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Telling memories : Al-Nakba in Palestinian exilic narratives

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AFTERWORD

Let me end this book with one final story of Palestinian exilic narratives. This story is one of the personal interviews which I collected during my fieldwork in the Gaza Strip in 2004, and it belongs to a Palestinian man from the first generation of post-*nakba* Palestinians, called Abu Majed, who resides in Rafah Refugee Camp. His story concretizes the main argument of my study: namely, the present-oriented nature of Palestinian collective memory of *al-nakba* as an ongoing catastrophe in exile. This is how Abu Majed narrates *al-nakba*:

Al-nakba happened in phases not at once. Every time the Jews attacked, we used to fight back and then move on to another place – they kept attacking and we kept running until we reached Gaza [...] *Al-nakba* is a despair, and everyone in the refugee camp had their share of it. And what made us withstand it back then, and also now, is our hope of returning [...] Just recently some of the people are building cement houses in the camp; the majority of the people see building a house as a “crime” of wasting one’s cause [...] I should tell you something. The Jews lived with us before. When the Jews used to meet each other outside of Palestine, they used to greet one another with *Makhaar bi Yroushelim* (Tomorrow in Jerusalem). In front of this hope, impossible things happen [...] The Jews call themselves the people of economics, knowledge and progress, but you know what, it seems they are not that after all. The Zionists counted on two things: the old generations of Palestinians will die, and that the young ones will forget. If you look today, from the generations who lived in *el-blad* [the homeland] and tasted its sweetness, no one of these went and blew him or herself up. The ones who do that today are the generations who were supposed to forget [...] Ever since they came and established Israel, the Jews have been experimenting on us all that happened to them in the Second World War – this is a sign of their stupidity; their actions only add to our anger, and increase our hatred. For the young generations, through their occupation of us, everyday they emerge anew as *the* enemy. Shortly after they occupied everything in 1967, the Israelis allowed us to go and visit our homes. Every Friday, I used to take my family and picnic in the yard of our destroyed house in *Breer* [...] We must and will return 100%! Let me tell you why. If the Jews would have come and lived with us nicely, then it would have been o.k. But they came as oppressors, and oppression always ends.

(Abu Majed, Rafah Refugee Camp. April 5, 2004)

Like most of the narratives I have discussed in this book, Abu Majed’s memorial storytelling exposes several aspects of *al-nakba* as the existential experience *par excellence* that defines Palestinian cultural memory, not in terms of its historical past, but in terms of the present of its action in the daily exile of its catastrophed subject (*mankoub*).

The first aspect concerns the far-reaching impact of *al-nakba* on the forced displacement of Palestinians and the consequent fragmentation of their society in time and

space. Temporally, this fragmentation is given shape in Abu Majed's description of the catastrophe as an event that "happened in phases not at once". Spatially, this fragmentation can be seen in his storytelling of how Palestinians kept running away from the Jewish attacks into different geopolitical settings, in his case Gaza. As I argued in my analysis of performances of *al-nakba* in Bakri's film *1948* in chapter Four, this fragmentation is relevant for the issue of the non-singularity of the catastrophic event in relation to subjective experiences and cultural re-enactments: it delineates different collectives or sub-collectives of memory of *al-nakba*. Palestinian re-enactments of *al-nakba* offer us a stark example of a displaced identity, but they also articulate the construction of Palestinian identity as a matter of existing "in the act" of cultural recall of loss of place in and for exile: an exilic identity that needs to be performed through continuous practices of re-tellings and re-readings.

The second aspect of Palestinian memory of *al-nakba* is its orientation to places and longing for the lost home. This can be seen in Abu Majed's description of his repeated visits to the ruins of his house: "Every Friday, I used to take the family and picnic in the yard of our destroyed house in *Breer*". Indeed, this image of visiting the ruins gives shape to a nostalgic memory. This memory, however, cannot be reduced to a mode of recovery of the past or idealization of the lost place. As I argued in my analysis of Jabra's novel *The Ship* in chapter One, nostalgic memory in the Palestinian case is not merely a psychic sentiment but also a political activity of remembering which functions as a cultural response to the loss of place. This memory is simultaneously linked to a process of identification with the legacies of the past in the present. Abu Majed's emphatic certainty of the return to the lost homeland, "We must and will return 100%!", not only politicizes the past loss but also exposes this past as neither remote nor concluded in exile. Palestinian exile, as we have seen in my analysis of Badr's collection of short stories *A Balcony Over the Fakhani* in chapter Two, constitutes an entangled spatio-temporal contemporary condition of forced travel and undesired movement. This actual condition involves a past subjective loss of home but also, crucially, an everyday denial of access to home. Within this condition, the subject is physically denied of his or her cultural space of selfhood.

The third aspect concerns the existence of Palestinian memory under the constant threat of a dominant Zionist narrative with political and military forces to silence it. This can be seen in Abu Majed's temporal shift from the past "despair" of *al-nakba* into Palestinians' resilience in facing this catastrophe in the present. Both the metaphors of "hope of returning" and the "crime" of building permanent houses in the refugee camp bear out this resilience. This aspect was central to my discussion of Tawfiq Saleh's film *Al-Makhdu'un* in chapter

Three. As we have seen there, the film's exilic narrativity connects spatial representations of Palestinian collective memory to the exercise of political power. It exposes a transformation of the construction of Palestinian identity, from catastrophe and victimization to ideology and political movements.

The fourth, and final aspect, relates to the generational specificity of Palestinian memory of *al-nakba*. Abu Majed's narrative emphasizes this generational specificity in his account of how the Zionist project failed to subdue subsequent generations of Palestinians, "The Zionists counted on two things: the old generations of Palestinians will die, and that the young ones will forget [...]. For the young generations, through their occupation of us, everyday they emerge anew as *the enemy*". Indeed, this account substantiates that subsequent generations of Palestinians inherited the past effect of the memory of *al-nakba*, as I argued in my discussion of oral narratives of *al-nakba* in chapter Five. Most importantly, this account situates the catastrophe of the new generations as ongoing in the present of exile, under military occupation.

In my quest of traces of the cultural memory of *al-nakba* and the ways in which it affects the evolution, maintenance and contestation of contemporary Palestinian exilic identity, I have attempted to illuminate instances of the loss of Palestine in a post-*nakba* culture. In this inquiry I made several moves between Palestinians' acts of memory and acts of storytelling of this catastrophe in exile. Each of my moves constituted a shift from the larger historical discourse of the events of 1948 to its memory fragments in Palestinian exilic narratives, and vice versa. The understanding that both acts, remembering and storytelling, bear on each other, and thus can work together in taking the past memory, in time and space, into the present and the future, has served as the central premise of my readings of the literary, audiovisual and oral narratives under discussion. By means of a detailed analysis of verbal imaginings and audiovisual imagings of loss of homeland and collective identity, I have tried to achieve a multifaceted understanding of the complex modes of memorial storytelling of *al-nakba*, and to stress their significance in exposing the ongoing catastrophe of exiled Palestinians today. It is my hope that the preceding analyses and reflections will contribute to paving the way for subsequent projects on Palestinian cultural memory and identity.

I end these closing remarks on a note of urgency. The analytical activity of aspects of Palestinian cultural memory exposes unusual repetitive quality of the events since *al-nakba*: a calamity that has continued for more than sixty years now, leaving a normal life for so many Palestinians beyond reach. In the face of this durability of *al-nakba*, I propose that Palestinian exilic narratives are best understood as a series of tensions about cultural identity. In line with

this understanding, there is a need, as I suggested in chapter Five, for a concrete “imaginative-discursive” approach to the analysis of memory in Palestinian culture and politics. This approach presents memory articulations of *al-nakba* in a way that speaks to contemporary culture of Palestinian exile. Most importantly, it also shows the multiple ways in which literary, audiovisual and oral exilic narratives postulate the transformation of “geopolitical fragmentation” from a specific historical experience into a theme that is expressed as a subject matter, and then into complex modes of memorial storytelling. What does need to be remembered is that Palestinian modes of storytelling of *al-nakba* in exile are modes of integration not separation; these are stories of a people whose identity has been systematically *unmapped* in time and space, but who are now fighting to reclaim both their name and place on that map. My study is intended as a contribution to that approach.

