

Israel, Palestine, and the Politics of Pity

The conflict between Israel and Palestine has been a longstanding geopolitical issue that has affected world politics, especially in the Middle-East. The oppression faced by Palestinians at the hands of the Israeli government is a running theme in the reportage by some Western Media outlets, especially liberal ones. Liberal politics, particularly in the West, is all about tolerance, acceptance and diversity, as well as various forms of freedom. The reportage of this conflict is the perfect representation of the politics of pity employed by western media to evoke compassion for Palestine.

This example is from a piece in the New York Times, about Israel evicting Palestinians from Sheikh Jarrah. The story is a human-interest story and was published in 2021, and uses the example of two families, one Palestinian and one Jewish, to set the centre stage. The article states that the “efforts to force Palestinians from Sheikh Jarrah set the stage for the recent Gaza War” and that “a similar dynamic looms in a nearby district” (Kingsley, 2021).

The story features two families, the Rajabis (Palestinian) and the Tamanis (Jewish), who have lived together in unease for nearly 17 years (Kingsley, 2021). A photograph of the Rajabi family during Iftar gives the reader a glimpse into the happy household bustling with children (mostly young ladies). The chosen family, and the picture itself make them the “perfect victims” to highlight this issue – “Children, women and elderly people are often seen as helpless in a violent situation, and therefore they are more suitable as ideal victims than males in their prime” ((Christie, 1986) in (Höijer, 2004)).

The article provides a brief history of the conflict, giving the reader just enough information to make them feel invested in the story. Each country and religion values families above all else and considering protecting the rights of the family a duty. Choosing a family to depict the overall issue makes readers from across the world connect with the victims instantly.

There are people to relate to, people to pity and be compassionate for, and people to want to help. All this is spurred on by the inclusion of the photograph of the family just spending time together – “Pictures, or more precisely our interpretations of pictures, can make indelible impressions on our minds, and as a distant audience we become bearers of inner pictures of human suffering” (Höijer, 2004).

The article also expertly uses the claims of ownership by the family to bring light to the larger issue – it is not just the family facing eviction, despite owning the house, it is the entire neighbourhood. It invokes pity for the victims by setting them up against the settlers. The family fighting for a house they legally own is contrasted with an Israeli court stating that the neighbourhood is owned by a pre-war era Jewish settler organisation that was only revived in the 2000s.

As Luc Boltanski states in *Distant Suffering*, “the politics of pity thus assumes two classes which are not unequal by reference to merit, as in the problematic of justice, but solely by reference to luck” (Boltanski, 1999). Here, the Palestinian family represents the class lacking luck and not merit, turning them into objects and depictions of suffering.

“The theatricality of humanitarianism is anchored on the view that the spectacle of suffering mobilizes a certain array of emotions that are constitutive of the moral tissue of western public life” ((Marshall, 1984) and (Nussbaum, 2003) in (Chouliaraki, 2013)). The article makes use

of this sentiment perfectly to play the emotions of the western public in favour of the victims of this conflict.

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