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The Politics of the Liberal Cinema: A Reading of Israeli Palestinian-Wave Movies

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Abstract:

The article is an attempt to analyze a new genre of Israeli cinema - the liberal Israeli Palestinian-Wave, a term introduced by the feminist film critic Ella Shohat, which emerged during the 1980s and made a rebirth with the dawn of the millennium. The movies of the Israeli director Eran Riklis- *Zayatoun* and *Lemon Tree*, are analysed to prove that their liberal attitude is a façade. Israel has been encountering indictment from the rest of the world for its inhuman treatment of Palestinians. While trying to voice the concerns of Palestine, the movies subtly defend Israel and its 'democratic' policies.

Keywords: politics, ideology, Middle East, liberalism, Israeli Palestinian-New Wave movies, orientalism.

Art does have a quite particular & specific relationship with ideology...What art makes us see, and therefore gives to us in the form of 'seeing', 'perceiving' and 'feeling', is the ideology from which it is born, in which it bathes, from which it detaches itself as art, and to which it alludes

- Louis Althusser

Cinema, being the highest form of popular art, dons quite efficiently the endorsing of ideologies perchance more assiduously than any other art form. This stature of cinema owes its indebtedness to its images that transcends all kinds of social, cultural, geographical and linguistic barriers. It has become a culture in itself and created a common tradition and language which could unite people across borders. The visibility of cinema has made it a popular medium for dispersing ideas and ideologies under the garb of fantasy and fiction.

The ideological stance that it often takes makes cinema a political tool particularly popular among the wielders of power. The 20th century saw the collapse of autocracy and colonialism bringing forth an era of democracy and freedom. The hitherto colonized states attained self-rule and celebrated their independence in grand style. However geopolitics and power began to play its part in the newly created lands. Borders became war zones with countries and states vying to capture and claim more land to their territories. Battles became a

routine endeavour while peace talks and treaties were made in plenty. The most conspicuous among the warring nations of the 21st century is the Middle East nations- Palestine and Israel.

Palestine and Israel had placed the Middle East at centre of global attention. The decade long crisis of the Israel-Palestine furthered with the legitimation of the Palestinian land to the segregated Jews, forming the State of Israel in 1948. It is through culture that a group preserves its identity. After depriving Palestinians of their home Israel was relentlessly in pursuit of proving their legitimacy over the land. The dispossessed Palestinians rendered helpless amid a strong Israel supported by the powerful West. Systematic attempts were made by Israel to curtail the cultural embodiments of Palestine vis-à-vis language, literature, religion and other arts. They gave secondary citizenship to its Palestinian nationals, destroyed their language, obliterated their sovereignty and made stagnant their arts.

Israel employed its movie industry to justify its claims of the land, adopting the techniques of nostalgia, memory and depicting Palestine as the usurpers of their land. The trend continued till the late 1980s when they began to produce a series of movies discussing the plight of the Palestinians. A liberal attitude towards Palestinian cause became apparent in these movies which made Ella Shohat call these movies “Liberal Israeli Palestinian-Wave movies” (216). The attitude was more obvious during the dawn of the millennium especially in the movies of the Israeli director Eran Riklis. A study of the evolution of the Israeli movie industry will lay bare the politics lurking under the cinematic garb.

The beginnings of Israeli films were restricted to travelogues, documentaries and newsreels, exclusively made with the purpose of exploiting the Palestinian locale, the Promised Land fashioned in the Bible. They took the story of Christ from the textual plane of the Bible and reproduced it in the ‘actual’ mythical region of birth of the God Son via the reel. The forerunner of Israeli film industry, Nathan Axlerod began his direction of *The Pioneer*, a low budget film but could not finish it finding himself languishing in the maze following the footsteps of his other counterpart novices. The earliest Israeli movies were the attempts by the Yishuv, the settler Jews who were in Palestine before the formation of Israel. Between the years 1931-1934, Baruch Agadati produced a newsreel *Yoman Aga* and most of the documentaries of the period presented the early Zionist history in Palestine reiterating the Biblical story of the return of the Jews to their homeland. The themes propounded during the Yishuv period were rather ideological and propagandist than truthful representation.

The first narrative film of Yishuv, *Oded the Wanderer* was a silent movie and took two years for its completion. Akin to a modern road movie, *Oded* tells the story of a boy who had lost his way during a school trip and later safely brought back home by his father. The movie features the boy’s escapades and wanderings on the streets of Israel, knowing his home and mulling over his land which he dearly knew from the Bible.

The period between 1950 and 1960 was a watershed period in the history of Israel with the establishment of Israeli Television. The Zionist films received popularity across the western world owing to the curiosity and delightedness in seeing land of the birth of god son although in reel. Meanwhile the Arab world received these films with derision and anger, calling it a Zionist propaganda. *Eretz Israel Awakening*, a Zionist travelogue captures scenes of towns and valleys in Palestine and also used Hebrew language as its narrative voice over. The movie gave images of the valley of Jezereel which is now desolate owing to the absence of its people. The film tries hard to coalesce the biblical past with the present. These images lured in the Israelites, a nostalgia and yearning to go back to their real home which they had seen only in the pages of texts or on the TV screen.

Oded the Wanderer inaugurated orientalism on Israeli screen. The movie presented only Israeli characters with the utmost neglect of Arabs. They were given meagre or no role. A few Arabs featured in the movie were shown as savage and uncouth who looks upon the Israelis with awe and admiration for their education, western clothing and sophistication. The movies also featured how the Israelis undertook the hazardous job of civilizing the barbaric Arabs as part of their missionary work.

Sabra, the first sound film from Israel, wavers from the hitherto theme of nostalgia and focused on the cruelties meted out to Israelis by the blood-thirsty Arabs and the heroic and stoic resistance and perseverance by the Israeli hero. The orient/occident binary division was subtly brought out with the Israeli /Western hero being presented as strong, manly and powerful, and overpowers the Arabic/oriental enemy who is weak and docile. The camera acts as the western gaze who absorbs the oriental land and its people from the perspective of a foreigner.

It is in this movie that the Jewish language Hebrew was first taken up, and initiated the absolute disregard for Yiddish language from Israeli movies. Everything Arabic in Israel was prohibited and even casting was done on this basis, with actors having Arabic accent were rejected while European accented actors were readily accepted.

Israeli movie industry produced not many movies between *Oded*, *Sabra* and 1948, the year of the formation of the State of Israel. Post 1948 movies from Israel harped on heroic nationalistic themes about soldiers, war and their victory over the Arabs. Narratives of this period took a novel turn by adopting objective point of view and voice over narration. The movies of the period *Sword in the Desert*, *Exodus*, *Judith*, *Cast a Giant Shadow* etc. centered on the themes of mixed romance, Jewish Diaspora, and Jewish virtues. The trend continued till 1967, the year which shook the Middle East, the Arab war. The aftermath of the war was a complete change of the theme and treatment in Israeli cinema. The concept of mutual co-existence was restated with repression of the enemy which is best exemplified in *60 Hours to Suez*. From early to mid-60s there emerged a new trend in Israeli film industry- the dawn of socialist comedies. The poor and modest Israel and its topography were transformed into urban sophisticated ones. The era of 1960s was the age of the second generation Jews. The

sophistication also found a discernible effect in the language too; the Palestinians / Jewish characters using English while the Arabs, Arabic. English began to stand as synonym for Hebrew or Jew.

'Bourekas' films of the 1970s were another novel trend that the Israeli movie industry had experimented with. Another problematic issue took up by this popular movie genre was the conflict between the Sephardi, the Oriental Jew and Ashkenazi, the native Jew. Alongside this popular mass movies were budded personal film making which opposed the Bourekas or the commercial film industry which began during the late 60s and flourished till the late 70s. From subjective heroes and heroic themes, the personal film makers with the likes of Uri Zohar, Golan and Frey centered their films around more universalistic themes and protagonists without any socio-political biases. However these personal films could hardly compete with the financial success of the mass movies. The impetus behind these films include the various film festivals, film magazines etc. which ushered into Israeli film industry offering a new film culture altogether of which Zohar's *Hole in the Moon* was the best example. It used the techniques of surrealism, parody, pastiche, self-reflexivity and nonsensical narration. After 1980s, Israeli movie industry flourished juxtaposed with Bourekas on one hand and individual efforts of art movie directors on the other.

Such individual efforts made by Daniel Wachsmann (*Hamsin*), Uri Barbash (*Beyond the Walls*) and Eran Riklis (*Cup Final*) resulted in the birth of a new genre. Emerging in the twenty first century, this new genre termed by Ella Shohat as liberal Israeli "Palestine Wave" movies placed at its centre the sufferings and anxieties of the Palestinian populace, a trend hitherto unobserved in Israeli movie industry since its birth in the 1940s (235). These 'liberal' movies narrated the anxieties of Palestine and its people, envisioning them as part of the Israeli land and culture, authorizing them with narratives promoting peaceful co-existence, and thereby attaining a liberalist status in the global academic scene. Essentially the Israeli liberalism was restricted to a subtle portrayal of Palestinian suffering and angst, while promoting alongside its authoritarian agenda of Palestinian assimilation. The Israeli new liberal trend toward Palestine faded during the 1990s with the Oslo peace treaty of 1993 and went about exploiting domestic Jewish themes.

Afraid of the infamous status of a colonizer, with Palestine lately gaining global sympathy with the dawn of millennium, Israel could no longer afford anti-Palestine movies which would invite worldwide criticism. In order to propagate the politics of a peaceful Israel-Palestine co-existence and justifying its people including the soldiers and bureaucrats by deliberately blaming an abstract state system, Israeli movie industry took an easygoing attitude toward the Palestinian demands for a free nation. The 'Palestinian wave' was essentially an Israeli response to the budding Palestine movie industry which made its beginnings in the 1990s, but gained wide acclaim and acceptance in the twenty first century, exhibiting nationalism through an unaccented Palestinian voice and articulating exclusively, the angst and hopes of the Palestinian populace. The Palestinian wave in Israeli cinema exhibited underneath its liberal

ornamental cloak an anti-Palestine ideology; covertly criticizing the Palestine movies' narratives on pan-Islamic nationalism.

The prominent director of the Palestinian wave was the renowned Israeli director Eran Riklis. His film *Zaytoun* is set in Beirut, Lebanon during the Lebanon War of 1982. The title of the movie *Zayatounis* the Arabic word for an olive. The Movie features a Palestinian boy Fahed alias Zico living in one of the Palestinian refugee settlements in Lebanon. It opens with a train of Palestinian boys playing football on the streets of Lebanon and the natives showering abuses on them asking them to go home. The predicament of the displaced and dispossessed Palestinians is presented at the very outset of the film. Fahed alongside other Palestinian boys sneaks out of their 'home' and do jobs like selling gums and cigarettes on the streets. A camp was organised by the PLO for the Palestinian refugees and they recruited children to their organization. They hunt children down and take them to the camp where they were given training in handling weapons.

After his escapades, Fahed returns to his camp where his father chides him for being with the group and he replies that he wants to liberate Palestine. Fahed's nostalgic memory of his home is presented by some pictures of his mother and his father's planting of an olive (*Zaytoun*) in a vase while teaching him how to sprinkle water on it with his mouth. When grandfather asks him to plant it, father tells him that he would plant it in his home when they return. He hopes to go back to his homeland soon in order to see his home in Israel occupied Palestine. As they were talking a huge noise was heard outside. An air raid and missile attack follow resulting in the killing of Fahed's father. The camera focuses on the broken vase with the *Zaytoun* and Fahed crying and removing the vase and planting the olive in a tin, sprinkling water as taught by his father.

The aftermath of the attack was represented by the vacant seats in classrooms with a bouquet for the dead students. Zico enters the class, greeted by these tragic images and he silently sits and opens his book. He gets to the last page of his book and writes down the names of Palestinian martyrs and adds to that list his father's name.

The scene shifts to the training camp where Fahed asks one of the men when would they go home to Palestine and he asks him to be patient. Fahed then tells him how badly he wants to kill the Israelis and throw them into the sea. While Fahed's longing for his home is nurtured by the stories that he heard from his father and grandfather, his hatred for Israel is reinforced by the witnessing of the series of deaths by the Israeli troops.. He vows to destroy his enemy and then go back to his home in Palestine.

During one of his training sessions, he sees an Israeli jet overhead and he shoots it down with his gun. The Israeli pilot, Yoni was captured and they beat him up and took him prisoner. The extent of Fahed's hatred for Israel is evident from his hostile attitude towards Yoni. He tortures him and even shoots him in his leg. In another instance one of the humane characters in the gang of children Ahmed was shot by the Israeli army while crossing the border. The attacks suggest the mutual hatred of both Nations towards each other. Ahmed's death added one more name to Fahed's list of Palestinian martyrs.

Fahed releases Yoni with the promise of taking him to his home in Palestine. He takes the olive plant, his mother's picture, his football and the keys of his home in Palestine. Yoni and Fahed together undertake their journey home which was fraught with series of hardships. The enmity between the two develops into comradeship and later on into a better understanding of each other. Finally both of them reach Israeli and Yoni was welcomed by cheers by his colleagues. The boy was treated better in the Israeli camp but he was not happy for Yoni was helpless to take the boy to his home in Palestine.

Seeing Fahed, the Israeli soldiers humorously call him a terrorist. Fahed tells Yoni his desire to go home and see his mother's grave. Disregarding his friends' advices, Yoni takes Fahed in his car and sets out to find out his home. He gets a map to trace the route but the names that Fahed told him was not there. Failed to trace his home and nation in the map Fahed angrily yells at him throwing away the map. The scene suggests how Palestine has changed beyond recognition after the Israeli occupation.

Camera follows them, capturing the serene, peaceful, happy landscapes of 'Israel'. On the way Yoni stops near a grave which turns out to be his father's. They exchange sympathies and continued their journey. Finally they find Fahed's home - a dilapidated one but with the front door still intact. Fahed opens the door with his key and enters home which hitherto existed only in his memory and imagination. He plants the olive tree in the backyard, and sprinkles water on it- following the manner in which his father had taught him.

As they return to the Israeli camp, the car radio gives out the news of PLO's murder attempt on Israel Ambassador to UK and Sharon's exhortation to retaliate by invading Lebanon. The political scenario of the place where they were going was bleak and they exchange things and promise each other a second meeting. The camera follows the convoy carrying Fahed moving, suddenly tilting to capture the Israeli Jets in the sky preparing for an attack in Lebanon. The movie ends with the close up shot of Fahed looking out of the window; his saddened look giving way to a subtle smile.

The screenplay of the movie was done by Nader Riqz, a Palestinian-American. However he has accused the director of changing many of the scenes calling it a Zionist propaganda. However Iran Riklis' 2008 movie, *Lemon Tree* presents the undaunted struggle by a Palestinian widow Salma Zidane against the Israeli government to save her lemon grove from extirpation. Salma has been a widow for ten years and her son was settled in the US while her daughters were married off to distant places. She is living alone in her small home taking care of the lemon grove which was planted by her great grandfathers. She also lives off with the meagre income that she gets from selling the lemon. Moreover the memories of her ancestors rest in the grove and for her it's a part of her family.

Her peaceful life was thwarted when the Israeli defence minister Israel Navon decides to move into a new house next to Salma. The house is on the Israeli side of border, Green Line separating Israel from its occupied territories of West Bank. The security guards, after inspecting the grove, deemed it as a potential hideout for terrorists and hence a security

threat for the defence minister. They obtained a legal permission and sent it to Salma their decision to uproot her lemon grove.

Salma breaks into tears for she could hardly think of her life without lemon trees and furthermore the grove was there in the family for fifty years. It's the only solace that she had in her lone existence. In the grove lies her nostalgic yearning for the past, her childhood memory and to part with it is nothing but death for her. Salma's resistance is from this yearning to hold her memory and identity. She decides to move to Supreme Court with the help of a young lawyer Ziad Daud.

Meanwhile a huge fence was built around the grove and a temporary checkpoint was erected with the continuous surveillance of guards. A slight movement in the grove will startle the guards ending in gunshots. However Salma sneaks into the grove to water her lemon trees which were fast withering in the heat. In the meantime Salma develops a silent companionship with the Minister's wife Mira Navon. Mira shows sympathy for Salma for she thinks Salma to be her alter ego with her own plight in the new house as a prisoner. Mira also gives an interview supporting the cause of Salma which invited the wrath of her husband. She asks her to withdraw her statement which she curtly refuses.

Salma gets little support from Palestinian chieftains who suggest her to subject herself to the Israeli needs. However she moves to Supreme Court with the help of her lawyer but fails to obtain a favourable verdict. Her lemon trees were adjudged to cut down owing to the security threat it created. Mira decides to leave her husband silently extending her support to Salma's predicament. The movie ends with Israel Navon sitting alone in front of his home and before him was the huge security wall, blocking all his visions of the outside world.

Riklis presents insecurity and prejudice of the Israeli government towards Palestinians. However the crust of the movie rests in the woman characters who are trapped in a patriarchal social situation. Both Salma and Mira are facing similar fate though their nationality is different. Salma wants to marry Ziad, the lawyer but faces indictment from her society. Mira is in an unhappy marriage but is trying hard to protect the name of her bureaucratic husband.

Although Riklis through his movies *Zayatoun* and *Lemon Tree* proffers to undertake a liberal stance, he inevitably ends up in showcasing Israelis as humane and liberal. Friendship and comradeship among Israel and Palestinian characters reinforce the Israeli politics of co-existence as against the demands of a Palestinian free state. These movies, under the façade of liberalism offer little legitimacy to the Palestinian cause while masquerading a Pro-Palestinian stance.

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