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95th
Harold Wolpe Dialogue
07 February 2011
Cape Town

Topic:

“THE ARCHITECTURE OF ERASURE
IN JERUSALEM”

Speaker:

Prof Saree Makdisi

She is a professor of English Literature at the University of California in Los Angeles, UCLA and the author of several books on British Romanticism, which is his area of expertise, and he writes on contemporary Arab politics and culture.

The aim of these dialogues is to create a space for open and informed dialogue and debate around key local and global political, social and economic issues facing South Africa.

District 6 Museum on 'Museum of Tolerance' 7 February 2011

Introduction by Director of District 6 Museum

We are very pleased to host this lecture, especially since Professor Makdisi is going to be in Cape Town for only 24 hours. More than that, particularly in light of current events unfolding in the Middle East and the Arab world, there is a need for solidarity with the people who live in these countries. In reading the article that Pramesh circulated in preparation for this talk by Professor Makdisi, all of us at the Museum were struck by the parallels to the building of the Museum of Tolerance in Palestine. I think that those of you who live in Cape Town will also be struck by some of the similarities between the Museum of Tolerance and the Prestwich Memorial, under which burial grounds were found. The way that we responded to the Prestwich memorial is something that we have had to think over. I was also struck by this road that was built through the burial ground in Palestine and again the parallels to the Prestwich Memorial. Professor Makdisi also speaks about the construction of the Museum of Tolerance as an act of aggression, which I think is an accurate description of events. We welcome Professor Makdisi for what I am sure will be a stimulating and inspiring talk.

Lionel Louw from the Harold Wolpe Trust:

We are delighted to have the trust between with District 6 Museum and UWC. It is a fitting occasion to be here and for this to be the topic of discussion. As you know, the Trust has never shied away from participating in those issues that impact on us in so many different ways, even when they are controversial. From the Harold Memorial Trust side, we are very proud to be associated with it. We have come a long way since 1994 and we have so many expectations, and it is this is a reminder of how much we still need to do to bring people together. So, welcome from the Trust's side and we are looking forward to an interesting evening.

Professor Saree Makdisi is from UCLA in the USA. He is the author of *"Romantic Imperialism: Universal Empire and the Culture of Modernity"* and *"Palestine Inside Out: An Everyday Occupation"*

Professor Makdisi lecture:

Questions and answers:

- 1. This was a very sad lecture. One cannot compare Apartheid to what is happening there. We need to find a different word for it. Why is the world not taking this very seriously?**

When we use the word 'Apartheid' both inside of Israel and in the West Bank, I think that the reference works not just because of the South African context, but also, according to an international body of law. If you look at the terms of the body of law that defines what Apartheid is including Convention on the Eradication of Racial Discrimination, it is very clear that Israel is an Apartheid State. If you look at all of the major features of South African Apartheid, each of them has an equivalent within Israel itself. There are incredible similarities.

But there are differences between South African Apartheid and Israeli Apartheid: South African Apartheid was about the exploitation of labour. Israeli Apartheid is not about Palestinian labour. They do not want Palestinian labour, they want them to disappear. You had the Population Registration Act in South Africa. In Israel today, every person is registered according to whether you are Jewish or not. If you are Jewish you have certain rights, if you are not Jewish you don't have certain rights. Within the State of Israel, both as citizens of the State of Israel, Jews live in certain places and Arabs live in other places. There are lists of laws in Israel today that prevent Jews from marrying non-Jews.

In South African Apartheid, it was all about signs and markers. People were always being reminded of their racial status – whether they could or could not enter certain places, which jobs they could take and which benches they could sit on. But there are no signs and markers in Israel. So if you are a Jewish Israeli, you can live your life from day

to day without any idea that you are living in an Apartheid state. This means that you can be a supporter of Israel in the US or the UK and have no idea of what it is that you are supporting.

As to your second question, the world is starting to intervene, as was the case in South Africa, not at the level of governments, but at the social level, for instance like grassroots activism. It was the South African example which set the precedent that when ordinary people of good will rise to act, things can change.

2. **Virginia Tilley: The Human Science Research Council conducted a 15 month study on whether Israel today constitutes an Apartheid State. It is 300 pages worth and it is quite dense but it is online. You can search 'Apartheid Israel'. It was found, using lawyers from Israel, London and South Africa, that Israel is an Apartheid state.**

3. **Keith: There is a context that you did not mention that is devastating: Jewish fundamentalists have made the biggest issue of the desecration of a grave, equivalent of what Catholics say about abortions. These fundamentalists in Israel continuously stage riots to stop the desecration of graves. In one famous case in the 1970s a fundamentalist rabbi and his students excavated a Jewish archeologist and dumped it on the ground saying 'how do you feel about this?' Second, a worst example than the one you have given is that Yad Vashem, which is 2 km from the exterminated village of Deir Yassin and it is itself built on a demolished Palestinian village from 1947. If these facts were more widely known, it would be useful. The last point that I wanted to make is that Lieberman's party, 'Israel is our Home' is a plagiarism on the Russia's party 'Russia is our Home'. Lieberman's commentary on increased taxes on the Palestinians until they are forced to leave is of course exactly on the edge of the 1880 Tsarist policy that we must increase taxes on Jews so that a 1/3 will be killed, a 1/3 will convert and 1/3 will be forced to emigrate.**

Prof Makdisi:

The desecration of graves is important in all cultures. The Museum of Tolerance claims that in Islamic law you can deconsecrate a grave. In actual fact that cannot be done. But, they go ahead and claim it anyway. It does not matter how many Islamic scholars stand up and say that they cannot. The point of Yad Vashem is that all of Israel is built on the ruins of Palestinian villages.

The Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles has documented within it all of the horrific massacres of the world, except for one, of course. It has never mentioned the 1948 Nakba or what is happening in Gaza.

4. **Question: I think that while many of the issues that you spoke about were very interesting, you are presenting a very one sided position. We do see that graveyards are moved in our city to make way for supermarkets, as in Observatory. The question is whether there is respect for the bodies, which is not something that you have told us about how many bodies were moved and how. To mention that the Jewish suburbs are built on the remains of Palestinian land is unbalanced because we know that, historically, the land was occupied by the Israeli civilization for centuries. This does not justify the uprooting of anyone else. I just think it should be presented in a normal balanced way.**

Prof Makdisi Response:

Are there cemeteries that are moved to make way for projects? Maybe, possibly. But, for one group to move in on another's territory is totally different.

One sidedness – when I see a cemetery and when I see bodies being removed it is complete disrespect for the bodies themselves. There was no Muslim involvement at all. There should have been Muslim representatives who could supervise this process (of course, they would not have agreed to it). It shows extreme disrespect for Muslims. Has this happened before in some far flung parts of history? Yes. But, this is happening now, as we speak. With

international human rights now, we cannot look back at the dark ages and say 'well they did this then and you are doing this now'. We can't look back at the dark ages use them to justify our actions today. If you read the Old Testament, when Joshua arrived in the land, there were already people there like the Canaanites, the Jebusites etc etc. They were thrown out. My point though is not to go back and reconstruct an ancient history. It is about today. All kinds of people have a claim on this land – Muslims do, Christians do, Jews do. The idea that you can give a multicultural land a single identity and say that it is the land of one people will never work without extreme violence. What I am calling for is a multicultural democratic state where all people have equal rights.

- 5. Terry Crawford Brown: I just returned from a second 3 month stint in Palestine monitoring the wall. I was in Jerusalem last year and in Lebanon this year. I can confirm what you have said in Silwan and Sheik Jerrach. I wanted to talk about the villagers of Al Wallaje. It is 2 km from Jerusalem and the Jerusalem municipality has just extended its jurisdiction to include Al Wallaje, and this village has lost most of its land. The wall has been extended up the mountain side in violation of the 2003 International Court of Justice Advisory Opinion. We went to see a Jerusalem district official to ask what hope there is for Al Wallaje. He said that there was no hope for the village because the Americans were going to give it away as a part of Gush Etzion in the peace plan and compensate Palestine with a piece of territory in the Negev. 10 days ago, the Guardian wrote about the Palestinian papers and the betrayal that they represent. The PA end up, after reviewing the Papers, looking like the clients of the USA and the Israeli government. Would you care to comment?**

There are villages up and down the west bank where life has been made impossible. What about in the 'North West' West Bank where there is a gap between the 1967 border and the Wall where 60 000 Palestinians live. The Palestinians need permits to enter their own land. The IDF is denying permits to 80% of these farmers. What all this tells us is that the control that is established in the West Bank makes it impossible for normal life to continue there. This process has been unfolding for 4 decades. The idea that there could ever be a 2 state solution, and a real independent Palestinian state that could arise out of the current status quo is unlikely. There is no way to create a separate state in the West Bank. Never mind like water or Jerusalem. If you look at the number of Palestinians in the world, 60% live in exile or in Israel and there are 10 million in total. So, the majority of the Palestinians do not live in the West Bank. Even under the best circumstances and you went to the 1967 borders, and a Palestinian state comes into existence in the West Bank and Gaza, this state could not represent most Palestinians, so it could not really be a Palestinian state. So for me, and many others, the only way to resolve this is to look at fundamental rights – Jews who were born there have a fundamental right to live there, as they were born there and Palestinians also have a right to live there under conditions of equality too: the ones who live under occupation, the ones who live as second class citizens in Israel and the largest group who live in exile. The only way to address these people's rights is to create a single democratic state that treats all of its people equally. It is the only way to advance everyone's rights. Not their desires (since each group would like to create their own state), but their rights. So, for me, and many others, the one state solution is the only solution. A two state solution fundamentally involves an abdication of the rights of millions of people.

- 6. My name is Lungisa from Khayelitsha and Open Shuhada Street, and I have been studying Jewish and Palestinian history. The question that I have is what is going to happen when you create one state with the soldiers? The IDF is too powerful. What is going to happen to them? OSS has created a forum in Khayelitsha. We have visited the Holocaust Centre in Cape Town and the District 6 Museum. We have found that they are similar. Could we find anyone to invite to our Forum in Khayelitsha who can help us to understand these issues better? We want to create solidarity with Palestinians and Israelis.**

Prof Makdisi Response:

There is no formula for a solution as per Apartheid South Africa. The one state will not address all of the issues but it is a beginning to address them.

7. **Your talk has made me think of an old question which unfolded in the wake of the Prestwich Memorial debacle. Namely, what would it have taken for the cemetery to have been left untouched from the developers? Maybe, for instance if they were MK soldiers? The District 6 Museum is a part of an international alliance of places of conscience. So it is a part of an international discussion around the village of Lifta in Palestine which was being depopulated many years ago but was recently being turned into a holiday resort. A bunch of radical Israeli and Palestinian architects were brought into a discussion to try and prevent this kind of heritage. In the end all of that came to naught. I was interested to hear about *Zochrot* and other memory institutions because I am interested in the implications about what you have to say about this place for memory practice. In addition, what do you think about *Zochrot* itself?**

Prof Makdisi Response:

There are all kinds of movements around memory which attaches to living bodies. During the 1948 war hundreds of Palestinian villagers were demolished. If you remember the giant fire in the north of Israel that took place recently... The reason why it burnt so quickly is because the Jewish National Fund bought land on top of which were Palestinian villages. Onto these villages they planted alien trees, because they wanted to cover the Palestinian villages. The reason that they burnt so quickly is that these trees did not belong there.

But, there is also a lot of activism to talk about – for instance, in the village of Ein Hawd. It was depopulated in 1948 and most of its inhabitants now live in Syria or Jordan, but some ended up living just outside the town. In the 1950s Israeli artists set up an artist colony and all kinds of art festivals in this Palestinian town. The Palestinians are ‘this close’ but their homes are there being lived in by other people within eyesight. This kind of thing happens throughout Palestine. There are so many cases that combine social activism and preserving memory.

8. **Mandy: Given the political situation with Israel being a Jewish state and the majority of Palestinians being outside, it is obviously very difficult to work with the Palestinians to create ‘memory’. You almost have to depend on the voice of progressive Israelis to reconstruct this memory. To what extent is this Israeli voice strong and to what extent does it sabotage the ability of the Palestinians to lead intellectually?**

Prof Makdisi Response:

I don’t think that Israelis are taking the lead. Palestinians have been doing it themselves. Those in exile continue to do work. There are massive documentaries detailing pre-1948 Palestine. There are UN databases that document the property of the refugees - there is a huge archive thereof.

For Palestinians, this is not just a question of marking the site, rather it is combining memory with the social process of returning people to the land. It is wrong to think of this as a historical battle of 1948. To this day there are Palestinian Bedouin villages in the Negev that are demolished. They rebuild them and they are demolished again. The site is not one of memory continuity but a living memory because they want to actually live there. There is social activism on the ground.

There are Israelis that are involved in Palestine but, most Israelis involved in this situation are more interested in what is going on in the Occupied Territories. They are interested in a 2 state solution – they say it themselves, they want to preserve a Jewish state. The problem with that is that there is no way to do this coherently with those who within the Jewish state (20%). Many of the people who live there, they live there in villages that ‘do not exist’ (10%, all of whom are citizens) according to the Israeli state. The state does not acknowledge their existence – no roads, sewerage, post offices, schools etc. Hence, this is not just about memory, these fights are about what is happening today, on the ground.

Having said that, I want to mention a very important website – www.palestineremembered.com – there are sound videos, someone who grew up in the villages. This is detailed Palestinian archival work of recreation using maps and photographic images.

The reasons that Israelis and Palestinians work together is that Israelis have access, they can get there, they have a privilege but it does not mean that they are doing it themselves. Palestinians are in the driving seat of memory.

9. SA diplomat: I was a diplomat with the South African delegation at the UN and I was a part of writing out UN Resolution 437 on settlements which condemned Israeli expansionism. What we noticed in trying to lobby Arab states is the amazing divisions amongst them regarding Palestine. I know America takes a key role in this regard, but what is your take on why Arab states cannot take up a unified stance on this issue?

Prof Makdisi Response:

That is a very important question. But, it is not the Arab nations, it is the Arab governments. There is no doubt whatsoever, that Arabs support Palestinians and their rights. What we are now seeing is that the rift has emerged between Arab peoples and their governments (as in Egypt and Tunisia).

It is not just Egypt and Jordan, but the Palestinian Authority themselves. It was the PA that blocked the Goldstone Report, rather the PA promoting it as a tool of international human rights. It is important to distinguish between Arab governments and their peoples.

Governments in these areas are vastly unpopular for amongst the other reasons their lack of support for the Palestinian people. Egyptians themselves know that Mubarak danced to the US tune. However, this is changing as we speak and it will create massive sea changes throughout the Arab world.