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Culture and Identity in Exile: A Study of Two Palestinian Autobiographies

An M.A. Thesis in English language and Literature

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*To my father,
the guide and the model
And to my mother,
a stream of unconditioned love*

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Introduction

The Palestinian people suffered greatly after the Nakba in 1948. The Nakba, or the Catastrophe, refers to the defeat of Arabs in the 1948 war with the Zionists; it witnessed the expulsion of more than 700,000 Palestinians from their homes, cities and villages and the confiscation of their lands. More than three quarters of the Palestinian population were turned into refugees and were faced by the shock that they could not return after the cessation of hostilities. The large number of expelled Palestinians came to be refugees either in their own land, where they were later labeled as “Arab Israelis”; or in the refugee camps in the neighboring countries of Jordan, Syria and Lebanon to where they were deported. Other Palestinians managed to go to other Arab and Western countries where their conditions of exile were slightly better. The Nakba marks the onset of the Palestinian people’s diaspora across the globe and the birth of their misery.

The identity of Palestinians became a reason for common suffering. As a community, they shared and still share an identity of displacement, dispersal and fragmentation. Wherever Palestinians go, they encounter hardships at borders and barriers, be it at airports or checkpoints, where every Palestinian is exposed to the possibility of harassment or exclusion. Palestinians are forced to be always on the move, and are not allowed to settle. Their life is “scattered, discontinuous, marked by the artificial and imposed arrangements of interrupted or

confined space, by the dislocations and unsynchronized rhythms of disturbed time” (Said, *After the Last Sky* 20).

The condition of displacement or exile affects the cultural identity of individuals. The dispersal of people across the globe inevitably leads to the shaping of new diasporic identities as a result of the cross-cultural differences, and that usually leave the exile in a state of confusion questioning and negotiating matters of culture and identity. Palestinians are no exception, in fact, their loss of homeland exacerbated their concern about cultural identity.

To all members of the Palestinian diaspora, homeland is the cornerstone around which they gather. The misery of the Palestinian condition in exile results from the feeling that ‘home’ is the place where they are not in and where they cannot be, it is where they once came from, but it became impossible to reach (Schulz 94), longing for it and for the house of the ancestors. It has become a major constituent of their cultural identity and part of their consciousness to the extent that “feeling at home in a foreign land represents a betrayal” (Sa’di 183). Home for Palestinians represents security, stability and belonging; it has come to be associated with symbols such as the old fig tree, old olive trees, and olive oil. The “key” of the old house is the key symbol for home as it signifies the long awaited return home.

Many of the Palestinians in exile are marginalized, especially of those living in the West. They are countered and silenced with the Zionist and “Orientalist”¹ representations which exploit the Arabs’ inability to make

their voice heard. Zionists have long dominated the political and media space, “The success of the Orientalist representations of Palestinians by both Europeans and Zionists effectively suppressed the Palestinian capacity for self-representation” (Ashcroft & Ahluwalia 121). It was therefore mandatory for Arabs to speak out and to represent themselves in order to make their voice heard against the Zionist propaganda and Orientalist depictions.

Edward Said urges Palestinians to seek the “permission to narrate”², and to speak up their silenced voices. He believes that “writing” is the exile's only available home, even though it is vulnerable and fragile (Reflections on Exile 184). This is why many Palestinian people resort to writing as a means for finding their voice, seeking the permission to narrate and fending off their sense of exile. Autobiography, thus, records the process of becoming who they are, and narrates what Frantz Fanon calls the “passionate research” to *rediscover* their cultural identities. Such writers produce works that represent their eagerness to belong, and uncover the dust from their hiding real self.

Autobiography is one of the genres that serve as a text for the “the oppressed and the culturally displaced”, which is a way to resist “silence and misrepresentation” (Swindells 7). As a genre, autobiography is best suited for tracing the construction of identity along time and space, it gives writers the chance of discovering themselves. The writer's identity is constructed through the process of writing, and it becomes in Stuart Hall's view “a production which is never complete, always in process, and always

constituted within, not outside, representation” (Cultural 222). Autobiography is, therefore, one of the most suitable genres for the literary representation of the Palestinian cultural identity, and hence its choice for application in this thesis.

Following the Nakba, oral narrations of the tragedy were abundant. These narrations described the massacres, the fear, the expropriation of land, the forced deportation, and the suffering of the refugees: the shortage of food, money, proper housing conditions and employment. Many Palestinian writers took on the responsibility of making such suffering known to the largest number of people possible, their writings came out in different genres whether novel, poetry, drama, short stories, essays or autobiographies.

The writings represented a literature of the Palestinians after the Nakba that is not confined to a single geographical area. Nevertheless, this Palestinian literature is categorized geographically: literature by Palestinians living inside “Israel”, by Palestinians in the occupied territories of the West Bank and Gaza, and by those living in exile in many countries of the world whether Arab or Western ones.

Among the notable Palestinian figures living in “Israel” are Emile Habibi and Anton Shammas. Emile Habibi (1922-1996) was a member of the Knesset and a novelist who wrote in Arabic. His prominent work is *al-Waqa'I' al-Gharibah fi Ikhtifa' Sa'id Abi an-Nahs al-Mutasha'il* or “The Strange Events in the Disappearance of Saeed the Pessoptimist” which depicts life of Palestinians

under the Israeli rule. Anton Shammas (1950-) is a poet and novelist who writes in both Arabic and Hebrew, but his notable work, the novel “Arabesques” is written in Hebrew. The novel deals with aspects of cultural violence in the Zionist discourse and its effect on the Palestinian citizens of “Israel”.

Palestinians in the occupied territories generally write in Arabic about the suffering under the Israeli occupation and about their resistance against that occupation. Among the most notable writers of this group are Sahar Khalifeh, Fadwa Touqan, Liana Badr, Mohamed Nassar, Atef Abu Saif and Hanan Ashrawi.

The final group is that of Palestinian writers in diaspora. Writers representing this group wrote many works that voice their suffering in exile, speak their nostalgia to their homeland, and trace their conflicts of identity. The writers in this group are divided into two categories; those living in Arab countries, and those who have settled down in Western countries. Ghassan Kanafani (1936-1972), who lived in Damascus, Kuwait and Beirut, was noted for his short stories and novels, especially his masterpiece *Men in the Sun* which depicts the harsh conditions under which Palestinians live, from the poverty of camps to the oppression of Arab regimes. Another eminent figure is Mourid Al-Barghouti (1944-), the distinguished poet who was twice exiled first from his native country Palestine and then from Egypt for seventeen years. He wrote many books of poetry, in addition to his most famous autobiography *I Saw Ramallah* which he

followed twelve years later by a sequel entitled *I was Born There, I was Born Here*.

The most prominent Palestinian figure in exile is Mahmoud Darwish (1941-2008) who is considered one of the most important Arab poets of modern time. Darwish was exiled in Cairo, Beirut then Paris and he later died in America. He wrote about 30 collections of poetry and prose, many of which were translated to about 35 languages. His works usually express themes of anguish over loss of Palestine, dispossession and questions of identity. His most famous poem is "Identity Card" published in his first collection of poems "Leaves of Olives".

Writings by Palestinians in Western countries remained dormant until recently. Their voice was first heard through Edward Said, the prominent Palestinian intellectual, through his writings on literary criticism. He started by *Orientalism*, his most famous book, and then followed it by many writings presenting the Palestinian cause to the world, such as *The Question of Palestine*³ and *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives*⁴.

Another Palestinian writer in diaspora is Salma Khadra Jayyusi (1928 -), the poet and critic, who exerted a huge effort in translating many of the Palestinian works into English, with the purpose of reaching a wider audience in the West. Her *Anthology of Modern Palestinian Literature* is a key reference on the topic.

Of the noted figures in the West is Ghada Karmi (1939-), a doctor and activist living in England. She has

lived there ever since her childhood after the forced exile of her family from Palestine following the Nakba. She is a well-known speaker of the Palestinian cause in the western media, and author of several books and articles in British and Arab media promoting the cause. Her books include *The Palestinian Exodus: 1948 – 1998*, and *Married to Another man: Israel's Dilemma in Palestine*. Her most prominent work is her autobiography *In Search of Fatima: A Palestinian Story*.

Other figures include Hisham Sharabi, Fawaz Turki and Ibrahim Fawal, in addition to the younger generation of Palestinians born in exile. This final group, many of whom are also known as the second generation of Arab-Americans, include the rising names of Naomi Shihab Nye, Nathalie Handal and Suheir Hammad. These and other writers have added strongly to the English voice of Palestinians, portraying their eagerness to see their land, while revealing different cultural identities.

Autobiography has been a most favorite genre for the Palestinian writer, through which prominent figures on the Palestinian scene started communicating their experiences and sufferings under fire and occupation. Initially, all such autobiographies were written in Arabic. In “*Rihla Gabaleyya, Rihla Sa’aba*” or *A Mountainous Journey, Difficult Journey* published in 1985 and translated in 1990, Fadwa Tuqan recounted her life and adolescence in Nablus, the Palestinian village, and she ended this autobiography by the Israeli occupation of 1967. Later in 1993, she wrote a sequel entitled *Arrihla Alasa’b* or *The Most Difficult*

journey in which she described life under the Israeli occupation.

Hisham Sharabi (1927-2005) wrote his autobiography in two volumes, the first one is *Al-Jamr wa Al-Ramad: Dhikrayat Muthaqqaf Arabi* or *Embers and ashes: Memoirs of an Arab intellectual*, published in 1978. The second one is *Suwar al-Madi: Sira Dhatiyya* or *Images of the past: An autobiography*, published in 1993. The two autobiographies display his young life in Jaffa and his fractured life in exile between America and Beirut.

Mohammad Al-Asaad's *Atfal Al-Nada* or *Children of the Dew* was published in 1990, in which he portrayed life in his native village "Om el Zeinat" and the suffering of the people on their expulsion from their land.

Murid Al-Barghuti's *Raaytu Ramallah* or *I Saw Ramallah*, first published in 1997, is a striking account of his exile. In this lyrical autobiography, Al-Barghuthi recounts memories of his village Deir Ghassana, and speaks of the agonies of 30 years of exile in Egypt and some other countries. He also shares his feelings upon visiting his homeland under occupation after such a long time. In *I was Born There, I was Born Here* (2009), a recent sequel, he narrates his second visit to Ramallah, but this time accompanied by his son Tamim⁵ who sees it for the first time.

Autobiographies originally written in English, by Palestinian writers to whom English is like a mother tongue, emerged due to the necessary need to address the Western audience and present a counter viewpoint of the

Palestinian cause. The first one to attempt this was Fawaz Turki in 1972 in *The Disinherited: Journal of a Palestinian Exile* and *A Soul in Exile: Lives of a Palestinian Revolutionary* (1988). These two books tell of their writer's early life in Haifa and his family's flight during the 1948 war to live a brutal life in a refugee camp in Lebanon. He wrote of his roaming over Australia, France, India, until he finally settled in the United States. Turki later wrote *Exile's Return* narrating his bitter experience of visiting Haifa in 1992.

Among the influential Palestinian figures who wrote their memoirs is Leila Khaled (1944-), member of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). She is famous for hijacking a plane in 1969 that was heading for Tel Aviv, forcing the plane to land in Damascus where it was blown up. She then underwent a number of plastic surgeries so that she could execute another hijacking in 1970 of an Israeli Al-Al flight, the operation failed and the plane was forced to land in London where Khaled was arrested. Leila Khaled wrote her autobiography *My People Shall Live: The Autobiography of a Revolutionary* (1973), in which she recounts her story as a child born in Haifa, witnessing the horrors of the Nakba then fleeing to Lebanon with her parents as refugees to live poverty-stricken in the camps. She narrates her involvement in political work as a teenager and being part of PELP guerillas.

Other accounts of the catastrophe and the resulting misery of the people can be found in Hala Sakakini's *Jerusalem and I* (1987), Hanan Ashrawi's *This Side of*

Peace (1995), and Abdel Bari Atwan's *Country of Words* (2008).

This thesis analyzes the autobiographies of two of these noted Palestinian figures: Edward Said's *Out of Place* (1999) and Ghada Karmi's *In Search of Fatima: A Palestinian Story* (2000). *Out of Place* recounts the memories of young Said as an exile from a very young age, a Palestinian living in Palestine, Cairo, Lebanon and America. In his work, Said describes the identity conflict he experienced and comments on the process of his identity formation.

In Search of Fatima: A Palestinian Story tells the story of Ghada Karmi as a Palestinian girl who experiences the Nakba and temporarily flees out of her country to find that she cannot return. She starts a new life of exile in Syria and then in England where her Arab identity conflicts with the English one. She later strives to gain her identity back and searches for 'Fatima' the Palestinian maid who represents that phase of her early life and stands for her Palestinian identity.

Karmi and Said are selected because they seem to provide an excellent illustration of the concepts of culture and identity, especially when influenced by the unsettling forces of exile around them. They represent the conflicts of diasporic identities resulting from living in exile for such a long period of time. Their autobiographies take us through their search for identity, and their need to belong to Palestine at certain points in their journeys.