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Writing the Massacre:
A Comparative Study of the
Representations of the 1982 Sabra and
Shatila Massacre

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Introductory Chapter

On Wednesday 15th September 1982, after a two-month siege, the Israeli forces entered Beirut and tightened its grip on the Palestinian refugee camps in the city's Southern districts. These camps were residential areas inhabited not only by Palestinian refugees but also by poor Lebanese, Syrians, Egyptians and others. On Thursday 16th September the Phalanges¹ and Sa'd Haddad's² men entered the refugee camps and began killing, abducting, raping and torturing their residents. When they left on Saturday 17th September, the number of victims had reached about 3700.

The object of this thesis is to study the representation of the Sabra and Shatila massacre in a number of literary and non-literary texts produced by Arab, British, French and American writers right after the event or decades later. A comparative reading of these texts will illuminate each of the author's position and his/her function as an intellectual. It will also assist in tracing the differences and affinities in the representations; and it will help explore the potentials and/or constraints of the different modes of writing used by the authors in their account of the massacre. In addition, the thesis will try to explore the following: how far did the works written about the Sabra and Shatila Massacre make up for the missing Palestinian narrative— to use Said's expression? Is the massacre's tale elusive? Which is more powerful and/or valuable: the documentary account or the literary imaginative account? How did writers incorporate

¹ A right-Wing Lebanese political party that played a major role in the Lebanese Civil War (1975-90).

² The founder and head of the South Lebanon Army which was supported politically and militarily by Israel and played a major role in the Lebanese Civil War.

the massacre in imaginary accounts? Was any of the writers' representation affected by certain hegemonic views dominant in his/her society and to what extent? How far did the thematic concern affect the techniques of writing? And what are the aspects of similarity and difference in the techniques employed by the selected writers?

The first writings that appeared about the Sabra and Shatila massacre were newspaper and magazine items. Naturally, the event received wide media coverage in both the Arab and western worlds. Since providing a broad examination of this material is beyond the scope of my thesis, I will just refer to one example. The 27th September 1982 *Time* magazine issue chose the massacre as its cover story. In addition to a number of photos picturing the mass-killed victims, the issue presents an overview of the events leading to the massacre and highlights the role played by the Israelis.

As early as 1983, some journals tackled this issue extensively. *Race & Class*, for instance dedicated Volume XXIV to cover the invasion of Lebanon and the ensuing massacre. It is divided into three main parts: the first provides background information about Lebanon, the Palestinians and the PLO. The second part presents articles by Arab and Foreign writers providing analyses for the events of 1982. The third part is subdivided into two sections: the first republishes articles and interviews related to the topic from other sources. Among these comes Thomas Friedman's "Beirut Massacre: the Four Days" which was published in *The New York Times*. This relatively long article chronicles the massacre and raises the point of Israeli responsibility. The second subsection presents reviews of books tackling the topic.

In the same year, the *Journal of Palestine Studies* dedicated two issues for the 1982 events. Volume XII, Issue 46, presents articles covering them from political, historical

and moral perspectives. Among these are: the testimony of Ellen Siegel, an American nurse who witnessed the massacre, an article reviewing reactions to the massacre in three Israeli newspapers and an article by Robert Fisk about the abduction of Palestinians in Lebanon. Among the material presented in Issue 47 are extracts from the "Kahan Report"; the final report of the Israeli Commission of Inquiry, and an article by Eqbal Ahmad, the famous Pakistani writer and activist analyzing this report, and a testimony of a militiaman who participated in the massacre.

Oral-based history accounts of the massacre soon began to appear. In 1983, Leila Shahid published in the *Journal of Palestine Studies*, a large scale study conducted among the survivors of the massacres. It takes the form of interviews and aims at recording eyewitness accounts. In 1984 Amnon Kapeliouk³ published his book *Sabra & Shatila: Inquiry into a Massacre*. In it, he gathers "the testimony of survivors, witnesses and participants, examining Israeli and foreign press accounts, the proceedings of the Knesset, and testimony before the Kahan Commission⁴, as well as other documents." Kapeliouk's book "chronicles events of September 14 through 20, 1982, in Beirut and in Israel." It includes "Maps that show the routes of the Israeli advance into West Beirut on September 15 and of the Phalange columns into Sabra and Shatila on September 16, 17 and 18" as well as a few photographs of the victims (Power).

³ Israeli journalist and author. His book on Sabra and Shatila is said to be based on notes originally taken by Leila Shahid.

⁴ Formally known as the Commission of Inquiry into the Events at the Refugee Camps in Beirut, was established by the Israeli government to investigate the Sabra and Shatila massacre. The report by the commission held that Israel was only indirectly responsible for the massacre.

A new addition to Oral-history accounts came in 1994 when Rosemary Sayigh⁵ published *Too Many Enemies: The Palestinian Experience in Lebanon*. She focuses on the larger context of the massacre and divides the book into three parts. The first part provides a detailed oral-based history of the Shatila Camp covering the details of its construction; the way it was managed and ruled; the main political developments that affected it; the cultural, social and economic conditions of its residents; as well as the events leading to the massacre and the events of the massacre itself. The second two parts provide an analytical account of the events following the massacre.

In 2003 Bayan Nuwayhed Al-Hout⁶ published her notable book *Sabra and Shatila*. It is composed of two main parts: the first focuses on the events of the massacre and the second on documenting data about the victims. Al-Hout places the events of the massacre at the heart of the book dedicating a complete chapter for each of its three days with the aim of providing a comprehensive and detailed account based on survivors' testimonies. Within this frame, the writer tries to refute some claims about the massacre: the pretext under which it was carried out, its scale, the count of victims, and the parties responsible. The Sabra and Shatila massacre was also touched upon in numerous accounts of the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, but the research is rather limited to the instances focused on the massacre itself.

⁵ Journalist and Scholar of Middle Eastern History. She is best known for her works on the Palestinian people which include *Palestinians: From Peasants to Revolutionaries; A People's History* (1979).

⁶ Palestinian-Lebanese academic and writer with a number of seminal research papers and books on Palestine including *Falastīn: 'lqadā-a. 'sh'b. 'lhād ar-a*. [*Palestine: The Cause. The People. The Civilization*] (1991).

Poems were among the first literary works written about the Sabra and Shatila massacre. In 1983, Mahmoud Darwish published his long poem “Ṃadīḥ ’ḷẓl ’l’aly” [Praise to the High Shadow]. Here, Sabra is a naked girl, at times asleep and at others singing a lament. These images evoke a sense of utter helplessness and emphasize the traditional link between the conquest of land and forms of domination over women. This is further highlighted when the attacker is described as killing Sabra, tearing her breast and limbs and rearranging them over the table in ways that stimulate his desire. The sections that precede this image are dedicated mainly to Beirut: the poet first addresses the fact that Beirut invokes in him conflicting feelings, and then the poem presents long dramatic sections recalling the state of the city under siege. After this section, the poet reflects on Beirut, his homeland, himself and then addresses the Lebanese bidding them farewell (371-375).

In the same year, Mourid Barghouti wrote a relatively long poem about the massacre entitled “Ṭaḷa ’s ḥaṭat” [Prolonged Diaspora]. The poet opens and ends his poem by addressing his homeland Palestine with lines written in the mono-rhymed *q̣aṣīd-a* form. In between, there are two accounts of the massacre. The first is in free verse and is directly preceded with lines addressed to an unnamed martyr and followed by lines that describe the state of Lebanon at the time and ends with a lyrical expression of love for the homeland. The second is in free verse as well, and is directly anteceded by lines in prose poetry addressed to Liberty and ensued by lines lamenting the state of Arabs, especially their leaders. Hence, there is a parallelism between these two accounts. It is striking, though, that eight sections of the poem start with the refrain “We who are not yet dead”.

In his collection of poems *Al-ḥamḷu ’l-F̣aḷaṣṣīnī* [*The Palestinian Pregnancy*] (1985), the Egyptian poet Fouad Haddad published two poems about the massacre. The first is a short lyrical poem in the Egyptian dialect entitled “’mlū

‘*ḥa lān-a ’lbyt*” [“Fill the house with your presence”]. The poem begins and ends with an expression of grief, and centers on the refrain “Fill the... with your presence”:

I wept, I wiped my tears
I wipe my tears, I weep
Fill the house with your presence
Fill the camp with your presence
Fill the darkness with your presence⁷. (81)

This refrain, as Radwa Ashour points out in *Ṣayadul dhakir-a* [*Memory Hunters*], is a call for intimacy and communication by an anonymous addressor to an indefinite addressee: the speaker could be the poet addressing the martyrs, the martyrs addressing the PLO fighters who left Lebanon, the PLO fighters speaking to their massacred relatives and friends... (81). Likewise, the second poem is a short one entitled “*ḥughniyy -a m ḥagnwn-a – Ḥilm tūfl ḥazīn*” [A Mad Song– Dream of a Sad Child]. It is a narrative poem in the Lebanese dialect which recounts the story of a child who went to a field to collect mulberry to find his grandfather who was just talking amiably to him turn into a fighter killing “the relative and the guest”.

More than a decade later, novels about the massacre began to appear. In *’tyaf* [*Specters*] (1999), Radwa Ashour moves from an individual incident of murder to the massacres of Sabra and Shatila, and Deir Yassin. The two mass murders are linked by the intertextuality in the title of Shagar's research tackling the Deir Yassin massacre. As for the events of Sabra and Shatila, they run parallel with the line of autobiography. The writer employs the techniques of intertextuality and stream of consciousness, and adopts a perspective that combines philosophic and historical perceptions. Though a number of writings appeared about the massacre and about the works tackling it, a comparative study of the representations of the massacre in non-literary

⁷ All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

and literary works produced by Arabs and non-Arabs of different background is yet to appear.

This thesis will explore the works of a French dramatist, a British journalist, an American scholar and three Arab novelists on the Sabra and Shatila massacre. The works are Jean Genet's essay "Four hours In Shatila" (1982), Robert Fisk's "Terrorists"⁸ (1982), later included in a chapter of his book *Pity the Nation, Lebanon at War* (2001), Noam Chomsky's "A Chapter of Palestinian History" in his *Fateful Triangle* (1983), Bahaa Taher's *Love In Exile* (1995), Elias Khoury's *Gate of the Sun* (1998), and Radwa Ashour's *The Woman from Tantoura* (2010). The variety of material with respect to author's background, genre, mode of writing and time of production offers the researcher richer possibilities and will yield illuminating results.

The essays of the French Dramatist and Poet Genet and the British Journalist Fisk are among the first written about the Sabra and Shatila Massacre. In his essay, Genet intertwines scenes from the massacre with scenes of Palestinian life in Jordan; all based on firsthand experience. His account is lyrical, and many brutal scenes are amazingly described in a dreamy language evoking senses of intimacy, innocence and love rather than feelings of dismay and aversion. Unlike Genet, Fisk employs language that shocks the senses of hearing, sight, smell and taste with the hideousness of the event. His primary focus is on rendering his first-hand experience in the camps and exploring the issue of responsibility.

In 1983, Noam Chomsky published his book *Fateful Triangle: The United States, Israel, and the Palestinians* with the aim of studying American policy towards Israel and its effect on the Palestinians and other Arabs. In the sixth

⁸ Robert Fisk mentions Sabra and Shatila in various comments in his book *The Great War for Civilization* (2005), but "Terrorist" is the lengthy account that includes his testimony and impressions.

chapter of this book, under a section entitled "A Chapter of Palestinian History", Chomsky tackles the Sabra and Shatila Massacre. This section is structured mainly on juxtaposition; the author juxtaposes the accounts of the international press with the Israeli accounts, and the Sabra and Shatila massacre with the Kishinev pogrom⁹. These juxtapositions highlight the ironies of the situation. In addition, he mingles subjectivity and objectivity in a striking way; and, like Genet and Fisk, he is reader-conscious with respect to style. "A Chapter of Palestinian History" is preceded with sections setting the context of the massacre and ensued by sections examining the question of responsibility.

In 1995 Bahaa Taher published *Love in Exile*. In this novel, he sheds light on this massacre – whose date is the present time of the novel - in the context of his exploration of the theme of Otherness and in the accompaniment of a number of other massacres. This is achieved mainly through the use of modern techniques, one of the most prominent of which is incorporating other genres in the novel. Likewise, Elias Khoury highlights this massacre in *Gate of the Sun* (1998). It is tackled in retrospect and is placed within the larger context of the events of 1948. More focus is placed on the issue of representation, and the main techniques used are the post-modern. In 2010, Radwa Ashour published *The Woman from Tantoura*, in which she devotes a number of chapters to the massacre and its context. These chapters are marked by innovation of techniques. They are placed at the heart of a journey that explores Palestinian history since the 1940s until the liberation of South Lebanon (2000) and attempts to provide a glimpse of Palestinian popular culture.

⁹ Anti-Jews riot that took place in the city of Kishinev, the capital of the Bessarabia province of the Russian Empire, on 1903. A boy was murdered and rumors spread circulating that he was killed by Jews who wanted to use his blood in their rituals. Violence erupted leading to the killing of dozens and the injury of hundreds

This journey runs parallel with the course of the life of a woman from the village of Tantoura who preserves the two intertwined journeys in a written testimonial account as per the son's – a scholar – request.

For the purposes of analysis, the research invokes the concepts of representation and the role of the intellectual as perceived by Edward Said. Said interprets representation as an organizational act that shapes reality rather than simply copying it. As Doaa Embabi points out, Said in *Beginnings* (1976) "maintains that the relationship between the text and the world is governed by what he terms as 'molestation'. The term accounts for the idea that the text rather creates reality than imitates it". For him, "writing and representation accrue a dynamic quality, they are a means of "doing" not simply a question of saying", let alone imitating (13-14). In *Orientalism*, Said maintains that "texts can create not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe" (94).

Moreover, Said sees that to understand the process of representation, it is indispensable to investigate the context of its production. "That is to say, one needs to know the purpose of representation, its recipients, and the entity producing this representation." In addition, the medium through which the representation is communicated should not be overlooked. "He maintains that the sheer fact that representation is an act embedded in language legitimates the "transformation" entailed and imposed on the represented culture" (Embabi 42-43). Bearing this in mind, Said wonders "whether indeed there can be a true representation of anything, or whether ... we must be prepared to accept the fact that a representation is *eo ipso* implicated, intertwined, embedded, interwoven with a great many other things besides the "truth", which is itself a representation" (*Orientalism* 272-272). The thesis focuses on the factors that influence representation and explore their workings in the works discussed.

In addition, Said stands against the prevailing association between the words intellectual on the one hand and "ivory tower" and "a sneer" on the other, seeing this train of thought as "depressing" (*Representations* x). The roles of intellectuals as perceived by Said fall under two broad categories. Firstly, the intellectual as one who questions corporate thinking: He is an "outsider, "amateur," and disturber of the status quo" who risks and goes "beyond the easy certainties provided us by our background, language, and nationality, which so often shield us from the reality of others" (*Representations* x-xiv). Secondly, the intellectual as one who recounts the missing narrative: According to Said, "facts do not at all speak for themselves, but require a socially acceptable narrative to absorb, sustain and circulate them" ("Permission to Narrate" 34). Here comes a major role of the intellectual who is "endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, a public" (*Representations* 11). More detailed discussion of the theoretical framework will be included in the body of the thesis.

The research is divided into three chapters and a conclusion. Chapter One is a two-part introduction; part one presents the research questions, a review of the literature, the methodological framework, the material and the steps of the research. Part two gives a brief account of the Sabra and Shatila massacre. Chapter Two "Written from 'Exile'" analyzes works where authors write from the position of an outsider and where the object of description generally occupies, in their dominant culture, the position of "the Other". This chapter covers the writings of the French Jean Genet, the British Robert Fisk, and the American Noam Chomsky. It studies the factors that led to truthfulness in representing the Sabra and Shatila massacre by these writers and highlights how these representations show the three

writers as challengers of dominant lies and articulators of the missing narrative. Furthermore, it discusses the spaces opened/limited by their chosen forms of writing and the techniques employed for rendering the atrocity, shedding light on areas of similarity and differences and the reasons behind this. The choices of focus are also explored.

Chapter Three, “Speaking for Ourselves”, covers the Sabra and Shatila massacre as represented by Arab writers and it discusses the works of the Egyptians Bahaa Taher and Radwa Ashour, and the Lebanese Elias Khoury. The chapter discusses the contribution these representations make to the missing Palestinian narrative and examines them as examples of a balanced narration of the victimized self. It explores how the change in the focus of the work leads to wide differences in writing the massacre despite the sameness of the literary form. Chapter three, in addition, analyzes the discrepancy in writing techniques and the reasons behind this. I assume that the Sabra and Shatila massacre is elusive; it is difficult to be embraced by words, and so in representing it authors incorporated testimonies and made use of documentary writing as well as photographic description. Imagination alone does not give this event its due, rather it succumbs before the reality of the massacre itself and writers find no option other than documenting it and recording it as if by a camera.

No critical work has been produced on the features of writings about massacres. The body of this thesis tries to analyze some of these features and to explore the factors behind differences in representations. For example, writers resort to incorporate eye-witness accounts or their own testimonies while relating the events of the massacre. Their tone becomes markedly serious with minimal resort to irony and similar techniques in the scenes that directly describe the massacre's events. This changes when they tackle the issue of responsibility for the massacre for example, as they heavily depend on irony and grotesque techniques. As for

the attitude to the massacre, it changes with the change in the backgrounds of readers; for instance, authors who write to Arab audience who share sympathy with the victims tend to mitigate the massacre's horrors whereas authors who write to non-Arab audience with pro-Israeli inclinations generally tend to give more focus to the details of the atrocities.

II Historical Background

Shedding light on the historical details of the Sabra and Shatila massacre will help examine the writers' choices in its representation, especially with respect to the elements of representation, and the interplay between imagination and reality. Since this is not a historical study in the first place, I will limit my reconstruction of the event to its direct context, major episodes and scale: my criterion of choice will be how useful the detail is to the analysis included in the body of the thesis. The massacre marked the culmination of Israel's second invasion of Lebanon and was triggered by the assassination of Bashir al-Gemayel on the afternoon of Tuesday 14 September 1982. However, it is far from being a spontaneous act of vengeance for the assassination as suggested by the accurate planning before and during the massacre, which shows that the crime was structured to terrorize Palestinians out of Lebanon, a goal particularly reflected in the brutality of murder and the extensive use of bulldozers to destroy Palestinian homes and institutions (Kapelouk 33).

On Wednesday, the Israeli forces entered Beirut and advanced to encircle the Sabra, Shatila and al-Fakhani districts. With the pretext of eliminating 2,500 terrorists, Israel began shelling the targeted districts from Thursday morning and did not cease fire except to let the Phalange and the Haddads in. The army cut electricity and all supplies but

lightened the sky with flares, to enable the massacrers to commit their crimes. According to Bayan Al-Hout, the massacre in the Shatila district extended as far as Shatila Main Street and the following quarters: Hayy al-Horsh, Hayy al-Farhat, Hayy al-Miqdad and Hayy Ersal. As for the Sabra district, only its southern part was subjected to the massacre. In addition, part of the Bir Hasan district, which faces Shatila from the south side, was among the first to be exposed to the massacre (44). As for the timing, it is estimated that the massacrers entered the districts between five o'clock and half past six on the evening of Thursday 16 September, and remained there till Saturday 18 September. No one was spared: Palestinians were killed for being Palestinian, and people of other nationalities, mainly Lebanese, were killed for living among Palestinians. Historians, likewise, agree that the killers did not differentiate among the victims according to religious affiliation. In fact, Kapeliouk reports that the victims included "nine Jewish women who had married Palestinian men during the British Mandate and accompanied their husbands to Lebanon during the 1948 exodus. The names of four of these women were published by the *Jerusalem Post* of September 30, 1982" (22-23).

During these three days, the means and ways of murder varied - though brutality remains a common feature. Some whole families were butchered in their homes by knives and axes; some others were gunned. Some houses were demolished by bulldozers over the residents, whether dead or alive. Men were usually forced to line up facing walls where they were shot to death, in many cases after being insulted. "Death Pits" were another means of mass killings. Victims were forced to step into pits either caused by Israeli shelling or dug by the militias. There they were either shot or buried alive. Babies and children were a common target: some were torn into halves and others had their heads smashed against the wall. The horrors of the massacre were not confined to