
Reviewed by Haneen Al-Zboon

*Imagining Palestine: Cultures of Exile and National Identity* is a groundbreaking response to the continuous attempts at silencing the Palestinian narratives. Inspired by Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, Tahrir Hamdi breaks away from the imposed silences, to motivate intellectuals in the so-called Third World to engage the silences. The book’s title provides an intriguing synchronization of the very imagining of Palestine. The very phenomenon of imagining is intricately and inevitably linked to the discourses of resistance in all its different forms. Moving from critical theorization, Hamdi addresses resistant discourses from the context of occupied Palestine, beginning with the contributions of Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani and others and ending with Naji Al-Ali’s drawings on the wall. To widen the cause, Hamdi has intentionally shifted from the works of Palestinian writers, such as Mourid Barghouti, to those who advocate solidarity for the Palestinians. More importantly, the shift from poetry and novels to writing on the wall signifies and enriches different forms of resistance alongside the process of imagination – an imagination that entails recovering all the constituencies of the nation. Every aspect of Palestinian culture has been involved in the process of imagination, ranging from works of literature to science, songs, and art. In so doing, Hamdi assures the importance of recovering the lost culture of occupied Palestine as a top priority that would lead to the process of decolonization and the liberation of the nation and its discourses.

Hamdi’s book imagines Palestine within the context of the post-1948 catastrophe, or “Nakba,” an imagining that entails reconfiguring or reformulating the nation after the catastrophic ethnic cleansing. All Palestinians deeply believe in their right to return to their motherland, which was taken by the Zionist colonial entity. Hamdi goes on to argue that such a return is best characterized by the old key that appears on the book’s cover; the key represents the Palestinians as the real owners of occupied Palestine. However, Hamdi points out the absence of Palestine from the map of the world, except for a few parts that had existed geographically. She questions the name “West Bank.” Hamdi calls on the Palestinians to think about the implication of such a controversial naming of the actual eastern part of historic Palestine. This is what Mourid Barghouti calls “verbicide” (2–3).

Haneen Al-Zboon, MA Candidate at the Faculty of Language Studies at the Arab Open University, Jordan

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We have been witnessing a postcolonial era except in the case of occupied Palestine, which, to quote Ernst Bloch, has “not yet” been decolonized. This, indeed, causes a kind of lack of interest in Palestine among critics working in the field of decolonial studies today. Also, Zionist propaganda plays its part in the sense that any attempt to expose their brutality is labeled as anti-Semitism. Hamdi takes her cue from Patrick Williams’ “Outlines of a Better World,” which poignantly addresses the urgent need for reconstructing postcolonial theory in line with the current continuous struggle in the twenty first century, more specifically the case of occupied Palestine. This, according to Williams, paves the way for the creation of a new, better world, free of oppression. Again, Hamdi informs us of the strength of the dispossessed Palestinians and their unconditioned insistence on continuing the liberation process despite the Zionists’ brutal attempts to cleanse them (4). She points out that “the harder the killer tries, the more vivid become the imaginings of Palestine and the return of the wandering soul as if nothing had happened” (1). Therefore, such liberation entails recovering the national identity of the indigenous population, in addition to strong solidarity with the Palestinian cause. In so doing, the process of imagining has been transformed from the theoretical to real-life event.

For instance, Hamdi introduces the very concept of “post” catastrophe into the field of postcolonial studies. For her, Said’s theoretical oeuvre is the result of a painful and catastrophic condition as a dispossessed Palestinian in the Western academy. So, it is “post” the catastrophe in the sense that the catastrophe continues to reproduce other catastrophes. This is exactly what Hamdi indicates by using the quotation marks – to document the endless effects of the previous rupture. Furthermore, Hamdi criticizes the abstractions of modernism and postmodernism terminology; for her, the theory should deal with the real events on the ground. This has to do with the role of intellectuals who create and establish critical theories based on lived experiences; intellectuals can never be separated from the surrounding events, she believes. Accordingly, Hamdi goes on to differentiate between what she calls “post” catastrophic theory and “trauma theory,” since both deal with traumatic events. In the case of the latter, the stress is on recovering, or perhaps recalling, the previous trauma that has passed away, in contrast with “post” catastrophic theory, which focuses mainly on the present continuity of such trauma (28–29).

Ghassan Kanafani, we are told, is the first to introduce the phrase “resistance literature.” For him, such a phrase is meant to include cultural resistance. Furthermore, thinkers in the Third World need cultural resistance alongside armed resistance to reach the process of decolonization, particularly in organizing the masses. Kanafani directly addresses the pivotal role of culture in activating and motivating the masses. For him, cultural resistance paves the way for armed
resistance and leads to its success. In line with Kanafani, Frantz Fanon calls for violence as the only way to dismantle colonial power and reconstruct a certain national culture. Having a national culture unifies and strengthens the armed revolution against colonialism (48–49).

Hamdi addresses the urgent need of telling the different Palestinian narratives to conserve the memory of the past due to the Zionist attempts to cleanse not only the land but also the memory of its people. Such killing of the memory has to do with what Ilan Pappe calls “memoricide.” Thus, Hamdi warns about this and calls for an essential need to strengthen the roots of the Palestinian culture and their rootedness in the land. The narrative of Palestine, she suggests, is different from other kinds of narratives because of the absence of institutionalization, an absence that may lead to its total disappearance unless intellectuals continue to tell the story of occupied Palestine and remind people of its significance (115–116).

To conclude, Imagining Palestine addresses one of the most, if not the most, important struggles in the world today. However, Hamdi is thoroughly keen to imagine Palestine both physically and theoretically. For her, the process of imagining should consist of the past, the present, and consequently the future. Her imagining involved all cultural aspects of occupied Palestine. More importantly, the book introduces new concepts and envisions a new way of reconstructing the field in line with the current conditions in occupied Palestine, extending the field of postcolonial studies. Indeed, this revolutionary book would be of interest to scholars and students in postcolonial studies, history, and cultural studies.