APPENDIX

Power Politics in Palestine: A Postcolonial Reading of Leon Uris’s Exodus

(L.Ronald David and M.A.Jeyaraju)

Leon Uris’s Exodus is a monumental piece of fiction frequently mistaken for history. In fact the story of the birth of modern Israel was either unknown or of no importance to many people until the publication of Exodus. The novel presents the struggle of the Jewish people for existence through more than a century of anti-Semitism. In the process it captures the power politics involved in the creation of a Jewish homeland in Palestine, thereby facilitating a postcolonial reading of the novel. The novel teems with re-presentations of typical political scenes from the period of the story, narrated with a high degree of artistic verisimilitude. The language teems with postcolonial diction.

Mark Parker, distinguished foreign correspondent for the American News Syndicate, arrives in Cyprus for a long-awaited reunion with his friend from childhood, Kitty Fremont, and is almost immediately confronted by Major Fred Caldwell of the British army, who bursts uninvited into his room in the Dome Hotel in Kyrenia, making him understand that Major Caldwell always irks him because he is a typical colonizer:

There was that arrogance about him that stamped him as a member of that quaint breed, the Colonizer. Caldwell was a stuffy and narrow-minded bore. A gentleman’s game of tennis, in whites ... a bashing gin and tonic and damn the natives. It was Freddie Caldwell’s conscience or the utter lack of it that bothered Mark. The meaning of
right and wrong came to Caldwell through an army manual or an order.... (Uris 10)

Mark warns Caldwell that the sun is setting on the empire:

“This is 1946, Major. A lot of people read the campaign slogans in the last war and believed them. You’re a dollar short and an hour late. You’re going to lose the whole shooting match ... first it’s going to be India, then Africa, then the Middle East. I’ll be there to watch you lose the Palestine mandate. They are going to boot you out of even Suez and Trans-Jordan. The sun is setting on the empire, Freddie ... what is your wife going to do without forty little black boys to whip?” (Uris 11)

Mark explains to his friend Kitty his intuition that there is going to be a war in Palestine:

“Oh, lots of reasons. Lot of people around the world have decided they want to run their own lives. Colonies are going out of vogue this century. These boys here are riding a dead horse. This is the soldier of the new empire [a dollar bill]... we’ve got millions of these green soldiers moving into every corner of the world. Greatest occupying force you’ve ever seen. A bloodless conquest... but Palestine ... that’s different again. Kitty, there’s almost something frightening about it. Some people are out to resurrect a nation that has been dead for two thousand years. Nothing like that has ever happened before. What’s more, I think they’re going to do it.... (Uris 19-20)
A typical postcolonial paradigm prevails on Cyprus, where the British have established a detention camp at Caraolos to intern Jews who are caught attempting to run the British naval blockade of Palestine and where David Ben Ami plays a typical resistance leader’s role as commander of the Palmach, the secret army of the Jews in Palestine:

The thin young man from Jerusalem [David] ... had been sent to Cyprus months before by the secret army of the Jews in Palestine called the Palmach. He and dozens of other Palmachniks smuggled themselves into the compounds of refugees without the knowledge of the British and set up schools, hospitals, and synagogues, built sanitation facilities, and organized light industry. The refugees who had been turned back from Palestine to Cyprus were hopeless people. The appearance of young Palestinians of the Jews’ army infused new hope and morale. David Ben Ami and the other Palmachniks gave military training to several thousand men and women among the refugees, using sticks as rifles and rocks as grenades. Although he was but twenty-two years of age David was the Palmach commander in Cyprus. If the British had gotten wind that there were Palestinians inside the camps they kept quiet about it, for they did their guarding from the outside—having no desire to go into the hate-riddled compounds. (Uris 21)

David points out to Ari Ben Canaan that the Jewish struggle against the colonizer is four thousand years old:
“I must never stop believing . . . that I am carrying on a new chapter of a story started four thousand years ago.” ... “Look Ari. Take the place you landed tonight. Once the city of Salamis stood there. It was in Salamis that the Bar Kochba revolution began in the first century. He drove the Romans from our country and re-established the kingdom of Judah. There is a bridge near the detention camps—they call it the Jews’ Bridge. It has been called that for two thousand years. I can’t forget these things. Right in the same place we fought the Roman Empire we now fight the British Empire two thousand years later.”

(Uris 25)

When Ari points out that “‘the age of miracles is gone,’” David protests: “‘It is not gone! Our very existence is a miracle. We outlived the Romans and the Greeks and even Hitler. We have outlived every oppressor and we will outlive the British Empire. That is a miracle, Ari’” (Uris 25).

Immediately after his testimony at the Nuremberg war crimes trials after World War II, Brigadier Bruce Sutherland is called to the War Office in London because General Sir Clarence Trevor-Browne wishes to recommend him for a delicate assignment which calls for great tact. The Arabs are getting quite upset about the Jews flooding the Palestine mandate and so it has been decided to set up detention camps on Cyprus to contain them temporarily till Whitehall decides what Britain is going to do with the Palestine mandate. Sutherland’s sympathies are entirely with the desperate Jews, especially after what he saw at the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. Sir Clarence too sees eye to eye with him on this. Besides, he personally knows
of the series of Arab sellouts during the war. Yet he pleads that Whitehall cannot risk losing Britain’s prestige and her hold on the entire Middle East “over a few thousand Jews.” He points out that foreign policies of any country are not based on right and wrong. He declares: “The only kingdom that runs on righteousness is the kingdom of heaven. The kingdoms of the earth run on oil. The Arabs have oil” (Uris 29-31).

Ari plans a monumental hoax of a breakout by three hundred Jewish orphans from Caraolos by a ship appropriately named Exodus. The feigned breakout is intended to break the back of the British policy on Jewish immigration to Palestine by arousing universal sympathy for the orphaned survivors of concentration camps. Ari enlists the services of Mark and Kitty to execute Operation Gideon. Three hundred children are smuggled out of Caraolos and put aboard the Exodus. By prearranged signal, Mark releases the story of Operation Gideon to the world. A spokesman for the Exodus is reported to have stated that the hold of the ship is filled with dynamite and that the children have joined in a suicide pact to blow up the boat if the British try to board her (Uris 35-172).

The British are caught with their pants down. Mark’s story creates a sensation not only in Europe but also in the United States. There is an acrimonious discussion at the Institute of International Relations at Chatham House. The participants are General Sir Clarence Trevor-Browne, Humphrey Crawford of the Colonial Office and Cecil Bradshaw of Chatham House. Bradshaw is pro-Arab and one of those, with Winston Churchill, responsible for the creation of an Arab state out of half the Palestine mandate, named Trans-Jordan, the establishment of Britain’s Arab army, the Arab Legion, and the installation of a king in Trans-Jordan, the Hashimite Arab
Abdullah, mortal enemy of King Saud of Saudi Arabia. Sir Clarence’s sympathies are known to be with the Jews and in support of the ruling Labour Party, which has promised to help establish a Jewish homeland in Palestine (Uris 172-74). When Crawford points out that this is the first time that any publicity has carried into the American press, Bradshaw hits out at the hypocrisy of the Americans and the ingenuity of the Jews in negotiations:

“With all of Truman’s talk the Americans have only allowed ten thousand Jewish refugees into the country since the end of the war. Certainly Truman is for Zionism ... as long as Palestine isn’t in Pennsylvania. Everyone talks idealistically but we are still the ones with a million Jews on our hands, a million Jews who could ruin our entire position in the Middle East. . . . The Zionists are very clever people. For twenty-five years they have made us the villains in Palestine. They write words into mandate articles and the Balfour Declaration that were never meant. They can argue a camel into thinking he is a mule. Good Lord ... two hours with Chaim Weizmann and I’m about ready to join the Zionists myself.” ... (Uris 174)

Sir Clarence advocates allowing the Exodus to sail to Palestine, which is what the Jews do not want. Bradshaw adamantly rejects the suggestion (Uris 172-75).

With Mark incrementing his story day by day, the Exodus affair becomes top draw in the world press and public opinion galvanizes all over the world in support of the Jewish children. Mark becomes the first journalist to be permitted to board the
Exodus. Ari closes his interview to Mark with the words “I say the same thing to the Foreign Minister that a great man said to another oppressor three thousand years ago—LET MY PEOPLE GO’” (Uris 175-78).²

Mark follows up his story with details of Operation Gideon, including details of how British army trucks were used in Operation Gideon, with the name and the insignia of a fake British army unit—the 23rd Transportation Company, F1MJFC (His Majesty’s Jewish Forces on Cyprus). British prestige dips further. Other newsmen are allowed on board the Exodus and, after the visit, they demand to be allowed into the Caraolos detention camp also. Sir Clarence flies to Cyprus and takes over from Brigadier Bruce Sutherland (Uris 175-80).

After two weeks of standoff, the children on board the Exodus announce a hunger strike—Ari’s way of going on the offensive, with overtones of a Gandhian satyagraha. As the hours tick by, the children start fainting and are stretched out on the forward deck. There are demonstrations all over Europe. A general strike paralyses Cyprus. Ari’s crew itself is jittery and fears the consequences if one of the children should die (Uris 180-82). But David justifies their fight for freedom on historical, moral and political grounds and also projects it as their religious duty:

“Six million Jews died in gas chambers not knowing why they died…

. If three hundred of us on the Exodus die we will certainly know why.

The world will know too. When we were a nation two thousand years ago and when we rebelled against Roman and Greek rule we Jews established the tradition of fighting to the last man. We did this at Arbela and Jerusalem. We did this at Beitar and Herodium and
Machaerus. At Massada we held out against the Romans for four years and when they entered the fort they found us all dead. No people, anywhere, have fought for their freedom as have our people. We drove the Romans and the Greeks from our land until we were dispersed to the four corners of the world. We have not had much opportunity to fight as a nation for two thousand years. When we had that opportunity at the Warsaw ghetto we did honor to our tradition. I say if we leave this boat and willingly return to barbed-wire prisons then we will have broken faith with God.” (Uris 182)

A piece of conversation between Sutherland and Sir Clarence defines the moral grounding of his partiality for the Jews and projects it as a Gandhian quest for the truth:

“These months on Cyprus have done something to me, Sir Clarence, especially these past few weeks. You may not believe this, but I don’t feel that I have suffered a defeat. I feel that I may have won something very great. Something I lost a long time ago.”

“And what is that?”

“Truth. Do you remember when I took this post? You told me that the only kingdom that runs on right and wrong is the kingdom of heaven and the kingdoms of the earth run on oil.”

“I remember it well,” Trevor-Browne said.

“Yes,” Sutherland said, “I have thought so much about it since this Exodus affair. All my life I have known the truth and I have known
right from wrong. Most of us do. To know the truth is one thing. To live it... to create the kingdom of heaven oh earth is another. How many times in a man’s life does he do things that are repulsive to his morality in order to exist? How I have admired those few men in this world who could stand up for their convictions in the face of shame, torture, and even death. What a wonderful feeling of inner peace they must have. Something that we ordinary mortals can never know.

Gandhi is such a man....” (Uris 185-86)

Ari shocks the British by announcing that, from the next day onwards, ten volunteers a day will commit suicide on the bridge of the Exodus in full view of the British garrison, until the Exodus is permitted to sail for Palestine or everyone aboard is dead. Bradshaw knows that he has been defeated. He tries to stall for time to work out a face-saving settlement, but Ari gives him no quarter. Countries all over the world express concern. All the Arab governments threaten against permitting the Exodus to go. Bradshaw is afraid of being becoming another Pharaoh and bringing down a curse on Britain. He orders that the Exodus be permitted to sail for Palestine (Uris 186-88).

The rest of the novel tells the typical tale of the Rabinsky brothers, Jossi and Yakov, who left the Russian Pale in 1884 and moved to Palestine, laboured as pioneers and then parted ways on ideological grounds, Jossi becoming a wise political administrator with the name of Barak Ben Canaan and Yakov becoming a fiery terrorist with the name of Akiva. Israel is built up little by little through kibbutzim and moshavim, cooperative and semi-cooperative communities respectively, and weathers
all the machinations of the Arabs and the British until the modern state of Israel is declared born on 14 May 1948. Within hours all her Arab neighbours pounce on her. The Jews fight heroically, each settlement holding out on its own against fantastic odds until all her oppressors are defeated and the infant state finds itself larger than what the United Nations envisaged at Flushing Meadows (Uris 194-589).

The final chapter provides a fitting finale to the moving story of the birth of modern Israel: Barak Ben Canaan has died of old age and cancer; David Ben Ami has died defending Israel and his beloved Jordana, Ari’s sister, is restless; Sutherland, once the representative of the British Empire, but now retired from army service, has settled down in Eretz Israel; Brigadier Ari Ben Canaan has exiled himself to the Negev desert because of his hopeless love for Kitty; Major Dov Landau is planning to go to America to study engineering so that he can alter the course of the Jordan and bring water to the parched land; Karen, Dov’s beloved, has exiled herself to the distant and dangerous kibbutz of Nahal Midbar in the Gaza Strip so as not to distract Dov from his project, though she loves him madly; but, they all agree to gather at Ari’s settlement of Yad El for the Passover Seder, particularly in view of the fact that Kitty is leaving for America. When the Seder is about to commence, Ari brings the shocking news that Karen is dead, murdered by a gang of fedayeen from Gaza. Kitty faints and Jordana goes to her aid. When Kitty recovers, she is worried about Dov, but he assures her that he will not go back to his days of hatred, because his beloved Karen could never hate the Arabs. Ari is distraught and Kitty goes to console him. He declares his love for her and begs her never to leave him. Kitty consents (Uris 589-
They all gather in the dining room for the Seder and, as Ari walks towards the head of the table, Uris closes the novel with an epiphanic scene:

“If you would not be offended,” Sutherland said, “I am the oldest male Jew present. May I tell the Seder?”

“We would be honored,” Ari said.

Sutherland walked to the head of the table, to the place of the head of the family. Everyone sat down and opened his copy of the Haggadah. Sutherland nodded to Dov Landau [the youngest male Jew present] to begin.

Dov cleared his throat and read. “Why is this night different from all other nights of the year?”

[Sutherland answered:] “This night is different because we celebrate the most important moment in the history of our people. On this night we celebrate their going forth in triumph from slavery into freedom.”

(Uris 599)
Notes


2 Moses, speaking for the God of the Jews, who has commissioned him to lead the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the Promised Land, tells King Pharaoh of Egypt: “Let my people go . . .” Exod, 7.16; 8.1; 8.20; 9.1; 9.13; 10.3.

3 Mahatma Gandhi said, “There is no such thing as defeat or despair in the dictionary of a man who bases his life on Truth . . .” (Anand T. Hingorani and Ganga A Hingorani, *The Encyclopaedia of Gandhian Thoughts*, “Truth and Non-Violence”)


5 When King Pharaoh refuses to let the Jewish people go forth into freedom in the Promised Land from slavery in Egypt, God visits Egypt with ten plagues. Exod. 7-11.
Works Cited

