a country already fractured by ethnic and sectarian divisions. Their military activities against Israel culminated in Israel’s invasion of Lebanon in 1982 to obliterate the PLO once and for all. PLO was forced out of the country and Arafat moved his headquarters to Tunis.

Meanwhile, the daily life for the average Palestinian in the Occupied Territories of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip was becoming ever harder. “The oppression of the Palestinians and their deteriorating economic conditions had resulted in daily protest demonstrations, strikes, and confrontations with the occupation soldiers throughout the territories.” (Abu Sharif, 2009, p. 157). PLO coordinated random and isolated instances of protests into a massive uprising, the Intifada (meaning shaking off). Young people covering their faces with the kaffiyeh and using only slingshots against well-armed Israeli soldiers became a cultural icon of Palestinian struggle to regain their land and dominated news programs all over the world, swaying the public opinion in favor of the Palestinians.

“The media covered the Israeli aggression, thereby increasing international support for the Palestinian people. The media began to see a new David and Goliath story unfolding each day, as young Palestinian children threw stones at the Israeli Goliath safely sitting in tanks and armored vehicles.” (Abu Sharif, 2009, p. 160).

Another outcome of the Intifada is the emergence of Hamas, secretly encouraged by Israel to weaken the PLO. “Some of the local leaders, disillusioned with the secularist PLO, founded a Muslim resistance movement, patterned on Hizballah, called Hamas (meaning “Courage” or “Movement of Islamic Resistance”). It has since been proved that Israel covertly aided its emergence as a rival to the PLO.” (Goldschmidt, 2010, p. 407). Hamas did extensive social work in especially Gaza, opening schools and hospitals, providing financial aid to the families of its fallen members. However, it was also engaged in terrorist acts against Israelis mostly in the form of suicide bombing.

After the First Intifada and in the early 1990s when the whole world sympathized with the plight of the Palestinian people, Arafat saw the need to renounce terror and seek a peaceful solution to the Palestinian

issue. Bassam Abu Sharif, a senior adviser to Arafat, recounts in his *Arafat and the Dream of Palestine* the way to Oslo and beyond.

I convinced Arafat to put the political ideas he had expressed in the past two months into a comprehensive peace proposal for resolving the conflict between the Palestinians and Israel. His proposal was to put forward, for the first time, the establishment of a lasting peace based on "two states on the historic land of Palestine." I suggested that we publish the peace proposal in U.S. and European newspapers under his name. This way the Western public would have a chance to see that Arafat was a man of peace who wanted an independent state for his people. I told him we would be able to put the ball back in the West's court, and the PLO would finally be a key player on the Middle East peace map, rather than just labeled as an organization run by terrorists. (p. 164).

The secret peace talks that began in Oslo in 1993 were finalized in Washington D.C. on September 13, 1993. Israel recognized the PLO as the representative of the Palestinian people and Arafat recognized the state of Israel and gave up violence as a means to achieve political ends. Hosted by US President Bill Clinton, Israeli Premier Yitzhak Rabin, and PLO Chairman Yasir Arafat shook hands, "symbolically ending their long enmity." (Goldschmidt, 2010, p. 411).

Palestinian Authority was established in parts of Gaza and the West Bank, and Arafat was elected the president in 1995. Both sides received harsh criticism and even violence from their own supporters. In 1994, an Israeli fanatic raided Ibrahim Mosque in Hebron and killed 29 and wounded over a hundred Palestinians that were praying at the time. Rabin was killed by an Israeli fanatic in 1995. On the Palestinian side, Hamas violently opposed Arafat's plan to give up violence and continue the struggle in the political area. However, what had been achieved in Oslo was thwarted and hopes for a peaceful existence between Arabs and Israelis were crushed once again when Benyamin Netanyahu took office as the Prime Minister in 1996. "He harbored an enduring and unshakeable hostility toward Arabs, especially the PLO. Believing that Israel's military superiority gave him a free hand, he arrogantly, foolishly and wrongly believed that he could force the PLO to give up the goal of a Palestinian state." (Bickerton, 2009, p. 179).

Second Intifada and a new wave of intensive violence broke out in 2000 when Ariel Sharon, accompanied by an entourage of a thousand Israeli policemen visited the Mount Temple, where the Al-Aqsa Mosque is situated. Palestinians saw this as an act of provocation. In the ensuing violence, Israeli policemen used live ammunition against Palestinian protesters. "The deaths of several young Palestinians set off a cycle of violence that resulted in the deaths of close to 500 people and the wounding of more than 8,000, most of them Palestinians, within six months." (Bickerton, 2009, 185).

The early 2000s were a time when Arafat began to decline in health and popularity and more radical factions such as Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Hezbollah emerged as the contenders for the title of the champions of the Palestinian struggle. Arafat died in Paris in 2004 and was replaced by Mahmoud Abbas as the leader of the Palestinian National Authority in 2005. Israel withdrew from Gaza in 2005, which had been under Israeli occupation since 1967 war. Abbas faced a challenge from Hamas and lost the parliamentary elections to Hamas in January 2006, which took over political control in Gaza. The PLO under Abbas controls the West Bank and is the official representative of the Palestinian people. Hamas blames PLO for accepting Israel's right to exist and disregards the decisions they make in their peace talks with the state of Israel. This eventually led to armed conflict between two Palestinian groups, which continued until 2011. The Palestinian-Israeli conflict has basically revolved around the violence between Fatah and Hamas and unfruitful peace talks between Palestinian Authority and Israel. Peace in the Middle East is still elusive.

EXODUS (1960)

Filmography

Production: Carlyle Productions

Production Date: 1960

Director: Otto Preminger

Cast: Paul Newman (Ari Ben Canaan), Eva Marie Saint (Katherine Freemont), Taha (John Derek), Ralph Richardson (General Sutherland)

Music: Ernest Gold

Length: 208 minutes

Synopsis

The film relates the events taking place a short time before the founding of the state of Israel in 1948. Jews from Europe and elsewhere in the world charter ships and go to Palestine. But, since the British authorities do not want to anger Arabs and try to limit the number of Jewish immigrants to Palestine, they capture ships carrying Jewish passengers and send them to camps on Cyprus. Ari Ben Canaan, a Haganah officer, is sent to Cyprus on a secret mission to smuggle the passengers of the newly-captured ship *the Star of David*. He arranges the ship *Olympia*, renamed *Exodus*, for transport and was about to leave the port of Famagusta when the British authorities found out about the plan. They blockade the passage of the ship first, but, they had to back down when the passengers go on a hunger strike and Ari threatens to blow up the ship. Katherine (Kitty) Freemont is an American nurse and acts as a mediator between Ari Ben Canaan and British General Sutherland and helps the solution. Kitty meanwhile falls in love with Ari and decides to go with Ari. They embark on their journey and arrive at Haifa, where Jewish organization Irgun, whose leader is Ari's uncle Akiva Ben Canaan, is engaged in terrorist attacks against the British. They bomb the King David Hotel and kill nearly 100 British soldiers. The United Nations vote for the partition of Palestine and the state of Israel is founded. Arabs revolt and bloody conflicts ensue. They attack Gan Dafna and kill its villagers. Taha, the mukhtar of the village Abu Yesha, warns Ari about the plan, and he manages to get the younger children of the town out. Karen and Taha are killed by Arabs. Karen and Taha are buried together in one grave. At the burial ceremony, Ari swears that someday, Jews and Arabs will live together peacefully. After the burial, the film ends with Jews getting into trucks and heading towards the battlefield.

Exodus

The film is based on Leon Uris' novel by the same title, which was published in 1958. It was a phenomenal success and sold millions of copies. According to McAlister (2001), Uris' novel and the subsequent film adaptation became a reference book from which Americans learned about Israel. She goes on to comment about how the book and the film present Arabs, "At the same time, both the film and the novel are decisively anti-Arab. The novel is simply vicious, littered with every imaginable stereotype—from Arabs who smell like goats to the once-beloved Arab friend who dares to desire a Jewish woman." (McAlister, 2001, p. 161).

The word “Exodus” is a very powerful one and is associated with millennia of Jewish culture and history. Bible tells us that Jews lived in Egypt as slaves until Moses and his brother Aaron were sent by God to deliver the children of Israel from bondage. They go to Pharaoh and demand that he let them go. Pharaoh refuses and the land of Egypt is struck with ten plagues as punishment from God. Pharaoh relents and lets them out of Egypt. But, then he changes his mind and chases them to the shores of the Red Sea. God tells Moses to strike the waters of the sea with his staff, the sea is parted, Moses and the children of Israel walk to safety and Pharaoh and his army drown in the sea.

This biblical account of Exodus is brought to life again and again throughout the film to impart legitimacy to the Jewish claims on the land of Palestine. When Kitty is trying to persuade Ari to call off the hunger strike,

Kitty: You think I’m a fool. But, I came to appeal to you to call off the hunger strike and avoid a tragedy.

Ari: Why don’t you appeal to General Sutherland?

Kitty: What can I tell him?

Ari: Tell him what God said to Moses: “Go unto Pharaoh and say unto him, “Thus saith the Lord: “Let my people go, that they may serve me”



Image 1. The Valley of Jezreel

In another scene, Kitty and Ari are on their way to Gan Dafna and stop at a place where they can overlook the Valley of Jezreel.

Ari: If you dug straight down far enough there, you’d find the ruins of Megiddo. You’d find the very same paving stones that Joshua walked on when he conquered it. (Pause for a second) That’s Mount Taboor.

Kitty: I remember where Deborah gathered her armies.

Ari: That’s where she stood when she watched Barak march out to fight the Canaanites. So Barak went down from Mount Taboor, and 10.000 men with him. The Canaanites had 900 iron chariots but Barak had men. 3200 years ago. That’s when the Jews first came to this valley. It wasn’t just yesterday or the day before.

Parallels are drawn between the events of a distant past and those of today. Ari becomes a Moses figure in his struggles to free his people from a foreign yoke, and he is Barak when he leads his men into the battlefield against Arabs. “Ari Ben Canaan is a great military leader who wants nothing more than to live simply on his family farm. He represents Israel as a nation that is sufficiently manly to go to war but sufficiently moral to regret war’s necessity.” (McAlister, 2001, 160)

Jews conquered Palestine after a fight with Canaanites. History will repeat itself and once more they will conquer Palestine, this time after a fight with Arabs, their new enemy.

Like the word “Exodus”, the word “Jerusalem”, too, has a wide range of connotations commensurate with its millennia of turbulent history. It is perhaps the one city that has had the most tumultuous history from its founding to this day. It has always been contested by a host of nations, empires, countries and religious parties ever since King David declared it to be the capital of Israel around the year 1000 BC. After David, his son Solomon ruled over Israelites and built the Temple in around the mid-tenth century BC., which was to be destroyed some four hundred years later in 586 BC by the invading Babylonians. Its citizens were enslaved and taken to Babylon and they were freed by King Cyrus after Babylon fell to the Persians in 539 BC. Solomon’s Temple was built for the second time only to be destroyed again by the Romans in 70 CE. The city was where Jesus Christ was crucified and therefore, have religious significance for Christians. It is also regarded as sacred by Muslims because they prayed towards Jerusalem in the early days of Islam and it also houses the Dome of the Rock. Nearly half a century after the city was conquered by Muslims in 637 CE, Muslims built the Al-Aqsa mosque in 691 CE, which includes the Dome of Rock that is built on the rock from where Prophet Muhammad is believed to have started his Night Journey and ascended to the heavens. Jerusalem was ruled by Arabs, Fatimids, Seljuk Turks, Crusaders, Egyptians and Mamlukes until it was conquered by the Ottomans in 1516 and stayed under Ottoman rule until 1917. Apart from four centuries of peace and calm, its history has mostly been one of bloodshed and tears. Like a beautiful princess whose beautiful face that launched a thousand ships, it has always been the much sought-after prize.

Jerusalem is the Holy City, yet it has always been a den of superstition, charlatanism, and bigotry; the desire and prize of empires, yet of no strategic value; the cosmopolitan home of many sects, each of which believes the city belongs to them alone; a city of many names-yet each tradition is so sectarian it excludes any other. This is a place of such delicacy that it is described in Jewish sacred literature in the feminine-always a sensual, living woman, always a beauty, but sometimes a shameless harlot, sometimes a wounded princess whose lovers have forsaken her. (Montefiore, 2011, p. xxv).

Representation in Absence

Grand Mufti of Jerusalem threatens with violence against Jews should the partition be accepted in the United Nations Assembly. Grand Mufti is a historical person and his threat is a historical phenomenon and actually happened. However, Ari Ben Canaan and his father Barak Ben Canaan, who advocate peace for Arabs and Jews in the land, are fictive characters. The narrative of the film takes a historical figure and two fictive characters and creates the illusion that Jews are peaceful and Arabs are fanatics. Ari and Barak were never present and they are represented in their absence.

Another instance of representation in absence is that Arabs are depicted as cruel terrorists but we never see them in the film. Karen Hansen talks about Dafna, foreshadowing her own death and that of Taha’s at the hands of invisible Arabs;

-She was a young soldier. The Arabs captured her and tortured her to find out things from her. But, she would not tell. So, they sent her back to Yad El in a sack tied to the back of a mule. They cut off her hands and her feet, and they gouged out her eyes. But, she wouldn't tell them anything.

Arabs are not given a voice. We never have the chance to look at things from their perspective.

Israelis and Arabs

Historically, Arabs and Jews were caught up in a series of bloody conflicts. What they did were essentially the same thing; using violence to achieve political ends. Who started it all is irrelevant. But, when it comes to representation, it is the Arabs that get negative descriptions. Irgun members bomb King David Hotel and nearly a hundred British soldiers are dead, but they are called 'freedom fighters'.

Kitty and General Sutherland are having tea and biscuits and conversing about the latest developments in the crisis of the passengers on board Olympia whose passage to Palestine has been blocked by the British authority.

Sutherland: You must understand that we British have shown, throughout our history, an extraordinary talent for troublesome commitments. Palestine is a British mandate imposed upon us by the League of Nations, which makes us responsible for keeping the peace in the area. The Arabs simply won't keep the peace if we allow further Jewish immigration.

Kitty: I don't know much about the mandate. But I do know that Jews were promised a homeland in Palestine.

Sutherland: During the First World War, Britain needed and accepted Jewish support from all over the world. In return, the Balfour Declaration of 1917 made such a promise. That promise was reconfirmed during World War II.

Kitty: How can you promise something and then not deliver it?

Sutherland: England was fighting for her life in 1917. Nations are very like people in such circumstances. They make promises they are not immediately able to fulfill. During the same crisis, we made the Arabs certain assurances. Hence, they have their claims, too. The Arabs are fanatics on the subject of Jewish immigration.

Sutherland, on the surface, makes candid confessions about the role Britain played in creating the conflict. However, his candor takes an opposite turn in the last minute and points the finger at the Arabs, who 'simply won't keep peace' and are 'fanatics'. At some point in the conversation, he receives a phone call, gets up from the table with a biscuit in his hand which he was about to eat and learns that Jews on board Olympia/Exodus have gone on hunger strike. After he hangs up the phone, he informs Kitty of the situation and looking at the biscuit in his hand, he puts it away as an act of solidarity with them or as if he is ashamed of himself when hundreds of innocent Jews go hungry.



Image 2. An orderly society

Due to the shortage of drinking water, it is rationed and every individual is allowed one cup every four hours. Image 16 shows the people in line for their water rations and everyone respects the rights of others in a microcosm of perfectly functioning civilized society. They obey their leader's orders and a harmony and a sense of camaraderie prevail among them.



Image 3. Flurry of activity on board

The ship Exodus that is to take Jewish passengers to Palestine is overpacked with hundreds of them. It is summertime and it is hot, an ideal condition for diseases to break out. However, they get organized, establish a medical committee led by Dr. Odenheim and build toilets and baths from wood. Everyone has to wash his body with seawater. Image 3 shows people busy with building toilets and baths.



Images 4, 5,6. Daily life at Gan Dafna

Images 18 show examples of daily activities at the kibbutz Gan Dafna. The activities are all directed at improving the artistic skills and physical well-being of the children, which ultimately make them productive individuals of the society. As the inheritors of the future of Israel, they must be taught and trained well.



Images 7. Chess players

Images of chess playing appear three times in the film, two of which above portray the Jewish characters playing it. Chess is a game which requires intellectual capacity, concentration, and clever planning. Emphasis is put on the intellectuality, creativity, and productivity of Jews again and again throughout the film as opposed to the destructiveness of Arabs. The contents of the images 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 assign all the commendable qualities to the Jewish people creating the impression that these qualities are exclusive to them. Such claims gain the status of a myth if they are repeated often in the media like the quotation below,

“In nearly every society in which the Jews have lived for the past two thousand years, they have been better educated, more sober, more charitable with one another, committed far fewer violent crimes, and have had a more stable family life than their non-Jewish neighbors.” (Prager and Telushkin, 2003, p. 30).

or a more ambitious claim as the following,

The Jews started it all-and by “it” I mean so many of the things we care about, the underlying values that make all of us, Jew and Gentile, believer and atheist, tick. Without the Jews, we would see the world through different eyes, hear with different ears, even feel with different feelings. ... For better or worse, the role of the West in humanity’s history is singular. Because of this, the role of the Jews, the inventor of the Western culture, is also singular: there is simply no one else remotely like them; theirs is a unique vocation. (Cahill, 1998, p. 3).

When they started their hunger strike, they threw all the food on board into the sea. Dr. Odenheim later realizes that this was a mistake. Because there are children on board and they should not have been forced to strike. Dr. Odenheim goes to talk to Ari,

Dr. Odenheim: We made a mistake, a bad mistake in letting the children be a part of this. A child’s body grows every hour. They need food more than adults. Their blood requires more sugar.

Ari: What should we do about it?

Dr. Odenheim: When a mistake is made, you admit it, you analyze it and you correct it.

Dr. Odenheim is presented as an exemplary character who can admit his mistakes and act in a rational and scientific way. When he dies, Ari describes him as the “head of the first clinic for Internal Medicine at the University of Vienna, author of many medical textbooks died today in the harbor of Famagusta” emphasizing his intellectuality and productivity.

Upon disembarkation at the Port of Haifa, Dove Landau separates from the group and goes to join Irgun. British police become suspicious of him and take him into custody. When they check his papers, they see he is a legal immigrant. At the police station, an officer releases him and says,

Police Officer: Immigration says you're legal, so we've no reason to keep you. The Jewish Agency sent a bus ticket and lunch money. You're assigned to Gan Dafna. Now, you take my advice and go there. Don't hang around Haifa. You'll get in trouble, and don't wander into Arab section. Or, you'll run into one of Grand Mufti's gangsters. They'll kill you, son. They'll slit your throat.

The police officer's graphic description of the murder of an Israeli by 'gangsters' creates an impression of Arabs not only as plain murderers but murderers with a quality of monstrosity as well. Killing a person by shooting is one thing, and killing them by slitting their throats is quite another. The latter requires one to be deprived of all humane qualities. Arabs are once again represented in their absence.



Image 6. Taha is hanged by Arab terrorists

The number of Arabs that appear in the film is astonishingly few, considering the ratio of the Jewish population to that of Arabs at the time, which is 1 Jew to every 100 Arabs. We learn this when Kitty says to Ari,

Kitty: Please, understand me. I wish you could win. I wish it were possible for you to have a country of your own. But, it isn't. You are offering the lives of these people for something that can never happen. Mr. Ben Canaan, even if you get the partition and a free Jewish state, the Arabs won't let you keep it. 500.000 Jews against fifty million Arabs? You can't win.

The absence of Arabs in the film may be interpreted as the Jewish idea of an ideal Palestine; with as few Arabs as possible and the removal of those few after they have served the interests of Jews as is the case with Taha and his late father Kammal before him. We learn from Barak Ben Canaan that Kammal donated the land on which Gan Dafna was built and died. Now, it is Taha's turn to do so. Taha informs Ari of the Arab plan to attack Gan Dafna and tells him to evacuate it. After he serves the well-being of the Jews, he is conveniently removed from the film.

Conclusion

The film takes a biased stance against Arabs. Basically, Arabs are there to serve as foils to Jews. By juxtaposing Arabs and Jews, the film presents a rational, orderly and humane image of Jews as opposed to irrational, animal-like Arabs who are out there terrorizing innocent Jews. The film is dominated by Jewish characters whereas there is only one character with a name and proper function. Arabs are mostly anonymous characters with no distinctive personality traits except that they are a vengeful and murderous horde.

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