

Forced Departures and Fragmented Realities in Palestinian Memoirs

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Abstract

The Arabic word *nakba* means “catastrophe”. The Palestinians use this word to refer to the events that took place in Palestine before, during and after 1948. These events terminated both in the establishment of the state of Israel and the loss of Palestine. In the decades after 1948, the narratives of identity, exile and dispossession become the self-representation of survival. Palestinian memoir-writing, an amalgam of the personal and the political, well represents the ideas of self-representation, exile, displacement and collective memory which I seek to explore in a contemporary Palestinian memoir: Ghada Karmi’s *In Search of Fatima: A Palestinian Story* (2002). This paper attempts to argue through a study of the memoir that there exists a shared national identity and collective memory within Palestine since *al-nakba*.

The project includes the study of the history of Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the significance of the genre of the memoir. Although a memoir is by definition a personal genre, the writer under scrutiny navigates between narrating her own story and illustrating a broader collective Palestinian history. In order to address the relationship between memory and history, as well as that between personal memory and the continuation of collective memory, the researcher considers the genre of memoir appropriate as it is suited to view it as nuanced portraits of the historical and contemporary socio-political landscape of Palestine from the perspective of victims.

Keywords: collective memory, Palestinian memoirs, displacement, exile, identity

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Introduction

For more than 67 years, since the date of *Nakba*¹, it is estimated that more than 780,000 Palestinians were exiled. Later, more than 300,000 were evicted after Israel occupied the Gaza Strip and the West Bank in 1967. About four million Palestinians are displaced in their homeland, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and inside Israel. At present, more than ten million exiled Palestinians live in the diaspora (Saloul, 2009). The Palestinian al-nakba is hardly acknowledged outside the Middle East.

This paper is an attempt to gain a sensitive understanding of an on-going Palestinian-Israeli conflict that is recognized as a serious international conflict. However, Palestine exists most strongly in and through its narratives. Edward Said proposes that Palestinians have to struggle to maintain their identities “on at least two levels: first, as Palestinian with regard to the historical encounter with Zionism and the precipitous loss of a homeland; second as Palestinian in the existential setting of day-to-day life, responding to the pressure in the state of residence” (*The Question of Palestine*, 1993).

The Palestinian problem is mere complicated than the media portrayals. These memoirs could be seen as counter narratives to the creation of the state of Israel and offer resistance to the Israeli occupation of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. The writers elaborate the impact of living in exile on their relationships with their near and dear ones, and on their self-representation of Palestinian identity. Moreover, they negotiate with the restrictions that prevent many of them from returning home. Although these memoirs do not offer overt solutions to this contemporary conflict, they do gesture towards some possible directions. They offer a conspicuous historical and political context with respect to engaging with the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Consequently, the tragedy of the Palestinian nation is made accessible, acceptable and relatable to public through these meaningful memories.

Starting from the bottom of core conflicts

In the decades after 1948, the narratives of identity, exile and dispossession become the self-representation of survival. If Edward Said’s *Orientalism* argued against the denial of the humanity of Arabs through stereotypes, Zionism as a particular mutation of Orientalism negated the existence of Palestinians, insisting that Palestinian collective subjectivity does not exist. The narrative claims a Jewish historical presence in Palestine based on a timeless biblical attachment to the land while rejecting Palestinian historical counter-claims with brutal military force. The task for Palestinian writers, therefore, was to construct a counter discourse that would not only prove that they exist, but also expose the racist ideology and terrorist tactics used to cleanse Palestine ethnically in order to fulfill the fantasy of Zionist slogan of “a land without people for a people without a land” (Chomsky and Pappe, 2005).

¹ In 1948, the year known in Arabic as *Nakba* or the catastrophe. This massive humanitarian disaster marks the beginning of exile as Palestinians became stateless. However, Palestinians use the word to refer to the events that took place in Palestine before, during and after 1948.

For all Palestinians, who do not have their own state, especially for Palestinians in the diaspora who are not allowed to enter Palestine as a geographical place due to an arbitrary visa protocol created by Israeli government, Palestine exists most strongly as an imagined community. Consequently, the image of Palestine is particularly portrayed through memoirs. The memoirs explore what it means to be denied access to a particular geographical place and to have no nation. They articulate models of Palestinian nationhood which is based on an understanding of the nation as an autonomous, sovereign and delineated specific lines of race and ethnicity. By embedding the themes of self-representation, exile, displacement and return, the memoir becomes the key for the preservation of a collective memory (Varma, 2011).

As Palestinians continue to be denied the Right of Return² to their homeland, the relevance of al-nakba narratives has been increasing continuously and play a similar role as prison memoirs, war crime survivors, ethnic cleansing and dehumanization of the Palestinians, in that they illustrate historical and political anguish by expressing the collective tragedy in individual experiences and adding the humanitarian dimension from historical and ideological positions. The writers use their memoirs as both personal and political narrative spaces. They wish not only to work through and document their own memories, but also wish to make political statements. In addition, memoirs could be considered as a political weapon also. They are the key narratives of Palestinian historical and political discourses as well. In other words, in taking direct aim at the Zionist negation of Palestinian rights, the memoirs of 1948 Palestinian exiles challenge the authority of the dominant discourse of Zionism. Memoirs of al-nakba indeed, are a powerful narrative signifier of contemporary Palestinian exilic consciousness.

Palestinian memoirs could be viewed as the colouring of the personal and the political. Through my research work, I would seek to explore the idea of self-representation, exile, displacement and return in two contemporary Palestinian memoirs: Ghada Karmi's *In Search of Fatima* (2002) and Salwa Salem's *The Wind in My Hair* (2007). It is a history of fact how Palestinians all over the world managed to maintain a shared national identity since al-nakba. The issue that would be taken up in this light would be to investigate questions which have been raised by these authors concerning the links between politics, ethics and aesthetics. For an aesthetic link, Azar Nafisi argues that the power of literature:

link us to our past, provide us with critical insight into the present and enable us to envision our lives not just as they are but, as they should be or might become. Imaginative knowledge is not something you have today and discard tomorrow. It is a way of perceiving the world and relating to it. (3)

The research focuses on at the ways both their memories of Palestine, as well as their relationship to it in the present, as informed by their position as exiles. Finally, the research will raise awareness of unending problems, such as the denial of basic

² The Palestinian right of return is embodied in U.N. Resolution 194 of December 1948, and all other relevant U.N. resolutions. In fact, it is one of the most sensitive and complicated aspects of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In Fact, this basic right is still rejected by Israeli government.

human rights in Palestine, segregation, discrimination, and racist apartheid by using Palestinian non-fiction in the light of a humanitarian perspective in order to gain in-depth understanding of the historical and contemporary socio-political landscape of Palestine and its diaspora. Horror of the Israeli military force and endless humiliation of Palestinian people will form the underpinning of such a violent history.

Palestinian Identity and the Aftermath of Catastrophe: Ghada Karmi's *In Search of Fatima*

Karmi's *In Search of Fatima* is considered as an exploration of the impact of exile. For Palestinians, Al-Nakba represents the loss of the homeland, the disintegration of society, the frustration of national aspirations, and the beginning of destruction of Palestinian culture. According to this memoir, her childhood was obviously violently disrupted by al-nakba or the Catastrophe. Unsurprisingly, Al-Nakba is a hallmark of the destruction of her homeland. This event would define her life as one of exile. Karmi's experiences of exile and the accompanying feelings of estrangement and loss, as well as dislocation and nostalgia, cause her to feel alienated from both her identified homeland of Palestinian and her other places of residence as she states in her memoir that "In an instant, I was no longer the Ghada I had known all my life, but this alien creature, "Garda" (190). Moreover, Karmi's portrayal of her mother demonstrates a longing for Palestine as home. Her mother's recreation of the "home" has both personal and political resonances. At a personal level, she seeks to continue practicing Palestinian cultural norms to help relieve a feeling of homesickness. She states, "With our mother at home maintaining a traditional life-style, he assumed that we would naturally retain our identity as Arabs and Muslims without other help" (208). In addition, her mother's recreation of Palestine is also a political gesture, a way of recreating the lost homeland.

Moreover, Karmi's writing is also viewed as the psychological dislocation of the exile and the impact of living in exile on identity construction. She eventually mentions her exile as a permanent condition with "no return." The departure was confusing for Karmi but there was a sense that she and her family would return soon. Eventually, she has realised that she does not have "return" as a choice. Her experience of living in exile brings her to a deep feeling of homelessness, neither England nor Palestine. In other words, she personally feels more English than Arab, yet is not considered English enough by many around her. She expresses in her memoir that she feels "truly displaced, dislocated in both mind and body, straddled between two countries and unable to belong in either" (422).

Last but not least Karmi's text is a clear specimen of how to illustrate the theme of exile; how the experience of suffering in exile would be for the Palestinian diaspora. She narrates that "I realise that, I persisted. "But the fact is there are two peoples here, unequal in every respect because the one consider itself superior to the other. It's clear for anyone to see that Arabs in this country live separate, excluded lives. In the rest of the world, we call it racism" (442). I will further point out that she intentionally narrates a version of Palestine exile as a counter narrative to the Israeli nationalism. Additionally, it serves as a re-interpretation of certain dominant media representations of Palestinians.

Living Memory of Displacement and Belonging: Salwa Salem's *The Wind in My Hair*

As mentioned earlier, al-Nakba led first to the dispersion of Palestinians and to the loss of their homeland. Almost every Palestinian has, in one way or another, been affected by the interminable catastrophe. The Catastrophe, therefore, led to the emergence of two categories of Palestinians: the Palestinians from the inside and the Refugees. This chapter will engage with Salwa Salem's *The Wind in My Hair* which exposes the difficulties most Palestinians experience under Israeli occupation. It powerfully illustrates the Palestinian problems from the 1930s to the present day. Salem started writing her memoir as she was dying from cancer. She narrates her childhood memories of fleeing from Jaffa, relating her memory of Palestine with nostalgia for her home, the big villa, the fields of oranges, grapefruits, citrus groves and the sea. She was only eight years old at that time when she (and many Palestinians) had to depart from her homeland in 1948. She further articulates, "The distance between Jaffa and Kafr Zibad is not far, because Palestine is small and it takes very little time to cross from one end to another, but the journey was atrocious. There were terrifying scenes along the way: destruction everywhere, tens of thousands of people walking without knowing where they were going" (15). She employs her personal experiences of suffering and displacement to represent the loss of Palestine and to continuously create a narrative to stand against the Israeli version. Then she explicitly states, "though we did not know it yet, my family along with thousands of other Palestinian families, had permanently lost our right to return to our city, our home and our land" (16). As a result, she and her family remain refugees across the world. However, she is displaced not only outside her country but also internally in her homeland. Memoir for her becomes a narrative of both individual and collective displacement.

Salem has encountered difficulties of displacement in her new countries. She, therefore, struggles to find answers to the question of belonging. The humiliating experiences through harsh racism, discrimination and exclusion can be seen throughout her story, as she portrays her inner tension of displacement disturbed by her experience "when we went out onto the street in Saudi Arabia the other children would shout in chorus, "Italian, Italian!" My children had had to overcome the problem of being different in Italy, and now they had to face the same thing in an Arab country." (177) Consequently, she has realised that she is always out of place both in Arab and Western world. At this point, Salem does not feel a strong connection to the Middle East. Her experience in Saudi Arabia is a turning point in her life. She decides to remain in Italy. She goes on to say, "Our children seemed to emerge from a nightmare. They were in seventh heaven when we arrived home. They were as delighted as if they had been released from prison" (179). Both in an individual and collective level, the experiences of displacement and belonging have reflected a deep psychological mark on the survival Palestinians which is a feeling of uncertainty, vulnerability and fear that strikes them.

Conclusion

“... to be Palestinian is, in part of upbringing, in part of sensibility, to be a wanderer, an exile, a touch moon-mad, always a little different from others. Our name, which is acquired after 1948, was not so much a national title- we had no nation- as an existential term.”

- Fawaz Turki, *Exile's Return: the Making of a Palestinian American*

Diaspora, exile and immigrancy are important features in selected Palestinian memoirs. Although the Palestinian national movement predicated 1948 by several decades, there is not one Palestinian family that has been unaffected by this loss. Forced movement as well as the condition of exile that scattered families and communities have produced specific lifestyles, cultural beliefs and new identifications. As the Palestinians continued to be denied the right of return, the Palestinian narrative of the nakba will continue to be written without end. Selected memoirs also suggest that the process of identity formation of Palestinians is not only determined historically by the loss of their homeland during 1948 but also crucially by the open-endedness of their ongoing catastrophe.

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