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### Telling memories : Al-Nakba in Palestinian exilic narratives

Saloul, I.A.M.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### **Nostalgic Memory and Palestinian Identification**

And Nostalgia for Yesterday?  
A sentiment not fit for an intellectual,  
unless it is used to spell out the stranger's fervor for that which negates him.  
My nostalgia is a struggle over a present which has tomorrow by the balls.

– Mahmoud Darwish, (2004).<sup>12</sup>

Like those of many exiled Palestinians either inside or outside historical Palestine, the words of prominent poet Mahmoud Darwish express a nostalgia for a past that Palestinians experience when they identify themselves as “Palestinians” in a present in which there is no independent Palestinian state. In the wake of the events of 1948, *al-nakba* emerged in Palestinian culture as a concept that signifies an unbridgeable break between the past and the present, and that romanticizes the Palestinians’ loss of the homeland as a loss of paradise. In her vast research on Palestinian exiles in Lebanon, Rosemary Sayigh describes their feelings of being expelled from paradise as a sentiment that is not exclusive to this specific segment of Palestinians.<sup>13</sup> This articulation of a lost paradise signifies a nostalgia for a relatively distant past. Nostalgia, as Barbara McKean Parmenter notes in her book *Giving Voice to Stones: Place and Identity in Palestinian Literature*, became “the most characteristic element of Palestinian literature in the decades following *al-nakba*” (1994: 43). In this chapter, I argue that this nostalgia informs the Palestinians’ cultural memory of loss of place in exile,

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<sup>12</sup> These lines are taken from Mahomud Darwish’s poem, entitled “Edward Said: A Contrapuntal Reading” (2004), in which he bids farewell to Edward Said. Darwish (b. 1942-2008) has long been recognized as the leading poetic voice of the exiled Palestinian people. He was born in the village of Birwe that was destroyed by the Israeli army in 1948. Darwish was several times imprisoned and placed under house arrest for reciting his poetry and for his activities as editor of the Israeli Communist Party's newspaper. In 1971 he left Israel going first to Cairo, then to Beirut where he joined the *Palestine Liberation Organization* (PLO) and became the editor of its literary and scholarly journal *Al-Karmel*. He left Beirut following the Israeli invasion in 1982, living variously in Cyprus and Paris. In 1987, Darwish became a member of the PLO Executive Committee, but resigned from it over disagreement with the leadership regarding some elements of the Oslo Accords in 1993. After having been denied entry into Palestine for twenty-six years, he was finally allowed to return in 1997 and settled in the city of Ramallah in the West Bank, where he died. For more of his translated poetry, see Darwish (1995, 2003 and 2006). Also, for studies exclusively focused on Darwish’s poetry, see Mansson (2003).

<sup>13</sup> Sayigh (1977: 17-40 and 1979: 3-16). Also, for relevant studies concerning Palestinians in refugee camps in Lebanon, see Peteet (1987: 29-63 and 1992).

through which both their sense of themselves as Palestinian subjects and their identification with Palestine as their homeland are shaped and, crucially, re-shaped.

Before beginning to tackle this argument, I need to lay out briefly some definitions of my principal concept, “nostalgia”. With its Greek roots, *nostos* meaning “to return home” and *algos* meaning “pain”, the word “nostalgia” came to signify, at first, a severe condition of homesickness. This medical-pathological definition of nostalgia dominated seventeenth and eighteenth centuries’ understanding of the term.<sup>14</sup> But by the nineteenth and twentieth centuries a considerable semantic shift had occurred in which the word lost its purely medical connotations: nostalgia went from being a curable medical illness to an incurable condition of the psyche as the modern cultural disease per se.<sup>15</sup> Nostalgia has often been criticized in contemporary theory as a negative sentiment that entails an emotional addiction to an unreliable and idealized past. According to its critics, nostalgia makes the past appear as more attractive to live in than the present, and hence can make people want to re-live the past and invent allegedly ancient traditions, while turning away from the present. In this view, nostalgia is seen in opposition to progress. It supposedly emerges because of an identity crisis or lack of self-confidence, it paralyzes political agency in the present, and therefore by and large it remains a sentiment to be shunned.<sup>16</sup> Yet, it seems to me that such critiques do not address several important issues nostalgia calls forth, particularly the questions of how the past is transmitted to the present, and of how this transmission might be productively used in order to specify notions of cultural memory and identity.

What motivates my questioning is an attempt to account for the collective workings of nostalgia in geopolitically conflicted discourses of memory and identity such as that of Palestinian *nakba* and exile. Instead, therefore, I take the nostalgic as an emotion that allows for a form of cultural transmission of memory. Within this transmission, historical and political purposes can vary, and thus the emotion can bear a complex and potentially productive relationship to the past. My contention is that, in the context of a loss of homeland, the process of idealizing the past is simultaneously linked to a process of

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<sup>14</sup> The medical significations of nostalgia were first coined in 1688 by the Swiss physician Johannes Hofer in his dissertation on the homesickness of Swiss mercenaries away from their homeland. See Hofer ([1688] 1934), cited in Hutcheon (2000: 198-207).

<sup>15</sup> See Boym (1995: 133-66 and 2001). In her research Boym conceptualizes “reflective nostalgia” in the case of post-Soviet artists who, according to Boym, “reconfigure and preserve various kinds of imagined communities and offer interesting cultural hybrids of Soviet kitsch and memories of a totalitarian childhood” (1995: 151).

<sup>16</sup> As a derogatory concept, nostalgia is often criticised as a symptom of erratic cultural stress due to socio-political complexities and rapid changes. Examples of such criticism of nostalgia include, among others, Davis (1979), Chase and Shaw (1989), and Lowenthal (1985).

identification with the legacies of that past in the present. The object of nostalgia is as much part of the present as it is of the past. The subject cannot idealize this object (the homeland) without at the same time identifying with it. Thus, rather than arguing with or against nostalgia's idealizing impulses, I wish to examine alternative uses that these impulses might fulfil in the identification processes between the subject and his or her (lost) place as (re)presented in Palestinian literary and cultural artefacts. At stake in my discussion, then, is a shift of focus from nostalgia as a mere psychic sentiment to the ways in which this sentiment is employed as a cultural response to the loss of homeland. In my case, nostalgia functions as a political activity of remembering that, as Darwish puts it in the poem quoted as epigraph to this chapter, is "used to spell out the stranger's fervor to that which negates him". Hence, the emotion can help configure alternative spatio-temporal relations between the Palestinian subject and his or her past and present conditions of loss of home and exile.

In this view, understanding the dynamics of transmitting the past into the present necessarily requires, as Nanna Verhoeff argues in her book, *The West in Early Cinema: After the Beginning* (2006), studying a sentiment that is more specific than the general term nostalgia suggests. According to Verhoeff, "instead of dismissing nostalgia as sentimental and escapist, we should understand that sentiment as historically relevant and culturally helpful" (149-50). Moreover, rather than perceiving nostalgia as a romantic longing for the past in order to escape the present, one should perceive it as a longing that attempts to deal with a problematic present. In other words, Verhoeff continues, "where the present is in crisis, the recent past whose loss partly accounts for that crisis can be invoked, absorbed and integrated within the present [...] Thus, the present and the past become unified in a nostalgia that functions as an investment of the past *in* the present" (149).<sup>17</sup>

In his article "Nostalgia for Ruins" (2006), Andreas Huyssen puts forward a similar productive impulse of nostalgia. According to Huyssen, the contemporary obsession with ruins in a European context has developed as part of a much broader discourse about memory and trauma, genocide and war. This obsession "hides the nostalgia for an earlier age of modernity that had not yet lost its power to imagine other futures" (6). For Huyssen,

it will not do to simply [...] dismiss this nostalgia as a cultural disease, as Suzan Stewart argues in her book *On Longing*. Neither will it do to understand the modern imagination of ruins and its link to the sublime as expressing nothing but phantasies of power and domination [...] (15)

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<sup>17</sup> My use of the term "nostalgic" is based on Verhoeff's conceptualization of the term "instant nostalgia". See Verhoeff (2006: 148-56).

Rather, Huyssen claims,

the dimension present in any imaginary of ruins but missed by such reductive critiques is the hardly nostalgic consciousness of the transitoriness of all greatness and power, the warning of imperial hubris, and the remembrance of nature in all culture. (16)

Unlike what has been generally allowed in recent discussions, both Verhoeff's and Huyssen's views put forward a distinctively different approach to nostalgia. Their views introduce nostalgia not as an opposite to the idea of progress, but as a special case of it. Through investment, nostalgia turns from a negative category held hostage to the past, into a productive activity that can help people, to apply Darwish's words, to "struggle over a present which has tomorrow by the balls".

In what follows I will chart some of the ways in which nostalgia travels in Palestinian culture from derogatory to productive. The focus of my discussion, therefore, will be on the dynamics of the Palestinians' nostalgia for the lost homeland, in relation to other and related concepts such as "trauma", "exile", "memory" and "identification", as presented in the writings of the first generation of post-*nakba* Palestinians who lived and witnessed *al-nakba*. The object of my analysis is Jabra Ibrahim Jabra's novel *The Ship*, which I take as an example of this literature. Jabra (b.1920-1994), who resided in Iraq after he was expelled from Palestine in 1948, is one of the most distinguished Palestinian writers who lived and died in exile. His novel *The Ship*, published in Washington in 1985, is the English translation of *Al-Safina*, originally published in Arabic in Beirut in 1970. In *The Ship*, the story of the exiled Palestinian Wadi Assaf, and particularly his experience and memory of *al-nakba*, serves to buttress the novel's argument in detailing the Palestinians' nostalgia in general and their cultural memory of loss of home in particular.<sup>18</sup>

A close reading of *The Ship*, coupled with a selection of insights provided by theorists working in the field of cultural memory, will demonstrate that Jabra's novel, as a literary narrative written from the point of view of the first generation of post-*nakba* Palestinians, transmits the cultural memory of *al-nakba* through detailing a specific and productive form of nostalgia by which a sense of attachment to the lost homeland emerges in the present of exile. To illustrate how this can work, I first briefly discuss what I mean by the

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<sup>18</sup> Various examples of literary representations written by Palestinians from the first generation of post-*nakba* such as Abd Al Kareem Al Karmy's (b.1907-1980) poetry have been collected in the *Anthology of Modern Palestinian Literature*. See Jayyusi (1992). Also, more examples of this literature are in Kanaana (1992).

productive potential of nostalgia. As I will argue below, central to *The Ship*'s emphasis on the past is the concept of "trauma". Nostalgia helps to overcome this trauma. I will then move on to the narratives of the two main characters, Isam Al Salman and Wadi Assaf. I read these stories in light of their nostalgia's dependence on a return to a traumatic past of loss, as well as in relation to their different attitudes with regards to escaping the land and its past: Isam has a homeland (Iraq) but is determined to flee its burdens; Wadi lost his homeland (Palestine) yet constantly searches for ways to re-attach himself and return to his land. It is the Palestinian side of this split between the narrators that ultimately concerns me in this chapter.

### *Nostalgia and Trauma*

*The Ship* is about a group of people at sea on a cruise through the Mediterranean. The story begins as the ship departs the land. It is narrated by two main narrators, Isam (an Iraqi engineer) and Wadi (a Palestinian merchant), and one marginal narrator, Emilia Franesi (an Italian divorcee). While Isam and Wadi take turns in their narration of most of the sections in the novel, Emilia only speaks once. Each narrates different parts of the action that takes place on the ship.

In this novel, Jabra makes use of multiple points of view, interior monologues, first-person narration, and most of the technical devices associated with modernist stream-of-consciousness style such as memory flashbacks, italicized words, and peculiar punctuation. These devices function as a way of revealing the inner thoughts and feelings of the characters and to disclose their memories of the past. In fact, the novel as a whole is made up of a set of monologues and long discussions between a group of people, all highly educated and well informed in literature, mythology and philosophy, despite their respective professions of engineer, merchant and physician. The only two actions that happen in the novel are two recollections, what can be called "acts of memory": acts that reveal memory to be a cultural activity in the present of the characters by which they constitute themselves as subjects in a process of identification.<sup>19</sup> The first recollection is of a love escapade in a car recalled by Isam. The other recollection, much longer and more central, is the story of Wadi and his friend Fayez, who dies while defending his hometown during the events of 1948. As acts of

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<sup>19</sup> I use the term "acts of memory" here to refer to the active nature of collective memory in Palestinian exile. For a very useful study on this notion in Palestinian exilic discourse, see Bardenstein (1999: 148-71 and 2002: 353-87). See also Bal (1999b: vii-3).

memory, the two recollections expose not individual but a collective memory in the sense that the narrative representation of the characters' past includes a larger history than in which these characters live.

The story that unfolds in *The Ship* is one of loss of place, agony, and nostalgia for a relatively distant past. While the characters suffer in the present (in this case, the late 1960s), their grief emanates from a past agony that shapes memory as nostalgic yearning. Indeed, in its emphasis on the past, *The Ship* seems to turn sharply toward a nostalgia that exhibits obsessive Palestinian longing for a lost home and its past times. The novel ends with a description of the past, and its final scene is set in the lost homeland. However, the past of the lost homeland to which *The Ship* returns is a troubled one. *The Ship*'s nostalgia for this past is not conventional. It is not a nostalgia that aims at recovering the past of the lost homeland as idealized site of origin. Rather, the concern of the novel, as it turns to the relatively distant Arab past in general, and to the Palestinian catastrophe of 1948 in particular, from the vantage point of the Arab condition in the late 1960s, is with the issue of the cultural transmission of memory. As such, the novel portrays the agonized self, its political and ideological distortions, and the varieties of nostalgias through which the Arabs, particularly the Palestinians, apprehend their past in the present. *The Ship*, therefore, presents a specific form of nostalgia that is built on a juxtaposition of past and present, the pre-agonized self and the present, together with the hesitations and anxieties of each. Within this nostalgia, the past constantly inhibits the present. This inhibiting effect seems to underscore the negative views of nostalgia. At the heart of *The Ship*'s conception of how the past inhibits the present, however, lies the concept of "trauma". I will argue that in the confrontation of nostalgia with trauma, the more productive potential of nostalgia may be realized.

For this discussion, I adopt a discursive notion of trauma, following Ernst van Alphen's conceptualization of the term in his article, "Symptoms of Discursivity: Experience, Memory and Trauma" (1999). I find Van Alphen's argument most useful for my discussion of nostalgia and trauma in the Palestinian case because he addresses trauma as a cultural concept that operates within the realm of discourse and that is closely linked to other concepts such as "experience" and "memory". Van Alphen outlines an important aspect of experience that pays careful attention to cultural implications.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> In his article, Van Alphen draws on feminist critiques and psychoanalytical theories of cultural memory and experience such as those by De Lauretis (1984), Williams (1983), Nora (1989: 7-25), Caruth (1996), LaCapra (1994), and Scott (1992: 126-29).

In his discussion, Van Alphen examines the interconnectedness of experience and discourse. At stake in this relationship, as he argues, is the notion that “subjects are the effects of the discursive processing of their experiences”. The subject’s experience, moreover, does not “depend on the event or history that is being experienced but also on the discourse in which the event is expressed, thought and conceptualized” (24). Thus, for Van Alphen, the interconnectedness between experience and discourse is grounded in the understanding that “experience depends on factors that are fundamentally discursive”. Discourse here does not constitute “a subservient medium in which experiences can be expressed. Rather, discourse plays a fundamental role in the process that allows experiences to come about and in shaping their form and content” (25). As Van Alphen succinctly puts it, to understand experience as the result of an integration of what is happening in discourse is to suggest that “experience can no longer be strictly individual. Although experience is subjectively lived, it is at the same time culturally shared” (37).

At the heart of this intricate understanding of experience and discourse, trauma occupies a central position. According to Van Alphen, trauma can be seen as

failed experience, because in the case of a traumatic event the discursive process that enables experience to come about has stalled. Failed experience excludes the possibility of a voluntarily controlled memory of the event: it implies at the same time the discursivity of “successful” experience and memory. We can now say that experience and memory are enabled, shaped, and structured according to the parameters of available discourses. (36)

Thus, it is in trauma as a “failed experience” (or an experience that has not come about) that the close connection between experience and discourse is disrupted. This disruption, to paraphrase Van Alphen, enables us to see what makes experience discursive in the first place.<sup>21</sup>

With this discursive notion in mind, I treat trauma as a signifier of loss. By saying a “signifier”, I mean that the trauma and the loss are not identical. Loss can be traumatic, in which case the trauma signifies it. In other cases, different signifiers come into play. Articulations of loss, however, can vary. In our novel, they vary from factual to experiential, depending on whether the loss corresponds to the death of a significant other, or involves the experience of separation from this significant other. In my reading of *The Ship*, I consider both these articulations of loss as traumatic. This traumatic quality, however, is not so much determined by the nature of the loss that triggers it but by the discursive structure through

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<sup>21</sup> This discursive notion of trauma is further developed in Van Alphen (1997 and 2005: 163-205)

which this loss is perceived and (not) understood. This is why I consider trauma a signifier. Trauma is not characterized by the extremity of the loss that takes place. Rather, borrowing Van Alphen's terminology, loss becomes traumatic for a person only when this person's symbolic order fails to provide consistent frames of reference in terms of which the loss can be experienced. As a result, trauma becomes legible on the level of discourse, where signification takes place or fails. Nostalgic memory does not take place on the level of discursive symbolization only. Instead, where trauma is generative of a form of paralysis, nostalgia makes dealing with the loss possible. And, since in both cases the relationship of the present to the past is at stake, this discursive notion of trauma enables me not only to distinguish trauma from nostalgic memory, but also helps us assess trauma as a disorder of both memory and time.

This discursive notion of trauma can be productive for exposing the specific problems that Isam and Wadi experience in their return to the Arab past as they negotiate trauma and nostalgic memory. Both of them, albeit differently, return to the past not as a site of ideal wholeness and comfort, but as a site of historical disorder and political catastrophe. In this past the moment of traumatization took place. Yet, paradoxically Isam and Wadi invest this same moment with nostalgia. The historical moment in which their nostalgia is invested is one that stands for unwilling, that is traumatic, re-enactments. Those re-enactments persistently leap forward into the present and invade the agonized self. And yet, as *The Ship* presents it, within the compulsive return of the traumatic past into the present, a situation emerges that becomes enveloped in nostalgia, so that a moment of possible salvation comes into view. This moment of salvation is synchronized with the ongoing traumatic past by means of a nostalgia through which Isam's and Wadi's re-enactments bring back with them a memory of a moment from the past that *preceded* the moment of trauma. In other words, the characters' return to the past not only shows nostalgia but also indicates why their nostalgia is not fulfilled in the present.

*The Ship's* portrayal of the cohesion of trauma and salvation suggests a cultural and political urgency, particularly for Palestinians. Through this cohesion the allegedly ideal past that existed, as well as the traumatic moment in which this past ceased to exist, can be loosened, opened up, and become subject to change. As I will show below, this potential salvation occurs in two distinct temporal forms. It arises not only through re-enacting the moment that preceded the trauma in the past as in Isam's case, but also by transmitting the memory of that particular re-enacted moment – simply to *tell it*, as in Wadi's case. To put it differently, rather than bearing the trauma of the past like Isam, Wadi transmits its presence.

Thus the nostalgic return to, and *of*, the past as a site of catastrophe as well as salvation is an essential move through which dealing with the present and the future becomes possible.

This nostalgic return, in addition, always takes on specific cultural frameworks. In Isam's return, those frameworks expose the chaotic condition of the Arab world in the 1940s and 1950s, as initiated in large measure by Western colonial rule: British, French and Italian. At the heart of this chaos is the Arabs' struggle with issues that relate to gender relations, tribal values, and oppressive authority. In Wadi's case, a nostalgic return to the Arab past exposes its disorder in terms of political betrayal and military defeat, both in 1948 and 1967, against the backdrop of the loss of Palestine. In his return, Wadi reflects on Palestinians' forced expulsion, their attempts to establish a link with the lost homeland in exile, and their inability to reclaim this land in the present. Hence, the aim behind the nostalgic return to the past is not to recover the ideal time of the homeland. Instead, it is a transmission of memory that attempts to bridge the gap in exile between the subject and the object of loss, between the Palestinians and Palestine. In this sense, nostalgic memory can be put to work as a cultural response to loss of homeland in exile. In order to delineate this mode of remembering, I first discuss Isam's nostalgic return.

#### *The Sea: Lovers' Escape and Vicious Dogs*

In the beginning of *The Ship*, Isam attempts to escape from his land as a way of healing his past wounds, only to find that escape is nothing but an illusion; a kind of re-enactment. This is so because there is nowhere to escape to; hence, the setting on a ship. The opening passage, narrated by Isam, contains the following description:

The sea is a bridge to salvation – the soft, the hoary, the compassionate sea. Today, it has regained its vitality. The crash of its waves is a violent rhythm for the sap that sprays the face of heaven with flowers, large lips, and arms reaching out like alluring snares. Yes, the sea is a new salvation. (1)<sup>22</sup>

Isam's description reveals an obvious gendering of the sea. This gendering is brought about through the use of images such as "flowers", "large lips" and "arms". As a result, a feminine image of the sea emerges. Such a personification conforms to traditional feminizations of water, and of nature more generally. Yet, what looks like a poetic description of the beauty of

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<sup>22</sup> All quotes from the novel are taken from the English version, *The Ship* (1985). Of course, I also consulted the original Arabic version of the novel, *Al-Safina* (1970), to verify the translation.

the sea turns into a statement that sets up the theme of the impossibility of escape. This impossibility is presented through the use of imagery of seduction and capture.

In the beginning of the passage, the sea is presented as a possible “bridge” that may lead to salvation. This possibility of salvation is suggested by the personification of the sea, as a soft compassionate entity that embraces people without a home. Yet the sea is neither soft nor compassionate. The sea is ever changing, and “[t]oday, it has regained vitality”. The vitality of the sea is determined by its unstable cosmic rhythms. Because of its vitality, the sea is not only a place for compassion, but it can also be a place that harbors and produces “a violent rhythm”. This violent rhythm, in turn, contains contradictory forces: beauty on one the hand and danger on the other. The violent rhythm of the waves produces a vital force that “sprays the face of heaven”. The spray of the sea contains beauty, “flowers and large lips”, that entices a person into its seductive trap of alluring snares, from which it is difficult to escape. Thus, through the imagery of the “alluring snares”, the sea not only becomes a confining or undesirable contrivance from which escape or relief is difficult, but it also becomes a potent symbol of being lost and trapped.

This symbolism of entrapment is particularly evocative if we read this opening passage in terms of exile. Read as such, the sea can be interpreted, at first, as a bridge to salvation that leads the exile to a different destination, *somewhere else*. Later on, however, the sea becomes salvation itself: it becomes this somewhere else. The affirmation expressed in the final sentence supports this reading: “Yes, the sea is a new salvation”. But how can the exile find salvation at sea, other than by drowning? Seen from this perspective, then, the exile remains stuck between the lost homeland and the new place that is unreachable. The sea, therefore, does not appear convincing as a place of salvation. This makes any interpretation of this image as naively nostalgic, inappropriate. Rather, the sea’s image as a dangerous trap makes it appear as a *void*, a non-place. This emptiness, potentially infinite, causes the escapee’s feelings and thoughts to be caught in a nostalgic reminiscence that revolves on a past (and a place) left behind. As a result, the past from which the characters seek to escape constantly impinges on the present before which they stand helpless and which they cannot change. In front of that present they are deprived of their will. Hence, by means of its metaphoric language that hints at the difficulty of trauma in the face of discursive symbolization, the sea foregrounds the uselessness of escape. The sea is an empty space that imprisons its voyagers.

Besides the imagery of the sea as a void, the ineffectiveness of escape is also made visible in the temporal construction of the plot. Temporal disorder, one of the characteristics

of trauma I have indicated above, is signified in the mode of storytelling. The plot in *The Ship* is constructed as “murder story” with a reversed chronology.<sup>23</sup> While the reader together with the narrators, except for Emilia who knows more, thinks that the gathering of this group of people on the ship is a matter of coincidence, by the end of the novel, the reader and the narrators discover that the gathering is the result of rigorous planning. The act of death (Dr. Falih’s suicide) which triggers this revelation in the narrative arrives as the culmination of the events and as the last step in the gradual process of revelation. This destabilizes the linear temporality of the narrative. And, as a consequence, random events turn out to be part of a plot, and the plot turns out to be more multifaceted than initially assumed and presented by the narrators.

The temporality of the plot, thus, plays on the dualistic motif of appearance versus reality, the characters’ gathering as a coincidence versus their gathering as planned, and thereby achieves an ironic effect. This effect, as Roger Allen and Adnan Haydar argue in their introduction to *The Ship*, is “produced through beginning the plot at a point that is close to its temporal ending as if to underscore that time in its chronological order and expansiveness is irrelevant” (1985: 8).<sup>24</sup> Instead, what counts in relation to time in the novel, is the moment at which the past is released in the present in order to accompany the possibility of the future. This moment is the same moment with which the novel starts: “the end”, when the characters depart the land and their past. The narrative begins with this moment precisely because “the end” is *the* moment out of time that the characters are incapable of reaching. It is in this moment that the characters’ past emerges. Accordingly, this moment causes them to question their own condition in the present and, through that uncertainty, it generates their nostalgia for the past.

This nostalgia enters the characters’ present in the form of memory and recollection. A stark example of this nostalgia can be seen in the part that follows Isam’s opening statement in which the reader is told of his failed love story with Luma Abdul Ghani. Isam states his reasons for being on the ship as follows:

I am here in order to escape. I am here for many reasons, but mostly because I could not make Luma my own sea, my own ship, and my own adventure. (11)

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<sup>23</sup> For an extensive discussion of the plot in *The Ship* as a “murder story”, see Hamarneh (1991: 223-39).

<sup>24</sup> For further discussion on time techniques in Jabra’s literary project, see also Allen (1995: 14-16).

These statements accentuate and motivate Isam's previous gendered focalization of the sea as a feminine figure. I use the verb "motivate" here following Phillippe Hamon's use of the term "motivation" to describe rhetorical devices that make a description pass as "naturally" belonging to the narrative that in fact they interrupt.<sup>25</sup> As soon as Isam utters these words, he indulges in a recollection from the past describing his failed love story with Luma. The narrative can be summarized as follows: Isam, an Iraqi engineer, falls in love with his fellow student Luma while studying at Oxford University in England. Upon their return to Iraq, Isam proposes to Luma. His attempt, however, is doomed to failure. Apart from class differences between their families, Luma turns out to be a relative of someone, Jwad Al Hamadi, whom Isam's father has murdered over a land dispute. The moment Luma's family discovers this about Isam, they refuse his marriage proposal, and his relationship with Luma ends as she marries her cousin, Dr. Falih. As a result, Isam is determined to escape this painful past. For him, the only means to do so is by deserting his homeland.

Although Isam manages physically to escape the land by boarding the ship, he cannot escape the memory of his past with Luma in that place. In the same opening section, Isam meets Emilia Franesi who tells him that her marriage had "lasted a little over a year", leaving her "with nothing but the memory of the lush green mountains above Beirut and the feeling that she had to escape" (12). When Emilia tells Isam that she is escaping her past like him, she also reminds him that while it is possible to escape the land, the memory of that place remains inescapable. According to Emilia, the place returns, and is returned to, through memory: "'Do you understand?' She asked. 'It is the memory of a landscape, not an emotion; the memory of a country, not a man'" (12). At this point of the narrative, Emilia's view carries no weight for Isam. Her view, however, becomes more reliable shortly afterwards when Isam discovers that Luma and Dr. Falih are also travelling with them on the ship.

As the object of Isam's deep affection, and also the subject of his agony, Luma's presence accelerates his confrontation with the traumatic past of their separation. Describing the moment when he first sees Luma on the ship, Isam says:

But Luma's face [...] is the face of tragedy, the face which haunts you forever, like desire and sorrow [...] I might forget it for days, for months, but then in a flash it would come flooding back. Feeling of stupor and inanity would leave me with a sense of drowning in sheer fury [...] When I saw her on the ship I wished she had not been there. I wished I could lower the ship's gangway to the wharf again and disappear into the crowds. I had run away from her, but there she was, standing before me, like a wall, like a giant, like the sea itself. (13)

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<sup>25</sup> See Hamon (1981).

Through the use of images such as “flooding” and “drowning”, this passage is a continuation of the sea’s image, which Isam reiterates throughout his focalization. Narratologically, Isam’s florid style shifts narrative elements: it displaces narrative action into simile and metaphor with no coordination on the side of imagery. The metaphors go nowhere; they do not return to the object they are meant to illuminate. This lack of coordination can be seen, for example, when he says: “there she was, standing before me, like a wall, like a giant, like the sea itself”. In this sentence, the images of a “wall”, “a giant”, and “the sea” lack the requisite element of commonality.

It is this displacement of action and lack of coordination that, I argue, signifies trauma. In accordance with trauma, symbolization is disrupted, both on the narratological level of temporal sequence and on the metaphorical one where metaphors do not bring Isam closer to, but remove him farther from the elusive past. For Isam, Luma’s face is a “face of tragedy” that keeps chasing him, and from which he cannot escape. Like the traumatic past, her face unwillingly comes “flooding back” in a “flash” and it is accompanied by mixed feelings of shock, hollowness and bewilderment. While Isam seeks to escape these mixed feelings, Luma’s face stands in front of him “like a wall” that he cannot bypass: it *blocks* the possibility of escape. This blocking effect is precisely what makes Isam’s experience “failed experience”, in Van Alphen's terms. With regard to the event of his separation from Luma, Isam is incapable of making the necessary narrative frameworks in terms of symbolic order and discourse: we can say that his trauma resists integration. For him, the figure of Luma represents a “giant” from the past that inhibits and haunts his present. This giant is so powerful that it extends as “the sea itself” before which Isam stands impotent. The same sea that allowed him to escape now embodies the very reason for his flight.

Isam’s response to Luma’s presence on the ship presents yet another indication of the correctness of Emilia’s view of how the past (or at least, figures from it) returns involuntary and somatically in the present. In one sense, the figure of Luma becomes a paradigmatic figure for portraying the return of the trauma of their separation that Isam failed to experience. For Isam, the figure of Luma is propelled from the past into the present and bears a message, invariably one of agony. Yet, in another sense, the figure of Luma does not bear the message of agony, but instead it, itself, is the message that turns into a sign that points back to the traumatogenic experiences of the past and forces those experiences back into his memory. Therefore, for Isam, Luma becomes a constant reminder of his trauma; a symptom of it. As a symptom, however, the figure of Luma does not merely signify individual loss,

separation and agony. Rather, as I will attempt to show, she carries with her underlying collective cultural disorder from the past that invades the present. This is more than a tragic love story. This cultural disorder is revealed through Isam's nostalgic return to the past.

Together with Isam's return to his own personal mishap with Luma, the reader is introduced to the wider cultural context of the Arab past. This past is represented as a time that contains cultural disorder and political upheavals. Isam's love story with Luma fails due to circumstances that are beyond their control. What binds the personal and the political is the issue of values. The failure of their love story is determined by a familial tragic past that is never resolved, within an Iraqi society living during a chaotic transitional period shortly after independence, and struggling to move from traditional to modern values.<sup>26</sup> In Isam's story, this struggle is presented through the act of "tribal revenge", his father's murder of Jwad Al Hamadi, of which both Isam and Luma are suffering the results.

The struggle between traditional and modern values was a typical condition of the majority of the Arab societies during the 1940s and 1950s. Within the context of decolonization and political transformation into independent states, Arab societies not only faced cultural challenges centering on rapid changes in thinking about gender relations, tribal values and class issues, but they also faced tremendous political challenges such as democracy, nationalism and military defeat. These difficult issues characterize the Arab past as a chaotic condition through which the Arab individual, as much as the societies, lived in limbo and stood paralyzed in the face of these challenges.<sup>27</sup>

In this context, a significant aspect to which Isam's return to the past alludes is the internal political situation of those societies: namely, the oppressive form of authority under which its citizens were ruled. This aspect is hinted at in the scene of the love escapade, the first main flashback in the novel. While Isam and Luma are making out, their act is interrupted by a violent "dog's barking" so that they are trapped in the car:

I drove for a while longer, stopped the car, and started to kiss Luma [...] Suddenly, the night was rent by the sound of violent barking, and involuntarily Luma moved away from me. I turned on the ignition and the car sprang forward. We saw a man coming from a distance, his dogs around him, jumping and barking. "Turn back, Isam. Turn back!" Luma cried. I backed up, and the rear wheels of the car fell into a ditch [...] The engine roared, but the wheels turned in vain. "What a mess. What a mess," Luma kept repeating. "What does the man want? I am scared of dogs." The dogs bounced ahead of

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<sup>26</sup> Iraq was the first Arab country to gain independence from British rule in 1932.

<sup>27</sup> It is worth mentioning here that Arab societies' transformation from being colonized into independent societies is still continuing up till today as most of the cultural and political issues such as tribal revenge, democratization, and political defeat remain utterly unsolved.

their master, filling the night with their vicious barking. Finally, the man arrived and suddenly flashed a light, which glared like an obscene eye among his dogs' eyes. (16)

The dogs with their master, later called "barking dogs around that ghost in the dark" (17), interrupt Isam's and Luma's act, and they also trigger in them a state of intense fear. Their fear, as I read it, is the fear of an omnipresent oppressive political authority. My reading is justified by the use of the public imagery of "vicious dogs", which is often interpreted in Arabic popular speech as a metaphor for the security services and the police apparatus that adhere to the ruling political authority and sustain its cruel forms of governing.

However, at the end of the love scene, my reading of Isam's and Luma's fear, and the passage as a whole, as a political statement reflecting on the oppressive political authority in Arab societies, seems to be weakened by the fact that the dogs turn out to be harmless:

He could have given us hell, for sure. We were trapped, and his dogs lunged at the car like a pack of wolves. Instead he gave us a smile. "Good evening. Are you stuck?" he asked with a gentle sympathy [...] "Don't worry," he said. He went back to check the wheels. (16)

Yet, despite the fact that the dog's master turns out to be a help for Isam and Luma, rather than doing them harm, my political reading is supported by the rhetorical fact that, later on in the novel, the metaphor of the "vicious dogs" occurs once again in Dr. Falih's return to the past. This repetition of the metaphor in Dr. Falih's recollection is important in relation to the identification of the characters in the novel.

Dr. Falih is the hyper-literate character, yet the most cynical. His despair and cynicism are not prompted by Palestinian or other contemporary political conflicts and dilemmas. He admits to alcoholism and hints at impotence (181). The depth of his existential angst exceeds that of the other characters and often contradicts the qualified optimism of Wadi's narrative. If Isam and Wadi divide Arab consciousness in *The Ship*, the suicidal Dr. Falih reflects the loss of cultural identity. His character gives voice to the fears of cultural collapse in the aftermath of *al-nakba* and the political defeat of 1967. Dr. Falih does not think of himself as Arab; as a physician and a thinker he had crossed a line that collapsed his Arab identity. In his case, the land ceased to support his distinctive persona. Isam and Dr. Falih identify with each other not only because they belong to the same tribe and are both in love with the same woman, Luma, in spite of Dr. Falih's affair with Emilia Franesi, but also because they are Iraqis with a keen sense of nostalgia for "old-time Iraq": a time the Greeks called Mesopotamia (180-86). This can be seen, for example, in the notes which Dr. Falih leaves to Luma after his suicide. These

notes, part memoir, part essay, and part narrative, are folded into Isam's final narration, and in them Dr. Falih describes himself as "a Greek god". This mythical resonance of Dr. Falih's conception of himself derives from the view Emilia had of him when she first encountered him, "[w]hen she woke up, she saw me and thought I was a Greek God challenging her Italian femininity, a Greek God from the banks of the Arabian Euphrates, from the remote regions of the desert" (180). I only refer to Isam's and Dr. Falih's identification in passing, but in their narratives there are several references to life in ancient and medieval Iraq; their narratives incorporate a similar nostalgic desire to return to that time.

Returning now to the metaphor of the "vicious dogs" in Dr. Falih's recollections, we see that the dog's master obliquely becomes part of the community that is damaged. The dogs appear as harmful and they are even considered, together with what they symbolize (political authority), as an "inside enemy". In a conversation with Wadi and Mahmoud Al Rashid about politics and authority, Dr. Falih recounts the following scene from his past:

One night [...] there was a very urgent case. In the usual way, the sick person's family explained to me how to get to their house [...] As ill luck would have it, I took a road with a number of vacant lots along it [...] I had barely walked more than twenty meters from my car when a dog came rushing toward me, barking. Behind it came another, then a third and a fourth. They were all stray dogs living in these empty spaces [...] Just imagine six or seven huge, black dogs. I could see their teeth gleaming even in the dark as they made ready to tear into my flesh. They formed a hideous circle around me, and their howling alone was more than enough to scare a complete tribe [...] my whole body was shaking [...] The key was in one of the pockets of the coat I had been using to keep those vicious teeth at bay [...] As I was looking for it and at the same time kicking out at the dogs, one of them bit me in the calf of my leg. When I used my utmost strength to get it off me, it ran away taking with it a piece of trousers and a bit of my skin too. (104-5)

The dogs turn out to be harmful as they take some of Dr. Falih's flesh. While the link to the oppressive form of authority does not directly appear in this passage, this connection is made in Dr. Falih's subsequent interpretation. When Wadi comments on the story by saying, "What a piece of luck!" (105), Dr. Falih directly says:

You see what I mean by the guillotine? "The enemy?" You [Wadi] are thinking of the outside, and I [Falih] am thinking of the inside [...] We have to be prepared to face the enemy outside; fine, we agree on that. But what about the enemy inside, the solid teeth that stick into your flesh as you're on your way to save people closer to death? (106)

Dr. Falih's interpretation of his story makes clear that the metaphor of the "vicious dogs" stands for an oppressive form of authority, a "guillotine". Later on in the same conversation,

Dr. Falih even hints that these dogs are similar, or even identical, to the ones that appear in Isam's recollection. This similarity between the dogs is established when Mahmoud is reading a passage from Dostoevsky's book *The Devils* (1872), which is about the thin line between authority as protection and authority as exploitation. In his immediate response to this passage, Dr. Falih says: "Do you mean, authority as the opening up of a blocked road, and authority as guillotine?" (108). Dr. Falih's interpretation of the protective role of authority as "the opening up of a blocked road" becomes a clear reference to the love escapade scene in which the master and his dogs help Isam and Luma from their trap on the road.

To be sure, these images of the "vicious dogs" as well as the tribalism expressed in Isam's and Falih's returns to the Arab past are not so much traumatic in their content – nasty dogs and the fight can cause trauma but they do not necessarily do so – but as a conveyer of temporal collapse. If it was not for the temporal and metaphorical disruptions of their storytelling, the reader would have no way to understand that Isam's and Dr. Falih's suffering is traumatic. Thus, it is the narratological structure and the words used that together become the symptom. Hence, time stands still, or past collapses with present: both traditional tribal culture and oppressive authority in their confining effects live on in the present of the characters and perpetuate their painful reality. In other words, the tribalism and the oppressive authority represent the constant impingement of the past on the present, erasing the boundaries between them, and thus rendering the latter helpless.

At this point of *The Ship*, the reader, sensitive to the recurrence of the motif of the dogs, sees the Arab past, through Isam's internal focalization, and complemented by Dr. Falih's, as a site of cultural disorder and political oppression. This chaos invades Isam's present, and therefore, appears as the legitimate reason for his escape. The political and the personal motivations for Isam's escape are intertwined to the point of indistinction, a prime symptom of the cultural chaos of nations whose development has been disrupted by colonization. Yet, Isam and Dr. Falih are not the only characters in the novel who return to the Arab past as a site of cultural disorder.

Another central figure who returns to this past is the exiled Palestinian Wadi. While Isam's and Dr. Falih's nostalgic return to the past exposes Arab societies' cultural and political struggles after decolonization, Wadi's return sets out to tell this past from the perspective of a Palestinian specificity. In his return, Wadi presents us with a stark difference in focalization from that of Isam and Dr. Falih, particularly in relation to the subject's decision of escaping the land and its past. His focalization, thus, also has a different

relationship to trauma and nostalgia. The difference, as I argue below, is that Wadi's nostalgia shifts in site from the temporal to the spatial: his is a yearning to return, not to a time, but to a place.

*Mr. Palestine: The Past Between Truth and Lie*

The first time Isam introduces us to Wadi, he describes him as a man who “would talk and laugh with gusto, and when he stopped talking, all other voices sounded like croaking noises” (18). Moreover, Wadi is the only character in *The Ship* whose physical appearance is described in detail:

He [Wadi] was tall, and his shoulders were bent forward in eager anticipation of whatever lay ahead. His thick black hair was always perfectly combed and betrayed a sense of elegance and a care for his personal appearance. (18)

This description of Wadi involves more than an introduction of a character in the novel, Wadi is made into a character with a Palestinian specificity. This specificity emerges through the combination between Wadi's physical appearance and a particular accent. In his comment on Wadi's appearance, Isam makes clear that the appearance of Wadi influences his intuition of Wadi's identity. It is Wadi's Palestinian accent that confirms this intuition:

I could sense right away that he was a Palestinian, and my intuition proved right when I heard his accent. He reminded me of many Palestinian students I had met in England. One thing has always surprised me about the Palestinians: their love for words, even when they speak in English. (18)

Not only does Isam's intuition of where Wadi comes from prove right, but Wadi's character is also given specific Palestinian characteristics, particularly his “accent” and his “love for words”. Indeed, Wadi's love for words, hence, of storytelling, becomes a remarkable technical feature of *The Ship*. For example, Wadi's share in the conversations narrated by Isam amounts to about one-third of them.<sup>28</sup> As a result of this substantiality and specificity, Wadi becomes a figure who has all the trappings of “the Palestinian”.

With regard to the larger issue of escaping one's homeland and past, Wadi's specificity and the great share in the narration that substantiates it serve as a narratological device that facilitates the occurrence of a different internal focalization. This focalization mediates between his personal memories and a more general Palestinian cultural memory.

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<sup>28</sup> In his reading of *The Ship*, Hamarneh makes this observation about the abundance of Wadi's narration. See Hamarneh (1991: 228).

Thus, by having a space to speak up with a Palestinian accent, Wadi – focalized within Isam’s generalizing discourse – becomes an allegorical figure for the Palestinian people. And, therefore, he becomes a qualified individual to address the Palestinian loss of the homeland. Moreover, Wadi’s specificity as an allegorical figure gives his character an advantage over the other characters in *The Ship*. Thanks to that special status, his nostalgic return to the Palestinian past not only reflects individual narrative, but also represents a collective one. His memories, opinions, and stories of the past cannot only be understood as elements of exclusively individual memory, but they can also be read as instances of a collective Palestinian memory of that past. To help understand how this general cultural memory can be seen in connection to trauma and nostalgia, the specificity of Wadi’s character as well as his views on the chaos of the Arab past need to be understood first.

Wadi is a gregarious, engaging character. This is the perspective that Emilia offers when she describes him as a man who “will stop at nothing, at nobody [...], [and] who can attract men and women with such speed and respon[se] to every person looking for some warmth of his radiant sun” (158). Again here, like in Isam’s description, Wadi’s character is given a special status in the narrative, this time as a social magnet. Indeed, at times the other characters are defined by their relationship to Wadi. This does not mean, however, that Wadi’s position is that of *the hero* in the novel; all the characters of *The Ship* are heroes in the sense that each contributes one or more pieces to a complex mosaic, at the center of which is the land. In fact, if there was a single hero, then, this would be the land since, as Roger Allen and Adnan Haydar put it in their introduction to *The Ship*, “the quest for [it] is the motivating force behind the action of the novel” (1985: 9). Wadi’s status is special precisely because his relationship to the land is unique. The image of the land saturates his discourse and sharply contradicts the image of the sea with which Isam’s narrative abounds. His only real dispute with the other characters, particularly with Isam, is about alienation from one’s roots and land. Like Isam, Wadi sees the Arab past as a time of cultural disorder. Yet, unlike Isam, he does not see this disorder as a legitimate reason to escape one’s land. In so doing, not only does Wadi offer a different interpretation of the past and its chaos, but he also stabilizes his own position as a composite figure of a focalizer, a narrator in his own right, and a transmitter of the (Palestinian) narrative.

To be sure, in Isam’s case the land is an imagined enemy that drives a wedge between him and Luma and compels him to escape. His chief worry is precisely the obsession with the land and the tribal traditions and the oppressive forms of authority bound up with it, which maintained their hold on contemporary Arab culture, and still do so. This is why Isam

is continuously searching for ways to break his ties with his homeland. His decision to sever his relationship to the land is a voluntary one. In sharp contrast to Isam, Wadi has been driven out from his land, and, as a result, has lost an integral part of his identity. Wadi's journey on the ship away from his homeland is simply one of the multiple journeys he is compelled to undertake in his forced exile. He always keeps alive his dream of returning to his land, and so he is deeply troubled by the past. When Dr. Falih, for example, dismisses Wadi's obsession with the past because he would be "like most Palestinians, obsessed with himself", Isam gives it a spin: "[m]ost Palestinians are obsessed with the innocence they've lost and want to regain" (94). According to Wadi, Isam "must return to his land, to his roots, in order to find the freedom" he is searching for (75). With respect to nostalgia and trauma, this dispute between Isam and Wadi and the differences between their perspectives on escaping the land distinguish their characters psychologically, of course, but the cultural and political dimensions, especially Wadi's insistence on the value of the land in his life as a Palestinian subject, are vital here.

In Wadi's account, specific political betrayals are responsible for the chaos of the Arab past. The most poignant example of these betrayals that Wadi offers in his story is the British betrayal of Palestinians during their colonial mandate in Palestine (1922-1948). Wadi accuses the British of handing over Palestine to the Zionists and allowing them to move into forward positions before the Palestinians could establish themselves in Jerusalem:

At the beginning of May 1948, modern Jerusalem was a battleground between Arabs and Jews. Actually the British army had not departed yet, but it had left things to the Arabs and the Jews, thereby feigning "complete" neutrality [...] It was understood that the army would be withdrawing on the fifteenth of May and that the camp and everything in it would be handed over to the Arab freedom fighters [...] The appointed day approached. Our moral was high and communications with other parts of the Arab world were still good. However, early on the morning of the fourteenth of May, we were surprised to see the British army moving its vehicles and equipment and withdrawing a day earlier than agreed [...] The army was withdrawing and actually handing over the modern city [known as West Jerusalem nowadays] to the Jews, step by step, under its protection. We suddenly became aware of the Jewish advance from every direction, filling the void which the British were leaving behind them. (56-57)

Hence, the loss of Palestine. According to Wadi, the betrayal of the Palestinians embodies the chaos of the Arab world. For him, this political betrayal is also invariably linked to bodily and moral ones. When Wadi participates in a general discussion about "truth" and "lie", he describes the disorder of the Arab past as epistemological failure of exactly these notions. To

describe this failed epistemology, Wadi takes both the “shameful meaning of the body” and its “animalistic nature” as his points of departure:

You see when it comes to love and sex, I’m romantic. If you come with me when we get to Naples, you will understand what I mean. I am on vacation now [...] In Naples [...] you’ll understand the meaning of the body. It is a shameful meaning. And why? Because it’s the animal in you. The body is the only irrefutable truth. The thing which connects you and me with beasts. Why be supercilious and hypocritical? In Naples, we’ll get four, five, six women, depending on the size of the room, and there we shall behold wonders. The only truth, the ultimate boredom. Because truth is ultimately boring. I always prefer liars. Liars are aristocrats. They’re rebels in their own way, and rebellion is always aristocratic. (19)

Wadi views the body as morally shameful because of its physicality, but at the same time as “irrefutably true”. However, because of this physicality that “connects [us] with beasts”, the truth is “ultimately boring”. Moreover, Wadi connects the truth of the body with a lie. This is a paradox he performs himself.

While Wadi is talking about the meaning of the truth, he lies. His lie appears in his account of his reasons for being on the ship as being on “vacation”. Wadi’s lie manifests itself when, later in the same monologue, he describes himself as an exiled Palestinian: “I was forced out of my country” (20). By lying about his status, Wadi creates epistemological confusion between what is true and what is not. As a result, Wadi’s preference seemingly is for lies and liars. Romantically, he describes lies as a rebellion and as a feature of aristocracy. In so doing, however, his description produces confusion, this time of lie itself. For, one cannot be a rebel and aristocrat at the same time, since these categories are opposed, and have historically and socially emerged as contradictory. The contrast between aristocracy and rebellion can be seen in their respective meanings: aristocracy signifies an elite where power rests, rebellion suggests resistance against or opposition to such power.

Accordingly, the confusion of truth and lie leads Wadi to a denial of these notions, particularly of “truth”. Wadi “believe[s] nobody”, and he does not “presume to tell the truth” either (21). For him, truth does not exist, and therefore, he “never wants to know it” (19). Even if truth were to exist, it would exist as “[a] beggar, a monk, a heretic, a despot, a son of [a] bitch [...] Actually, anyone who claims to be telling the truth is either deluded and doesn’t know it, or a liar and knows it” (19). Wadi’s admonition of the opposition between truth and lie, and perhaps by implication of all conceptual oppositions, is further enforced by the negative categories that describe truth, all serving as opposites of the romantic pair of rebel and aristocrat. The figures of a “rebel” and “aristocrat” fit in perfectly in Wadi’s case as

exiled Palestinian particularly if we read these in correlation to Isam's narrative as forms of rule. Read as such, rather than by an oppressive authority as a state builder in Iraq, Wadi's world appears to be ruled by the aristocrat and the rebel so as to emphasize the absence of the national state and its bourgeois subjects.

Wadi argues that the opposition between truth and lie cannot serve as the epistemological frame for the representation of the reality of Palestinians' loss of homeland. This is how Wadi narrates the failure of these notions:

We [Palestinians] spoke the truth till our throats grew hoarse, and we ended up as refugees in tents. We fancied the world community cherished the truth, and turned out to be the victims of our own naiveté. We came to realize all this both as a nation, and as individuals. This is why, as an individual, I don't care what people say any longer. The only thing that matters for me is my feelings and intuition. Long live liars, dissemblers, and impostors! At least, I'm safe from their harm because I'm a master at their game. As I told you, I am on a vacation; and hope it'll last a year or two [...] I was forced out of my country, and yet I've managed to make money in Kuwait, I still make enough, thank God. (20)

For Wadi, the failure of truth manifested itself through the lack of response to what happened to the Palestinians in the past. The Palestinians "spoke the truth", but the world community did not respond. The Palestinians' collective belief that the world community "cherished the truth", turned out to be a "naiveté" by which they were victimized and exiled: they "ended as refugees in tents". Because of this "naiveté" the failure of truth turns into a symbolic representation that oscillates between victimization and protest. This failure, caused by a mismatch between his expectations (the response in the present) and the event itself (the loss of the homeland), induces Wadi's experience of the past as a betrayal. Since he was victimized despite telling the truth, Wadi now prefers liars. Significantly, his preference for liars is motivated by an attempt to survive in the aftermath of the loss of the homeland, "At least, I'm safe from their harm". This notion of "survival", as we will see later, plays an important role in Wadi's nostalgic return. Because Wadi is "a master at [liars'] game", he is capable of lying as easily as them. When he lies "I am on a vacation" while meaning "I am in exile", Wadi is also saying he is on vacation from the truth.

Narratologically, Wadi's description evokes the loss of homeland (the trauma) between the collective and the individual. This can be seen in his alternating use of pronouns, "we" and "I". In the beginning of the passage, Wadi articulates this loss in a collective manner as "[w]e spoke the truth [...]". Later on, however, his narrative shifts emphasis to the implications of this loss on his individual self in the present. In this part, Wadi expresses a

keen sense of individuation. This is most obvious when he says: “I don’t care what people say any longer. The only thing that matters for me is my feelings and intuitions”. However, Wadi’s sense of himself is emphatically determined by the collective loss of homeland in the past. This becomes clear in his reasoning: “This is why, as an individual [...]”. Thus, the collective and the individual become relational, and in his case, they are specifically brought together in a cause-effect relationship.

Wadi’s articulation of the way the collective loss of the homeland makes an impact on his individual self in the present is relevant particularly to the larger conflation between the political and the personal motivations for escaping the land in *The Ship*. I use the terms collective/individual and political/personal interchangeably here. Whereas in Isam’s narrative, as I indicated earlier, these motivations are intertwined to the point of indistinction, in Wadi’s narrative they are neatly connected, yet they remain distinct as two entities: they do not merge, nor do they completely separate. This simultaneity affects the ways in which Wadi invests his (personal) nostalgia with/in the collective trauma of loss of homeland in exile. His return, I argue below, exposes the past with all its agony and it follows up on it into the present. In so doing, the past not only justifies the present, as in Isam’s case, but more importantly, for Wadi, the present of exile becomes an *instance* of the past. This is so because in this present the “re-enactment” in the sense of the enduring consequences of the traumatic loss of place are evident everywhere.

By saying, “the present becomes an instance of the past”, I do not mean to suggest a cyclical temporality between past and present: the past does not recur as such. What actually happens in this case is that the past loss of homeland is not preserved, but re-emerges and the is integrated on the basis of, and within, the present experience of exile. Wadi deploys nostalgia to transform and appropriate this wounding resurfacing. He thus manages to maintain the simultaneity between the political and the personal. In other words, Wadi’s nostalgia not only preserves the Palestinian past, but it also entangles and connotes the resonance of this past in the present. At the heart of this entanglement is Wadi’s attempt to connect himself, his inner world of dreams and imagination, with the world around him. This spatio-temporal configuration underlies my reading of Palestinian loss of homeland between the historical catastrophe of 1948 (*al-nakba*) and the ongoing one of 2008 (exile) together. I do this throughout this study, and especially in my analysis of oral narratives of *al-nakba* in the fifth chapter. This is also the same kind of joint reading that I will be practicing in my discussion of Mr. Palestine’s (Wadi) nostalgic return in the remainder of this chapter.

### *Nostalgia for Jerusalem*

Now that Wadi has mastered the art of lying, he can go on with his life, sublimating the loss of his homeland with trade and with works of art which he calls, “poetry” (20). Yet, these sublimational works neither ease Wadi’s pain of the past, nor do they bring him relief in the present. This is so because Wadi’s present is “plagued by painful memories, very painful” (20). The memories that haunt Wadi’s present evoke both the beauty of the homeland and its tragic past:

After all, all Palestinians are poets by nature [...] because they have experienced two basic things: the beauty of nature and tragedy. Anyone who combines these two must be a poet [...] You were probably too young when the Zionist monster gobbled up the most beautiful half of the most beautiful city [Jerusalem] in the world [...] But I walked up and down all its hills, among its houses built of stone – white stone, pink stone, red stone – castle – like houses [...] You’d think they were jewels [...] remind me of flowers in its valleys, of Spring, of the glitter of its blue skies after spring showers [...] Flowers like children’s eyes spring up from beneath the stones and around the barren roots of trees. [...] This is why nights bring back to me memories of Jerusalem, and I grieve and rage and cry. (20)

Wadi’s statement, “You were probably too young [...]”, introduces the issue of the transgenerational transmission of the past by which he, once again, stabilizes his own position in the narrative as a transmitter of the story. Moreover, for Wadi, precisely the combination of beauty and tragedy produces language, in the form of poetry. This experience of beauty is specific, having the lost homeland as its object. In order to articulate this beauty, Wadi returns to the past from which sweet images of the land emerge. The sweetness of the land is symbolized by means of simile such as the houses that look like “jewels”. The Spring of the homeland is so beautiful that even the “barren roots of trees” experience it and flourish with flowers like “children’s eyes”. These sweet images of the homeland symbolize the “innocence” that Wadi, like most Palestinians, lost together with the loss of their land. This “innocence” highlights the problematic idealizing aspects of nostalgia. However, as I argue below, Wadi’s nostalgic return is not concerned with recovering this sweet past of the homeland, but the land itself.

Furthermore, Wadi’s rhetorical imagery is noteworthy. His similes are framed in the concrete spatio-temporality of the homeland. Compared to Isam’s description of “the sea as a void” that I analyzed earlier, Wadi’s description shows a stark dichotomy between sea and land. Unlike the sea, Wadi’s homeland is described as a place with concrete features and boundaries: neither Palestine appears frozen, nor does it stand outside of time. The loss of

this land accordingly makes it appear as a discontinuity. The difference between void and discontinuity is crucial: the former is inert absence; the latter is disconnection that requires a connection. As a Palestinian exile, the odds against a reconnection of Wadi with his land are severe. I shall discuss the audiovisual imagings of this transformation of the loss of homeland as a geopolitical discontinuity in exile in my analysis of Tawfiq Saleh's film *Al-Makhdu'un* (1972) in the third chapter.

With respect to nostalgia and trauma, this imagery bears as much on the similarity as the difference between Isam's and Wadi's respective nostalgic returns to the past. The similarity between Isam and Wadi is simply that their nostalgic returns are both oriented toward a traumatic moment: for Isam, this moment is his separation from Luma, and for Wadi, it is the loss of homeland. Their returns, however, differ significantly as to the way in which the traumatic moment affects their narratives. While the traumatic moment in Isam's narrative "blocks" Luma's face as the wall blocking the escape, in Wadi's narrative this moment "bring[s] back to [him] memories". In those memories, Wadi recalls scenes from his childhood in Jerusalem. He nostalgically elaborates the charms and the beauty of his city, "the most beautiful of God's cities". Yet, Wadi's memories not only evoke beauty, but also catastrophe, when "the Zionist monster gobbled up the [...] beautiful city". In his return to the past, then, the traumatic re-enactments of *al-nakba* are unleashed first, and those re-enactments subsequently and paradoxically trigger his sweet memories of the homeland's houses, hills and seasons. In other words, through Wadi's re-enactments of the loss of homeland his memories of its beauty and sweetness become mobilized, its innocence invoked.

Wadi's telescoping of idealization through catastrophe makes his evocation nostalgic. This nostalgic evocation takes the form of a "flow of memories" in which each element activates the memory of what follows. Temporally, however, Wadi's flow of memories is incoherent, as it is not governed by a chronological order, because the catastrophe (or loss of homeland) precedes the beauty of home rather than following it. Thus, the catastrophe retrospectively produces the beauty and the sweetness of the homeland. In other words, it is the loss of homeland and its subsequent investment through memory, with nostalgic longing and imagination, which turns it into a "paradise". As a result, there is no possibility of going back to that paradise since it is neither quite the place that was left behind, nor is it the place one can return to, but one that only exists as a place of a longing that is foreclosed. Hence, what Wadi expresses in his nostalgic return to the past at this point of the narrative is not just memory, but memory in combination with *imaginative* investment. This does not mean that

the place itself (Palestine) does not exist. But it does mean that if the Palestinians would be allowed their “right of return”, they would not enter the “paradise” that was created as their object of nostalgic longing. However, the nostalgic idealization of the place thus becomes more politically compelling and urgent rather than less: it attests to the historical loss of homeland (*al-nakba*) that made it necessary as much as the injustice that sustains this loss in contemporary Palestinian exile.

This is particularly significant if we take into consideration Wadi’s allegorical status as the representative of a Palestinian cultural memory and his conception of return: for what and to where does he want to return? As I suggested above, Wadi’s nostalgic return shifts from the temporal to the spatial. What I mean is that his nostalgia, unlike that of Isam and Dr. Falih in *The Ship*, engages in an active rather than a passive form of idealization of place. This active idealization not only manifests itself in Wadi’s concrete imagery of the land as a discontinuity, as I pointed out above, but also in his understanding of a specific relationship between time and space. For him, time, unlike place, cannot be returned to – not ever; time is irreversible. This effect becomes clear in his articulation of time itself as an entity that is marked by loss. Consider the following description:

What you knew two days ago [...] and what you know today are not the same thing. Life runs, speeds on, racing people. Every day it changes you, erodes you, gnaws at your sides, enlarges the numb areas in your heart. Every day, it adds to you, blows you up, and hammers into your heart the nails of pain and joy. You’re forever changing. Your childhood accompanies you, but it’s no longer a part of you. It’s there, far away, with those waves on the horizon, on that island you behold in the sea of your dreams [...] I was staying in a hotel in Damascus once when such memories [of the loss of homeland] came back to me unexpectedly. A man I knew saw me crying and asked me what happened. I told him I was crying for my father, my mother, and my brothers and sisters, and that I had lost all shame. That was many years ago. Others wrote poetry instead of crying. But who can compose words that are the product of thirty years of experience in the most beautiful of God’s cities? Our creative attempts are merely tranquilizers, a kind of weeping. Yet, nothing in life can take the place of large flowing tears. Time, in any case, is a horrible thing. In its unabating tide it robs everything of vigor and newness. In the end, it leaves you nothing of any worth. Time has trampled down everything I see and left it faded and dull. If I were a painter, I’d paint it. Do you know how? One huge black smudge on a canvas. In two or three places I would spot it with red paint. Time is the enemy. Live, if you wish; stay alive as long as you can. But you’ll have nothing else; a big black smudge filling the fabric of your life, with a red spot here and there; the trivia that come your way whether you want them to or not, without you[’re] ever being able to achieve that great relentless experience which is the product of choice and will. [...] We survive in spite of ourselves. It is a kind of passive survival, something we accept, but cannot control. [...] I won’t put up with passive survival. (19-21)

The theme that dominates Wadi's description is that of the transformation of experience in time. Through Wadi's understanding of time we can remark, then, that his nostalgic return is not meant to be for the (sweet) time of the place, but for the place itself. Moreover, the word "unexpectedly" substantiates the notion that the historical moment in which he invests nostalgia is one that stands for traumatic re-enactments. Wadi's re-enactments turn the catastrophic loss of Palestine into intense loss that cannot be easily sublimated: *al-nakba* becomes encompassing. The loss of the homeland cannot be sublimated by writing poetry, only tranquilized.

Wadi chooses crying over writing poetry because, in his view, the experience of living in the homeland for a finite time cannot be expressed in words. And if that "great relentless experience" cannot be put into words, then the loss of that experience cannot be encompassed in words either. In view of this finitude, marked and enforced by loss, Wadi describes the works of sublimation, "our creative attempts", as mere "tranquilizers". These tranquilizers may temporarily ease the pain, but can never stop the "flowing tears", and therefore, these attempts cannot relieve him in the present. Poetry cannot do this, because of time, "the enemy", which tramples down creative attempts and leaves them "faded" and "dull". After all, as Wadi puts it, time "[i]n its unabating tide [...] robs everything of vigor and newness". I shall further discuss Wadi's interpretation of creative works as "tranquilizers" in the next section.

For now, it suffices to say that, for Wadi, language is unqualified to articulate the experience of living in the homeland as well as of its loss. Unlike those who "wrote poetry", Wadi refuses to compose poems because "words deflate his resolve" (21). Wadi's dismissal of language as a possible sublimation of loss is enforced by his preference for tears: "yet, nothing in life can take the place of large flowing tears". Tears, not language, become the mnemonic compensation for the loss of the homeland and its sweet experience. Significantly, Wadi's tears are shed for the sake of his family: "I told him I was crying for my father, my mother, and my brothers and sisters, and that I had lost all shame". The word "shame" here signifies the intolerable sense of humiliation that accompanies the loss of homeland. In Palestinian culture, land is associated with honor. Its loss, therefore, signifies the loss of honor. The proverb *El Ard A'ard* (the land is honor) in Palestinian dialect expresses this association. Wadi's evocation of shame fits in with the way in which many first-generation post-*nakba* Palestinians viewed the political defeat of 1948 and their subsequent exile as a tragic failure that has tormented them ever after. This cluster of negative sentiments, as Gannit Ankori argues in her book *Palestinian Art*, is common to their narratives, and also

often denotes their “survivors’ guilt” (2006: 51).<sup>29</sup> Wadi’s employment of the familial dialectic signifies the loss of the homeland not merely as a loss of geography, but also of the human relations that flesh out that geography. This notion of loss of place is a prescient evocation of estrangement in exile that will be central to my analysis of Liyana Badr’s collection of short stories *A Balcony Over the Fakihani* (1993) in the next chapter.

Wadi’s focalization of the past sets up, yet again, a different perspective from that of the other characters in *The Ship*: this time from Emilia’s conception of what encompasses the escapee’s memory. In the course of the narrative, the difference between their memories becomes significant particularly if we read it in terms of Emilia’s character as an “Italian tourist”. I refer to Emilia as a tourist here not so much because of her European (Italian) identity, but because of the views she expresses. Emilia appears as a tourist in *The Ship* because she speaks like one. Her memory of the past, as she told Isam before, is composed of “the memory of a landscape, not an emotion; the memory of a country, not a man” (12). Thus, Emilia’s memory is tied to landscape rather than to people. Wadi’s memory, instead, conjures up both. Through the dialectic that informs his tears, his memory evokes the land as well as the emotional bond with the people who inhabit it. Hence, Wadi’s nostalgic return reflects what I call here “native nostalgia”. With “native” I do not mean to imply a form of privilege in terms either of origin or essential identity. The term “familiar” would perhaps be the most adequate choice of words here; however, I opt for this risky and loaded term to suggest the degree of deep affinity, attachment and belonging that Wadi expresses.<sup>30</sup>

Wadi’s nostalgic evocation of the past has another consequence for the way it impinges on his present. Time not only shatters language and makes poetic sublimation inadequate, but also life itself, through the “unabating tide” of time, becomes “a kind of passive survival, something we accept, but cannot control”. For Wadi, this passivity is determined by his lack of “choice and will” as a Palestinian exile. Indeed, one could attempt to continue living, but in the end, in Wadi’s view, nothing but a formless shape will remain:

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<sup>29</sup> In her study on Palestinian art, Ankori argues that in the context of *al-nakba* Zionist and anti-Palestinian propaganda often deliberately misrepresented the feelings of humiliation of first-generations of post-*nakba* Palestinians as a sign of their unwillingness to defend their homes or of their sheer cowardice; a misreading which Ankori rejects and instead dutifully analyzes the ways in which Palestinians fended off this propaganda in cultural media, especially visual aesthetics. See Ankori (2006: 51-52).

<sup>30</sup> For the term “native”, see, for example, Geertz (1983: 55-73). According to Geertz, the problem of understanding things from the point of view of the native has been exercising methodological discussion in anthropological understanding. Geertz argues for an interpretation that relies on a “thick description” of cultural acts by which the meanings behind the actions as well as their symbolic imports in a specific cultural setting are exposed. For another relevant anthropological study that focuses on temporal discrepancy, see Fabian (1983).

“a big black smudge filling the fabric of life [...]”. On Wadi’s canvas, the “red spots” are few. The “red spots” signify a switch from inadequate poetry to abstract visual art. As I will attempt to show in the next section, Wadi’s shift to art relates to his view of works of sublimation as “tranquilizers” of trauma. In other words, Wadi cannot recreate the past’s “great relentless experience” of living in the homeland. This is so because this experience, for Wadi, has proven materially transitory; it does not last. It is an experience that is always lived in time; after exhausting its time, its material reality disappears, and then, the experience is transformed into memory.

This temporal configuration between experience and memory is given shape in his description of childhood as an experience that “accompanies [the subject], but it’s no longer a part of [him or her]. It’s there, far away, with those waves on the horizon, on that island [the subject] behold[s] in the sea of [his or her] dreams”. The word “dreams” highlights the temporal transformation of real experience into the scope of imagination and fiction, hence, into memory. By means of this analysis of time, Wadi not only enacts nostalgia, but also ruthlessly indicates its uselessness. Although his nostalgic return gives coherence and legitimacy to the Palestinian past, it equally shows that this nostalgia cannot retrieve it. Yet, Wadi in time comes up with an alternative to nostalgic longing alone. This alternative is memory, seen as an act directed to the future. This can be appreciated in Wadi’s story about his friend Fayez, which forms the second main recollection of the novel.

#### *From Nostalgia to Active Memory That Remains*

Before I proceed with Wadi’s story about Fayez and his conception of nostalgic memory, I wish to tackle his interpretation of the work of sublimation as the “tranquilizers” of trauma. Besides his dismissal of language (poetry) as a possible form of sublimation, later on in the narrative Wadi equally discredits trade. For him, the commerce that he both inherited “in spite of himself” and “was rewarded with for his exile” (38) cannot compensate for the loss of the homeland. For example, while Wadi would do anything and “travel a thousand miles” (21) for money, in the end, he nevertheless “tramples it under [his] foot” (21). To clarify Wadi’s view on the works of sublimation, I take a closer look at the following monologue, one of Wadi’s many in the novel. I discuss this monologue in particular because it helps me unpack the ways in which Wadi conceives of the political and psychological possibilities, as much as the limitations, in the arts for sublimating his trauma of loss of homeland. Unlike Isam’s case, Wadi’s trauma does not cause him to withdraw into his inner world: he does not

break with the world around him. Instead, he keeps his inner and outer worlds in constant contact with each other. Wadi also elaborates on the importance of memory for his survival in exile.

As indicated, Wadi dismisses poetry and trade as methods of sublimation, but not of art per se: he paints and this practice is directly related to the loss of homeland. This revelation emerges in one of his conversations with Isam and Fernando, Wadi's Spanish roommate in the cabin on the ship, when the three of them are engaged in a discussion about how each understands art and what it means to enjoy it. This is how Isam begins their exchange:

Since some of our conversation was in Arabic, Fernando busied himself with a thorough examination of the paintings. He picked them up one by one and shook his head, sometimes to express contentment, and at other times the opposite. Then he clapped his hands. "When I don't understand a painting," he said in English, "I enjoy it. Take this one, for example. I don't understand it, but I feel it penetrates me. It hurts me, but I enjoy it. Masochistic? Why not, as long as I enjoy it". "My own sense of enjoyment is purely intellectual," I [Isam] said, studying the painting carefully. "I love to observe relations, proportions, contrasts between lines and masses. It's the kind of thrill one experiences after solving a difficult mathematical problem." (70)

At work here are two views of the reception of art. Fernando's is triggered by his inability to understand the paintings. Accordingly, this generates the emotion of pain in him, which shapes his sense of the masochistic enjoyment of art. For Isam, art is a scientific venture; his enjoyment takes the shape of observation and study. Both views conceptualize art as a problem in need of a solution: Fernando and Isam make sense of art in either visceral or intellectual terms.

This is how Wadi responds to their views:

"But," Wadi Said, "there are no solutions in art. The problem is what counts [*muhima*]. The solution is in the next issue that you never buy. I enjoy anything that tears me apart within, that makes me feel I'm walking to left and right at the same time. You know, most of us are like a man in love with two women at once, a brunette and a blonde." [...] "This kind of man," [...] "regards each of them as a paragon of beauty, and in his solitude he sees each one all that he can possibly want in a woman. He sees himself moving back and forth between them, kissing one while the taste of the other woman's kiss is still fresh on his lips. He thinks they know nothing about each other, that his game is one of his own closely guarded secrets. But, in a devilish moment of fantasy, he sees them both making love strangely to each other. The idea strikes him as ludicrous. It upsets him, and he dismisses it from his thoughts. One day he discovers that they are indeed in love with each other, that they are lesbians, torturing him for their own sport, and finding true pleasure only in each other. He becomes aware that he is jealous of each of them, jealous of a woman whom he loves

and whom he thought he was able to deceive and use in order to deceive his other woman. This is how we constantly tear ourselves apart between the things we love (or imagine we love) while these things actually love themselves and hold fast to their own logic and eccentricities much more than they care for us or our desires. Our own life in society is one example of this. Power and its contradictions, money, possessions, marriage, children – they're all constantly tearing us a part. In the end, what a pleasure it is to seek refuge in the world of *Vogue* where there's no pain, no tearing apart, just a dream that lasts for an hour or even less!" (70-71)

Wadi is not so much concerned with "making sense" of art, but with the "sense-making" of it. For him, the issue is not how we ascribe meaning to art. On the contrary, the point is how art conceives of us as well as of itself. The word *muhima* is necessary to understanding this view of art. *Muhima* in Arabic is more specific than the English phrase, "what counts": it literally means "function", and in this case it signifies a cultural and political relevance. For Wadi, art does not offer solutions to real-life problems. As he puts it, "the solution is in the next issue that you never buy". Much like reality, art offers problems that cannot, and should not, be redeemed. Nevertheless, nothing short of survival is at stake.

Unlike Isam and Fernando, Wadi does not seek clarity in art, but conflict. He describes his sense of enjoyment of art as follows: "I enjoy anything that tears me apart within, that makes me feel I'm walking to left and right at the same time". The act of "walking to left and right at the same time" is physically unattainable, and thus, it signifies a conflict-ridden standstill rather than movement. Unlike poetry and a fashion magazine like *Vogue*, the paintings that Wadi creates offer no way out of the pain and torment of the world: "what a pleasure it is to seek refuge in the world of *Vogue* [...]". Escaping into the world of *Vogue* is limited: the escape is like a dream that lasts "for an hour or even less!" This short duration of escape is what motivates Wadi's previous interpretation of creative sublimations as "tranquilizers".

The most moving part of this monologue is the following fragment, in which Wadi elaborates on his view in relation to his own practice of painting and the loss of his homeland:

Today the tempest swept me away. The nightmares that I fear and pour onto my paintings whenever I can, have begun to haunt me once again. People say that, for a man, the nightmare is an incubus, a lustful woman who attacks him at night, sucks his life out of him for her pleasure, and make him see whatever she wants him to see. But my nightmares are different. All I see are human massacres. I fight my way through them, but only manage to escape to places that are full of ruins and garbage. What is the meaning of escape anyway? Where are we escaping to? I may escape into these paintings, which I only show to a very few people, or I may withdraw into silence that

lasts for many days, flirting with my own thoughts. These thoughts usually revolve around my homeland, and my silence – a kind of internal silence, like a cosmic night whose spaces cannot be spanned [...] And visions are important, no matter how obscure they may be. How many people throughout the centuries have held fast to their visions or even become martyrs because of them? [...] But what exactly did I remember? What did I see? [...] It was a dizzying silence, the silence of intense joys and agonies that came to an end and yet were about to start anew, just when they had reached a conclusion [...] Music was blaring on the ship. People came and went, watching the sunset, sighing, laughing, flirting. I stood there like an idiot, completely absorbed by the scene [...] You would probably say, along with Freud, that the whole thing was sexual. Sexually deprived people often imagine they're either the world's giants or its vermin. But the issue is not that simple. For me, it's a question of life, the very matter of survival. [...] illusion is still something that [man] cannot avoid. It is as though he would say, 'Take away illusion, and darkness will prevail.' [...] Illusion is all the sweet things in life. Remove it, and the final pleasure reverts to naught [...] All the time I see myself running over the hills, walking among the mountain crags or even on the water of Lake Tiberias. Christ keeps me company. I see His large, bare feet, His long, slender fingers flowing with miracles, while He himself hardly utters a word [...] (71-73)

Wadi links his practice of painting to loss of homeland: “[t]he nightmares that I fear and pour onto my paintings [...]”. Moreover, Wadi states that his nightmares are different from common interpretations of what constitutes them. Wadi’s articulation of these interpretations evokes a gendered image of imposition, a narrative image that is simply too profound to be left unanalyzed. In this image, “an incubus, lustful woman” sexually assaults man’s mind by which the woman becomes a Godly figure. This figuration emerges in particular if we consider the three narrative acts that compose the image itself. The first act is the act of invading or conquering the self in which the “woman [...] attacks [man] at night”. The second one is that of murder in which the woman “sucks [man’s] life out of him for her pleasure”. And in the third act, the woman gives back life to man (resurrection of the dead), and she imposes her authority on him, “[she] make[s] him see whatever she wants him to see”. Through these acts, the woman becomes a Goddess. As I read it, by setting up the difference of his nightmares through common interpretations, Wadi humanizes himself. When he says “people say” as meaning “common sense”, Wadi in fact engages in a sequential narrative act of recitation by which he repeats the original act of the people, and hence, inserts himself within the collective: he becomes one of the people. This humanization clearly stands in opposition to the dehumanization he experiences as result of the loss of homeland.

Wadi’s nightmares are not prepared for him by a ghostly incubus or by the Freudian unconscious but by historic events: “All I see are human massacres”. His nightmares are of

this world, not of another. Escaping these nightmares is useless since his escape only leads him back “to places that are full of ruins and garbage”. Wadi can only escape in his paintings or withdraw into silence. The compulsion to silence conforms to the interpretation of trauma in which the subject lacks the words to process events into experience: silence suggests paralysis, failed experience because of a lack of relevant discursive frames. What supports this idea is the sheer intensity of the used image of silence: “my silence – a kind of internal silence, like a cosmic night whose spaces cannot be spanned”. This silence is at once internal, psychic, and external, even “cosmic”. The historic trauma has caused a spatialized silence that stretches between the interior psyche of the Palestinian subject and the outer reaches of the cosmos. This chasm cannot be bridged or spanned by words or art, only visually indicated by a formless smudge of black with red spots.

Wadi’s inner-outer silence is mixed with the noise of the outside world, real setting and nightmare bleed together: “[m]usic was blaring on the ship. People came and went, watching the sunset, sighing, laughing, flirting. I stood there like an idiot, completely absorbed by the scene”. That Wadi is able to notice each of these acts requires attention on his behalf, thus, some engagement with that is taking place around him. The word “scene” becomes indeterminate, as we cannot know whether it stands for what he sees in his nightmare or of what he sees around him. Reality and nightmare become contemporaneous. At the same time, illusion remains necessary for survival: “Illusion is all the sweet things in life. Remove it, and the final pleasure reverts to naught”. The illusion returns Wadi to the homeland that is unreachable. He sees himself “running over the hills [...]” of his land. The image of Christ that concludes the fragment condenses the effect of the trauma – speechlessness, as Christ “hardly utters a word” – and its resolution – walking across the lands and waters of Palestine as the biblical figure of Jesus once did – while it also suggests the only means through which survival can be attained: through miracles and visions that are necessarily and avowedly illusions, but yet inflect *this* world. Wadi’s nightmare is both imaginary and all too real, and so is the vision that allows for his survival, as Christ serves both as a metaphysical apparition and a historical inhabitant of Palestine, in that sense a Palestinian.

This brings me to the ways in which Wadi’s “return” to the past shifts from nostalgic longing to a productive relation. For Wadi, the point is not to establish the reality of the experiences of the past in time. The truth of experience, in his view, is not determined by its transitory existence in time. Instead, experience resides in memory, and with this shift, the medium at stake changes once more, from poetry to painting to music:

The only real thing is my memory of it, a memory that is transformed into something resembling music. Daily happenings recede into the dark tunnels of time, leaving behind waves of music in the mind. Everything is transitory except these waves, not only metaphorically but physically as well. (22)

Experience passes and vanishes in time. Yet it always leaves memories behind, which become “waves of music in the mind”. These tunes transmit not facts but feelings, both “joy and sorrow” (22).

Wadi’s shifts between artistic media – from poetry to painting to music – may be read to indicate his attempts to give imaginative and material shape to the unrepresentable trauma and its aftermath. From the ineffectual sublimation of poetry Wadi moves to the formless smudges and spots of his paintings to ultimately end up with waves of memory, akin to music, that are as metaphorical as they are physical, and that are, as he claims, the “only real thing”. The progression shows that Wadi is not so much involved with returning to an original state; he is not concerned with the repetition of the experience. Rather, what matters is the process that runs from poetry to painting to music, the wave of memory that is not transitory, that *remains*.

In this sense, for Wadi, memory is like a story: it runs its course towards the end. As I indicated above, the characters of *The Ship* struggle with teleology. In Wadi’s case, it is the ending (or the not chosen present of exile) that resists story. As Wadi says: “I can usually remember the beginning, but it is the ending which gives me problems” (24). This makes sense if we read Wadi’s memory as present-oriented: his memory concerns the historical moment of loss of homeland (the beginning), yet can only take place in the present of exile (the end). The narrative time of Palestinian trauma and memory is necessarily convoluted, folded. As Mieke Bal explains, “cultural memory signifies that memory can be understood as a cultural phenomenon as well as individual or social one [...] We invoke the discourse of cultural memory to mediate or modify difficult or tabooed moments of the past – moments that nonetheless impinge, sometimes fatally, on the present” (1999b: vii). Wadi’s nostalgic return undoubtedly offers a “before” and “after” around which a narrative framework is erected to make sense not only of what happened in the past, but also what is happening in the present. Following Bal, we can argue that such narrative emplotments enable Wadi to negotiate the past moment of loss of homeland, the “taboo moment” that fatally impinges on his present, thereby transforming “cultural trauma” into “collective memory”. This present-oriented mode of cultural memorization can also be seen in Wadi’s story about his friend

Fayez. In this story, Wadi's narrative moves from a romanticized nostalgia about life in pre-*nakba* times, to the debilitating sense of loss that exile triggers.

Fayez is Wadi's best friend in childhood. For Wadi, Fayez represents everything that is innocent and beautiful. What brings them together in the first place is both a shared fascination with the beauty of the homeland and the attempt to articulate this beauty in drawing. This is how Wadi recalls an encounter with Fayez:

When the breeze blew across the shady part of the building, it was pleasantly cool and reached from the doorway to a short stone passage at the end of which was a stairway going down to the lower courtyard. We sat on the threshold by the doorway. A pretzel seller came by, and each of us bought a piece [of thyme] for a piaster. [...] Like me, he [Fayez] was fourteen years old at the time. However, he had an appetite for visions [...] Unlike him I was ignorant of all this at that age. [...] We used to meet after returning from school in the afternoon. We lived a few minutes' walk apart. Whenever he came up to my house, we went into a neighboring field [...] We sat on the rocks under the olive trees and talked till the sunset. (48-50)

This is a characteristically nostalgic memory. In the beginning of this memory, Wadi and Fayez are sitting in the pleasant shade "on the threshold of the doorway" eating thyme. The act of eating thyme symbolizes Palestine and its most distinctive produce. By eating together Wadi and Fayez also perform a traditional act: the forging of a bond that signifies the strength of their friendship. In Arabic tradition, the act of eating together, particularly with strangers, functions as a way of establishing or showing trust in each other. By performing this act together, the strangeness of others is often overcome so that they become familiar figures, and therefore easier to identify with or relate to. Performing this act on the threshold of the building adds to the symbolic charge of this simple event.

Having become friends, we see Wadi's relationship with Fayez as a dear childhood friendship, but it also contains an element of learning. In the second part of the passage, Fayez is described as a person who "has an appetite for visions", while Wadi, in comparison, views himself as "ignorant" to what happens around him. Fayez sees more than reality, Wadi less. Through Fayez's knowledge of visions and Wadi's ignorance of them, their friendship is constituted as a learning relationship. During their long conversations among the olive groves, Fayez teaches Wadi how to paint things: "I found myself venturing into lines and colors. Where had this talent been hiding that now came raining down on me so suddenly with just a gesture from Fayez's hand?" (55). Wadi learns how to paint scenes from the homeland, but he also learns how to appreciate this homeland as a specific place, as he puts it, from "whose firm surface we extracted our gorgeous vegetables and sweet smelling fruit"

(55). No longer is the object of attachment and identification an abstract political entity, but a homeland with a mothering earth of soil, trees and stone, and a way of life. In accordance with Wadi's view of artistic practice, painting takes on a cultural-political function: painting is not only an image of the real, it is also stencilled off this real. His practice affirms the authenticity and ontology of the painting not only as a mimesis of the experienced world, like writing poetry, but as an arti-factual trace of it. Wadi's paintings elicit an acknowledgment of the presence of the land through which he comes to identify with Palestine as more than a place whose beauty one enjoys, but also as a source of life. This perspective of the homeland as existential resource, a distinctive aspect of the narratives that I discuss in this study, is relevant to understand the ways in which the loss of place is experienced by Palestinians in their ongoing exile: the loss of Palestine as a loss of life.

Wadi's relationship with Fayeze does not last as it is interrupted by war and subsequent death. During *al-nakba*, while they fight to defend their city, Fayeze is shot and dies in front of Wadi. This death becomes a synecdoche for the loss of the homeland. Describing the moment of Fayeze's death, Wadi says:

But there was no need to look [for water]. He started shaking uncontrollably; I could not stop him. His mouth kept opening and closing in jerks in a desperate quest for air or water or both. I kept shouting, "Fayeze, Fayeze ...". Then a thin trickle of blood flowed out of the corner of his mouth, and his eyes remained fixed on the walls of Jerusalem like two glittering stones. My friend had been killed, and I had stood there by him as helpless as a child. (61)

The moment of Fayeze's death represents an apocalyptic moment of incomprehensible violence. Standing there "helpless" in front of his dying friend, Wadi finds himself stricken and shattered beyond the limits of human comprehension. For him, the moment of Fayeze's death entails the death of human relations; he feels "abandoned by God and man" (62). Wadi's focalization of Fayeze's death imprints itself on the larger moment in which this death occurred. Fayeze's death becomes an affirmation, even a mortalization, of the loss of the homeland. The larger moment of death, *al-nakba*, becomes a double signifier: both of death of human relationships and of Wadi's memory in which his loss of home is anchored. This anchoring effect is enforced through Fayeze's gaze that remains "fixed on the walls of Jerusalem like two glittering stones". The phrase "glittering stones" here embodies a fixation of the gaze as much as the affirmation of the loss of the homeland.

For Wadi, this occurrence of *al-nakba*, as a moment of loss of homeland, will always remain a transitory happening that exhausted its material time. As part of his childhood, the

experience remains with him as a memory. As Wadi says, what remains of it is its re-enactment that he “remember[s] everyday, and [has] remembered for over fifteen years” (64). Paradoxically, while Wadi re-enacts *al-nakba*, he does not name it. Instead, Wadi describes this experience as a year, 1948. In one sense, his un-naming of *al-nakba* can be read in relation to trauma as a form of paralysis. By not being named, *al-nakba* is signified as a traumatic event that resists integration in Wadi’s symbolic order, and thus forms, according to Van Alphen’s terminology, a “failed experience”. Its lack of name articulates trauma and the loss of language it entails. In another sense, by not naming *al-nakba*, Wadi shows he cannot put into language the shattering of language, and he cannot put into humanity the death of humanity: the friendship and the love that joined him with Fayez. He refrains from doing so, not to master this event, nor even to document it as truthful, but, on the contrary, to depict it as an *indefinable* non-name of this incomprehensible death. In other words, rather than bearing the trauma of the past as in Isam’s case, Wadi bears witness to its incomprehensibility: he transmits the catastrophe’s presence. Precisely in this transmission the present of exile becomes an instance of the past loss of homeland. At the heart of this transmission is Wadi’s identification not with the dead, Fayez, but with the living, Palestine. This identification with the homeland can be seen in the closing parts of Wadi’s narrative.

#### *Memorization, Exile and Nostalgic Identification*

Wadi’s nostalgia evokes the past, yet takes place in and for a problematic present. His present is problematic because of his forced exile. And forced exile can be particularly traumatic because the departure from the homeland is involuntary and the return to it is impossible. Hence, as Anette Mansson succinctly puts it in her book *Passage to a New Wor(L)D: Exile and Restoration in Mahmoud Darwish's Writings 1960-1995*, in Palestinian exile “there is simply no ending” (2003: 37). This impossibility of return to the homeland, as I will argue in the next chapter, constitutes a specific condition of denial in which the Palestinian subject is enduringly barred from access to home.

Commenting on his lost homeland, Wadi describes it as a paradise shaped through personification: “nothing is equal to that red rocky land that greets your feet like a lover’s kiss” (24). For him, to be exiled from Palestine, therefore, is like “a curse, the most painful curse of all” (24). This curse takes the form of spatio-temporal infinitude in which the conviction of the loss of the land personified becomes, in time, intensified and problematized as a property of exile. Exile, as a result, not only represents a major consequence of the loss

of the homeland, but it also becomes a symptom of the inability to end that loss through which, as Wadi puts it, “the tragedy [of the past] renews itself” (25). For example, Wadi’s nostalgic memory of the sweet past of the homeland is activated when he begins questioning his present exile. It is only when Wadi asks “[w]hy was I uprooted and cast under hoofs and fangs, driven into flaming deserts, and screaming oil cities?” (25) that his re-enactments of *al-nakba* burst into the present, bringing back with them a nostalgic memory of the moment before, of the sweetness of the homeland. Wadi’s questioning of the present of exile induces the mode of his nostalgic memory as present-oriented through which the image of the past is mediated in and by the present: the past loss of homeland “renews itself”.

In Wadi’s internal focalization, the reader sees the past in *The Ship* as a place of catastrophe and loss of place. Yet, unlike Isam and Dr. Falih, Wadi introduces a different focalization in relation to the decision to escape the homeland. In his narrative, the catastrophic moment contains the revelation that all social structures and acts of desire are subject to violence and death. However, Wadi’s account proposes alternatives that entail neither passive withdrawal, such as Dr. Falih’s suicide at the end of the novel, nor the escape from the homeland, as in Isam’s case. While the first of these alternatives is an attempt to narrate the loss of the homeland as a way of working through this loss, and its symptomatic reincarnations in exile, the second entails a recurring vision of salvation through which the possibility of returning to the lost homeland emerges. These alternatives are what, in fact, inform *The Ship*’s specific articulation of nostalgia.

Wadi’s first alternative appears in his relationship with Isam. Before meeting Wadi, we see Isam as a broken person whose failed love story with Luma leads him to a point of resignation and a quietism in which he decides to escape the land. Yet, the moment he meets Wadi, Isam’s understanding of his own loss changes. Isam’s change, however, is not so much determined by his ability to narrate his loss to Wadi but rather by his ability to listen to Wadi’s story. Isam describes his listening and Wadi’s storytelling as follows: “I listened as the words poured out of his [Wadi] mouth like incessant rain, like a never-ending storm” (18). In this statement, “incessant rain” symbolizes catastrophe. This symbolism is enforced by the imagery of the “never-ending storm”, which can turn into a catastrophe if it does not end. Significantly, the “incessant rain” serves also as a metaphor for the impact of Wadi’s storytelling on Isam’s personal growth. Through Wadi’s uninterrupted narration, not only Isam changes his mind about escaping the land – “I am going back to Baghdad” he decides (198) – but Wadi also finds for himself a way of healing by which he substitutes a symptomatic repetition of loss with a narrative remembering it. Thus, instead of recalling *al-*

*nakba* as something belonging to the past, Wadi, through his narration, elaborates on this loss of homeland in the present of exile. Thus, Wadi integrates the repressed material, “the grief he stifled” (64) at the moment of Fayeze’s death in the past, into a contemporary experience.

By incorporating *al-nakba* in exile, Wadi overcomes the past loss of homeland. In so doing, he manages to destabilize the present itself. In pointing out this destabilization of exile in Wadi’s nostalgic return, I am not arguing that the imaginative enterprise of *al-nakba* is subsumed in order to construct the future as a projected idealized image of the lost homeland and the past. Instead, the point I wish to make is that *al-nakba* was subsumed in order to construct the future through projecting the present of exile as the aftermath of the loss of homeland. To put it differently, the construction of the future becomes possible only when this aftermath, the ongoing exile, ends. Thus, Wadi’s destabilization of the present is meant to criticize the *un-ending* of catastrophe that Palestinians endure in the form of exile, simply because they can never, by definition, reach either backward or forward to the lost homeland. Through this first alternative, Wadi’s nostalgic return, then, transmits the memory of *al-nakba* in the present loss of place in exile.

Wadi also describes a second alternative. This alternative contains a vision of salvation through which the possibility of “physical return” to the homeland materializes. This vision emerges at the same moment of the catastrophe and inevitably returns with the re-enactment of its event in the present. While Wadi is carrying the dead Fayeze in his arms, he takes on an oath that he will always return to the homeland: “I swore [on the rock] that I would come back, somehow, as an invader, as a thief, as a killer; I would come back, even as a casualty” (64). Wadi’s oath is highly charged with images of bonding with the homeland. His act of “swearing on the rock” personifies Palestine as a holy figure by which his relationship with this land is transformed into a divine bonding. Wadi’s bonding with the land is further intensified by the narrative acts with which he describes his inevitable return. Through the first three acts of “invading”, “theft” and “killing”, Wadi emulates his return to Palestine by the same means with which this land was lost as well as the way he was driven out of it. The fourth act of return, as a “casualty” is a result of the first three and it bears on Wadi’s insistence on return. It is, in fact, a non-act.

Wadi also suggests a concrete model for his return. This model can be seen in his actions. For, if Wadi in fact does not return as “an invader, as a thief, as a killer [or] as a casualty”, he can still return by transferring money to Jerusalem. Wadi has bought a piece of land near Hebron, and he is planning to buy another piece in Jerusalem. All he wants is to build a house and to cultivate the land with his own hands (190-92). This is his alternative

model for returning to the land, and “only on this basis can [Wadi] be happy with anything” (200). Wadi’s model not only brings about a vision of salvation, but also turns into a model of identification that affirms his relationship with the lost homeland. This identification finds its expression in his perception of the homeland as a metamorphic landscape that replaces both the metaphor of the sea as a seduction to escape and the metonymy of the land as an entity that drags one back. This identification, in addition, entails more than knowledge of how life in the homeland used to be before it was lost. It also includes specific material processes of attachment to this land in the present such as transferring money, buying lands, and building houses.

As I argued above, Wadi’s two alternatives, especially his model of identification, bring about a possibility of returning to the lost homeland. Yet, at the end of the novel, this possibility turns out to be distant as the reader knows full well that Jerusalem is occupied, the “Palestinian refugees” are barred from returning to their land and even the Palestinian citizens of Israel are prevented from buying property. Wadi’s nostalgic return, then, seems to be for unrealized possibility. His is a yearning for a (lost) place that, similar to the cultural traumas surrounding it, returns of its own accord together with these losses, yet also *opposes* them. Within this nostalgic return, the unrealized possibility of social harmony and justice symptomatically arrives to provide alternatives and motives for changing existing conditions of loss of home and exile. Furthermore, Wadi’s nostalgia returns, and is returned to, in and by the present, but at the same time it entails the effort to work through the cultural trauma by transmitting its presence as a way of imagining the future to which it aspires. Hence, Wadi’s nostalgia is, in fact, a future-oriented one that gives a new political and cultural meaning to the painful memories of the past. This nostalgia need not be reactionary and escapist, but can also travel from a negative to a more positive function, as “a reconstitution of injured subjectivities”.

A final issue raised by Wadi’s nostalgic return is the role of exile in the determination of the subject’s identification with the lost homeland. Despite the apparent reunion between Isam and Luma, as well as Wadi’s possible return to his homeland that concludes *The Ship*, their problems remain unresolved. While the tribalism that separated Isam and Luma still exists, Wadi’s return is far from certain. Yet, in the novel, at least, one thing is certain: Wadi’s nostalgic memory is meant to be transmitted as it is, sixty years after *al-nakba*, to the reader, who, seeing the Palestinian loss of homeland through Wadi’s focalization, could feel the liberation of the moment of return. The most productive aspect of this transmission of

nostalgic memory is that it draws hope, or what Wadi calls the “unjustified faith” (79), that anything is possible and that nothing could stand in the way of the return: *The Ship* does not undercut the dream itself. Within this transmission of nostalgic memory, the contours of *al-nakba* could be determined, for the reader, by his or her perceived distance, coded as the ongoing exile, from Palestine. Loss and distance become the prevailing articulations of the past that through nostalgic memory, reaffirm the subject’s identification with the lost homeland in the present. Within this identification, the subject’s experience of loss of homeland becomes portable and interiorized as a spatio-temporal point of reference that splits this subject’s narrative into a “before” wherein the subject existed in the homeland and an “after” wherein he or she is exiled from it in the present. This is the essence of a nostalgic mode of remembering as a collective activity in exile. Precisely both its confrontation with trauma and the attempt to narrate the past loss of the homeland as part of the present of exile give this activity its distinct productivity in the Palestinian case.

One additional remark should be added here, lest I appear to be idealizing this sentiment. Indeed, Wadi’s nostalgia, with the productive potential I attributed to it here, responds to the past loss of the homeland by which the ongoing exile comes into play. However, Wadi’s nostalgia seems to leave something out: namely, it shows little understanding of the dynamics of the condition of exile. Although his nostalgic memory articulates the subject’s inability to return to the homeland as a direct result of exile, it does not completely detail that which prevents this return in this condition. In the next chapter, I turn to a more contemporary narrative that exposes the discursive effects of the loss of the homeland on Palestinian identity within the reality of exile: Liyana Badr’s collection of short stories *A Balcony Over the Fakihani*, from 1993. I argue that the Palestinian subject’s “critical memory” of loss of home in exile complements what the subject’s nostalgic memory of loss of homeland leaves out. At the heart of this shift to critical memory, the subject’s memory of the loss of Palestine is triggered by a physical condition of denial of access to home in the present.

