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Department of English Language and Literature

**The 1948 Nakba between History and Fiction: A Reading of
Selected Works by Arab and Zionist Authors**

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كلية الاداب

قسم اللغة الانجليزية و ادابها

نكبة 1948 بين التاريخ و الكتابة الروائية: قراءة لنصوص مختارة لكتاب عرب و صهاينة

رسالة دكتوراه

من

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Introduction

Introduction

May 1948 marks a change in the history of Palestine and the whole region. It witnessed the Palestinian Nakba¹ [catastrophe] during which the Zionist *Yishuv*² declared Palestine their homeland. The Palestinian historian and academic Nur Masalha (b. 1957) observes that this resulted in a situation where the Palestinians were systematically and brutally massacred. Subsequently, Masalha continues, the Zionists expelled an estimated 750.000 Palestinians, depopulated and destroyed over 500 Palestinian villages and prevented repatriation (*Expulsion of the Palestinians: The Concept of Transfer in Zionist Political Thoughts, 1882-1948* 175; Introduction 1; *The Palestine Nakba: Decolonising History, Narrating the Subaltern, Reclaiming Memory*,5). However, the Zionist discourse calls these atrocities, which culminated on 15 May 1948, the Israeli Declaration of Independence or The War of Independence. What distinguishes the Zionist colonisation from any other colonial rule over Palestine is that no other occupation has ever tried to displace the Palestinians from their land (Sayigh, *The Palestinians from Peasants to Revolutionaries* 4). Narrating 1948, the Palestinian/Arab and Zionist colonial narratives contest and try to decide who owns the land, who regains it and who has future plans for it (Said, *Culture and Imperialism* xiii); unfortunately, the Zionist grand narrative, as a hegemonic one, has so far tried to determine answers to these questions. Therefore, there is an urgent need for a Palestinian/Arab counter-hegemonic narrative that consequently attempts to foreground the Palestinian voice and experience on the one hand and deconstruct the Zionist grand narrative on the other. The first step to counter the Zionist grand narrative is to use the correct terms to describe the relationship between the Zionists and the Palestinians; it is a coloniser-colonised relationship respectively (El-Messiri 62).

The Zionist hegemonic narrative has used many tactics to propagate lies to hide its colonial nature and to marginalise, if not annihilate, the Palestinian people and narrative. One of the motifs that runs throughout the Zionist grand narrative of 1948 is the religious motif: occupying Palestine manifests, for the colonisers, the Divine Promise to the Jews (Daoudi and Barakat 57). The other motif is the national one: the Zionist grand narrative has always propagated that the Jews were taking “their” land back and were fighting to free this “occupied” land from the British occupation (Said, *The Question of Palestine* 23). Thus, they falsely align themselves with the liberation movements of the third world countries in the fifties and sixties. The late Zionist Prime Minister Golda Myerson, later Meir, (1969–74) likening the Zionists’ fight with the occupied nations, said: “[I]ike them, we had shaken off foreign rule; like them, we had to learn for ourselves how to reclaim the land, how to increase the yields of our crops, how to irrigate, how to raise poultry, how to live together, and how to defend ourselves” (cited in Moore-Gilbert 54). Meir’s claims denied the Palestinians’ presence, their national aspirations and identity, while establishing, at the same time, myths about the Zionist colonial movement that have, unfortunately, shaped the image of the colonial presence in occupied Palestine until now. Such myopic representations of the events on the grounds have been commonplace practices in the case of Palestine and the creation of Israel in 1948. The Zionists have managed to narrate 1948 and have successfully blocked the Palestinian narrative of the Nakba; thus, the Palestinian and Arab works analysed in this thesis are presented as counter-hegemonic narratives that foreground the Palestinian historiography, literature and identity.

1948 AND THE PALESTINIAN CALAMITY

For the Palestinians, the Nakba has been a historical, social, geographical, psychological, and cultural calamity. In fact, the Nakba did not start and end in 1948; its roots go back to the nineteenth century and its effects still linger until the present time. It is the iterability of the Nakba, among other features, that distinguishes it. This iterability is clear in the Nakba narratives and in contemporaneous atrocities and assaults directed towards the Palestinians (Jayyusi 113). The Palestinians have been subjected to systematic ethnic cleansing since 1948. Those who survived the massacres of the Nakba are not any better than those who lost their lives; actually, the survivors might have suffered worse ends. The surviving Palestinians witnessed uprooting, confiscation of their lands and properties and the killing of their family members and fellow villagers. Some Palestinians now reside in refugee camps in host countries, others -the privileged ones- have managed to get proper living places; however, all suffer from the systematic annihilation of the Nakba experience, their identity, heritage, tradition and home country. The Zionist grand narrative has tried to annihilate everything related to the Nakba. They started with eliminating the Palestinians' memory of the Nakba in what is defined as "memoricide". However, the Nakba has become a living memory for many Palestinians who witnessed it, but were unable to comprehend it, and an on-going experience in the lives of their offspring who witnessed other atrocities, like the Sabra and Shatila massacre (1982), the Israeli invasion of Southern Lebanon (1982), the War of Camps (1984-1990), and indeed the successive wars on the Occupied Territories and Gaza. Further, the Nakba caused the dismantling of the Palestinian society; family members and loved ones were either massacred or lost and strangers joined path. Moreover, expulsion, atrocities and massacres have caused the Nakba to become a traumatic experience. It is noteworthy that though the trauma of the Palestinians has lingered until now, it has been absent from the Western context

of Trauma Studies (Masalha, *The Palestine* 12). Cathy Caruth (b. 1955), who has written extensively on trauma, does not mention the Nakba in any of her books. However, she sees that “without question [she] would count the Nakba as a collective traumatic experience” but added that the Palestinians’ experience would be entangled with the history of the Israelis (Caruth, “Re: Concerning Trauma Studies”). Thus, not surprisingly the first one to locate the Palestinian Nakba and its horrors in the Western context, exposing the latter’s denial of the Nakba, is the Palestinian literary critic Edward Said (1935-2003) (Masalha, Introduction 4).

It is because of and despite the silence of Caruth, other Eurocentric critics, historians and literary figures about the Palestinian plight, some Palestinian and Arab historians, critics, anthropologists and writers devoted their work to it. To mention but few: Said, Masalha, Walid Khalidi (b. 1925), Joseph Massad (b. 1963), Saleh Abdel Jawad (b. 1952), Adel Manna’ (b. 1947), Sharif Kanaana (b. 1936), Abdel Wahab El-Messiri (1938-2008), Ibrahim Nasrallah (b. 1954), Elias Khoury (b. 1948) and Radwa Ashour (1946-2014). Besides the Palestinian and Arab figures, we find the Israeli Ilan Pappé (b. 1954), who dedicated most of his works to expose the Zionist atrocities against the Palestinians, and Baruch Kimmerling (1939-2007), who wrote extensively about the same issue. What further makes the Nakba a distinguished historical calamity is that the Palestinian land, people and history were erased in 1948 from the Israeli and Western narratives. Masalha clarifies that Palestine was literally wiped off the map after 1948 (*The Palestine* 1). In order to secure the disappearance of the Palestinian race, the Zionist grand narrative has deployed what is known as cultural genocide. Cultural genocide is defined by the Jewish Polish lawyer Raphael Lemkin (1900-1959), who himself coined the word “genocide”, as: “the destruction of the cultural pattern of a group, such as the language, the traditions, the monuments, archives, libraries, churches. In brief: the shrines of the soul of a nation” (qtd. in Docker). Thus, as the

Palestinian historian Abdel Jawad explains at length: the Zionist *Yishuv* destroyed and depopulated, among other cities and towns, Majdal, Safad, Beisan, Beer-Saba', Lod, Acre, Jaffa, Haifa, Ramle and the Arab parts of Jerusalem, that embodied “*the intellectual core of the Palestinian society*” (90). He adds that this is in addition to destroying schools, cultural centres, public libraries, publishing houses, printing presses, archives of municipal councils; and as for the land registry, it was either confiscated or destroyed (90). This was followed by what Masalha calls “toponymicide” that refers to “the erasure of ancient Palestinian place names and their replacement by newly coined Zionist Hebrew toponymy” (*The Palestine* 10). The Palestinian historian Massad clarifies that this Zionist Hebrew toponymy was carried out by Jewish National Fund’s Place-Names Committee that later became Israel Place-Names Committee after 1948 that sought to Hebraicise and Judaicise Palestine (“The ‘Post-Colonial’ Colony: Time, Space, and Bodies in Palestine/Israel” 336). The colonial authority has sought to block any attempt by the Palestinians for self-determination through what is called “politicide”. Starting before the Nakba and continuing after it, politicide is implemented through destroying the national and political existence of the Palestinian community that encompasses the military, political and social activities (Masalha, *The Palestine* 1; Kimmerling 4).

Thus, the use of the term Nakba in this thesis is a deliberate choice. In fact, adopting it as the most suitable term to describe what happened in Palestine in 1948 has been the subject of debate. As mentioned before, the Nakba is an old act of systematic destruction of a whole nation, culture and identity; hence, calling the Nakba “catastrophe” or “disaster” in English is inaccurate. The Nakba is a colonial settler project that started in the nineteenth century (as will be explained pp.8-49); it is an apartheid system that continues to persecute the Palestinians in various ways. For example, Christian and Muslim Palestinians cannot pray in their sacred places without a permit

from the Israeli authorities, which is likely to be denied. Palestinians living in occupied Palestine cannot move freely from a city/territory to another inside their own country. They cannot move freely inside the West Bank: they are usually faced with check points, barriers and roadblocks that hinder their movement and risk, sometimes even cost, their lives. This is not to mention the Annexation Wall/Apartheid Wall that divides the West Bank. It seems that all of this is not enough for the colonial authorities; they continue persecuting the Palestinians by unlawful detentions and house demolition. It is a system of constant bombing and shelling of the native population, evident through the continuous attacks on Gaza Strip in the years 2008-9, 2012 and 2014, respectively.

Massad discusses the usage of the term “Nakba” extensively in his article “Resisting the Nakba”. He explains that using English terms like catastrophe and disaster is undermining a horrid reality. Massad sees that catastrophe and disaster mean overturning and calamitous events respectively (“Resisting the Nakba”) which do not describe the iterable traumatic nature of the Nakba. Thus, he appropriately describes the Palestinians as *mankubin*; a term that has no equivalence in English (“Resisting the Nakba”). It is by virtue of these different systematic, ongoing and destructive methods, the Palestinians gained this identity that further distinguishes them from other colonised nations. Thus, the term *mankubin* could be accepted in the English language as a way to describe the plight of the Palestinians.

ON ZIONISM AND THE ZIONIST PROJECT

It is mandatory to study Zionism because it is closely related to the Palestinian plight. Studying Zionism historically, as Said maintains, needs to be done in two ways: genealogically so that its origin and affiliation with other political institutions and ideas are exposed and as “practical systems for *accumulation* (of power, land, ideological legitimacy) and displacement (of people,

other ideas, prior legitimacy)” (*The Question* 57). The current study attempts to analyse Zionism through these two aspects. Though the Palestinians have considered Zionism to be “an uncompromisingly exclusionary, discriminatory, colonialist praxis” (Said, *The Question* 69), some historians claim that the Zionist colonisers have equal right to the land as the Palestinians. However, seeking to annihilate the Palestinians, confiscating their land and properties, and settling the Jewish immigrants on these Palestinians’ properties prove beyond doubt that the Zionist project is a settler colonial one.

Zionism, which the Zionist forefathers and leaders proudly called a (colonial movement), emerged in the nineteenth century when European colonisation was at its peak (Masalha, *The Palestine* 38, 34). Masalha asserts that the invention of the Zionist national project goes back to the contribution of the Russian Zionist Simon Dubnow (1860-1941) and the German biblical critic, Heinrich Graetz (1817-1891). These two historians built a “collective national consciousness of Judaism as an ‘ancient nationality’ existing from time immemorial” (Masalha, *The Palestine* 20-1). Their historical writings would build the consciousness and ideologies of the Jews and the Zionist discourse. The Palestinian historian Khalidi adds that the essence of Zionism as a modern political movement started in Russia in the 1880s (“The Palestine” 6). Zionism as a colonial national movement follows the German nationalism in that its theories and thoughts of degeneration and race run through it (Massad, *The Persistence of the Palestinian Question* 176). However, this national movement is not to be equated with the Palestinian national movement as Khalidi believes in his article, “The Palestine Problem: An Overview” (5). The Palestinian national movement was never colonial at heart: it sought freedom from the British and Zionist colonial rules over Palestine. Since land acquisition is an integral part of any colonial enterprise, the Zionist’s main aim was to possess the land. Massad illustrates that the “European nationalist

principles of *blut und boden* [Blood and Soil] would guide Zionism's invention of Jews as a nation with its own land” (*The Persistence* 169). In fact, if we look at the aim of Zionism, as stated in the First Zionist Congress in 1897, we would find that it states that the *raison d’etre* of this new Jewish nation was “to erect for the Jewish people a home in Palestine secured by public law” (Jabbour 25). Like any Western colonial project, the European White man was to penetrate the "desolate" "neglected" colonised land so that it flourishes and blooms (Massad, *The Persistence* 169-170). However, what could distinguish Zionism as settler colonial movement is that it “aimed to create a society that could never be anything but ‘native’ (with minimal ties to a metropolitan center) at the same time that it determined not to come to terms with the very natives it was replacing with new (but essentially European) ‘natives’” (Said, *The Question* 88).

It is worth mentioning that historians have traditionally distinguished between what is known as political Zionism and practical Zionism, though both of them serve the main aim of the Zionist settler colonial project. The Austro-Hungarian Jew Theodor Herzl (1860-1904), father of political Zionism, was not interested in the Jewish problem until the Dreyfus Affair in the 1890s (Shlaim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* 2). In his *Der Judenstaat/The Jewish State*, or *The State of the Jews* (1896) as Masalha translated it (*The Palestine* 34), Herzl advocated the idea that the diaspora Jews are to leave Europe and “acquire a territory over which they would exercise sovereignty and establish a state of their own” (Shlaim, *The Iron* 2). While this political Zionism was pursued in the realm of international politics (Shlaim, *The Iron* 3, 6), practical Zionism of *Hovevi Zion/ Lovers of Zion*³ urged the Jews to immigrate to Palestine, after being persecuted in Europe, and to work on settlement projects. These settlement activities included “land acquisition, settlement, and the building of a Jewish economy there” (Shlaim, *The Iron* 3,6); first steps to fulfil the national and colonial aims of Zionism in Palestine.

Since the nineteenth century, Zionism has been distinguished for two main features: the constant alliance with great powers of the world, outside the Middle East, and “nonrecognition of a Palestinian national entity” (Shlaim, *The Iron* 5). Chaim Weizmann (1874-1952)⁴ the chief architect of the association between the Zionists and Great Britain (Shlaim, *The Iron* 5) adopted these thoughts and the first Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion (1886-1973) followed his footsteps. Born as David Green, the Polish Ben-Gurion, like any coloniser, disregarded the indigenous people of Palestine. He was distinguished by the wide gap between his public utterances in relation to the Palestinians and his private beliefs. Ben-Gurion’s promises for the Arabs were only meant to please the British. His ideology was clear since the Great Palestinian Revolt (1936-1939); war would solve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (Shlaim, *The Iron* 17-9).

Sharing Ben-Gurion’s contempt of the Palestinians, in addition to a blunt colonial hostile rhetoric towards them, is the Russian Ze’ev (Vladimir) Jabotinsky (1880-1940). Jabotinsky is an important Zionist figure. Jabotinsky’s ideology was reflected on the thoughts of the sixth Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin (1913-1992) and still influences the Zionist policy makers until now by virtue of being the ideological forefather of the current Israeli Likud party (Said, *The Question* 18; Karon). Jabotinsky founded the World Union of Zionist Revisionists in 1935. His Zionist Revisionist colonial ideology was obvious in seeing that the Zionist project in Palestine is an offshoot of the Western “civilisation” in the East (Shlaim, *The Iron* 12). As a typical coloniser, he saw that the Arabs are totally irrelevant to the Zionist project except as enemies (Flapan, *Zionism and the Palestinians* 113), which is, again, reflected on the current ideology of the Zionist occupation. Further, as Flapan explains, Jabotinsky thought that the only solution to the conflict between the Zionists and the Palestinians is the “iron wall” (*Zionism* 113). One cannot help but see the materialisation of this idea in the building of the Annexation Wall, though the iron wall

initially referred to the Zionist military force that would be used against the Palestinians. Shlaim adds that this iron wall was, for Jabotinsky, a means to break the Arab resistance necessary to proceed with the Zionist project (*The Iron* 15). Consequently, the need for a Zionist military force is one of the reasons behind establishing the organisation of the dissident military group, Irgun Zvei Leumi (IZL/Irgun).⁵

If we believe in the truth of the statements that history is written by the victors and that historical writing “is an ideological weapon with which to double the oppression of already vanquished groups by depriving them of their historical pasts and consequently of their identities as well” (White, “The Historical Event” 9), then we can apply the same principles to any consideration of the history of 1948 Palestine. The hegemonizing Zionist grand narrative denies the Zionists’ hostile ideology towards the Palestinians, refuses to acknowledge the Palestinians’ plight and foregrounds, instead, several myths. Therefore, one major aim of this study is to analyse these myths that justify and further propagate the creation of the Jewish state in Palestine in 1948. These myths were discussed in several books by Israeli historians, but for the purpose of this study, we are using Simha Flapan’s (1911–1987) influential book, *The Birth of Israel: Myths and Realities* (1987) as Flapan is the first Israeli historian to refute such Zionist claims. The main Zionist slogan upon which several myths and falsifications were built is “a land without a people for a people without land”⁶. This was followed by a number of myths; according to Flapan, the first myth claims that the Zionist *Yishuv* accepted the UN Partition Resolution 181 (1947) but the Palestinians refused it. The second myth states that the Zionists pleaded the Palestinians to stay in Palestine in the wake of the Nakba, but the Palestinians left after being urged to do so by the Arab leaders. The third myth is the belief that 1948 was an incarnation of the Biblical story of weak David (the Jews) slaying mighty Goliath (the Arab armies). The fourth myth states that the Arab

countries were determined to nip the infant Jewish state in the bud which leads to fifth myth which states that Zionists had no option but to be engaged in a war against the armies of these Arab countries (*The Birth of Israel* 15, 81, 187, 119, 153).

THE NEED FOR A PALESTINIAN/ARAB COUNTER-HEGEMONIC NARRATIVE

The Zionist grand narrative does not stop at propagating lies about its foundation; it extends to marginalise and delegitimise the Palestinian/Arab narrative as well (Beinin 11). Time and again, it has been proven that the Palestinians' situation is a difficult one: they have been "pitted against an undeniably superior antagonist whose consciousness of himself and of the Palestinian is exactly, *positionally*, superior" (Said, *The Question* 15). Moreover, as Said brilliantly observes, the Palestinian has become a nonperson as opposed to the Zionist who is the only person in Palestine (*The Question* 37) that is worth mentioning, narrating and presenting. As a result, the Palestinian/Arab counter-hegemonic narrative of the Nakba has always attempted to deconstruct the Zionist grand narrative and emerge with a genuine Palestinian narrative of 1948. In order to do so, a process of deconstructing the Zionist grand narrative and reconstructing a Palestinian/Arab Nakba narrative is mandatory. El-Messiri defines deconstructing the Zionist grand narrative in the following manner: recalling the historical and present occupation facts and comparing them to the Zionist claims (59); this is part of what the Palestinian/Arab historians, writers and critics studied here do. Nevertheless, narrating the Nakba is a complicated and sometimes tiring enterprise. It is not only that the Zionist grand narrative does not do justice to the Palestinian narrative, but ironically, and perhaps also tragically, the mainstream Palestinian and Arab narratives sometimes fall into the same misrepresentation. The Palestinian historian Mahmoud 'Issa (b. 1959) observes