...with generally resented and deemed unfavourable for individuals, societies and grief, grievance, and grieving, along with a complex list of epithets that could, varying circumstances, accompany them – racial grief, political grievance, protracted chronic grief, traumatic, unresolved grievance – nevertheless occupy a significant culture and its manifestations in literature, art, history, science, and politics.

and the Rites/Rights of Grief offers an intellectual excursion into realms of regenerative problematics, too frequently dismissed without due consideration. In light, the volume constitutes a weighty contribution to the field of literary and studies. First and foremost, however, Culture and the Rites/Rights of Grief is to be equally enjoyed by readers with an interest in present-day literary, cultural and phenomena, at the intersection of which grief and grieving execute an imposing – albeit one that remains as indeterminate and fleeting as the nature of orary cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary encounters.

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Culture and the Rites/Rights of Grief

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Edited by Zbigniew Bialas, Paweł Jędrzejko and Julia Szotysek

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"NOT TO GET LOST IN THE LOSS": NARRATING THE STORY IN MOURID BARGHOUTI’S I WAS BORN THERE, I WAS BORN HERE AND IN DEBORAH ROHAN’S THE OLIVE GROVE—A PALESTINIAN STORY

HANIA A. M. NASHEF

Introduction

Rarely do we pause and wonder how some countries have been erased from world maps, and what impact such actions have on the lives of citizens of these countries. The year 1795, for instance, marked the third and final partition of Poland; territorial divisions and expansions, which were carried out by Austria, Prussia, and Russia, led to the disappearance of Poland as a sovereign state for 123 years. In more recent history, specifically in 1948, the establishment of the state of Israel wiped out the name of Palestine from the world map. The creation of a new state led to the destruction of another, as at least 418 Palestinian villages were demolished, towns and cities were emptied of their original inhabitants, and around 1 million Palestinians were expelled out of their homeland to what became known as the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and to neighboring countries and in the larger diaspora. Only 165,000 Palestinians were able to remain in the territories that became the state of Israel in 1948. The Gaza Strip and the West Bank were later occupied by Israel in 1967, which led to another wave of refugees, namely to neighboring Arab countries — to some who have earlier ended up in camps in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, this was yet another exodus. Hence to this day, for many Palestinians in the diaspora, the loss of the homeland has become the characteristic that defines their very essence. Salim Tamari notes from the Palestinian testimonies of the 50th anniversary of commemorating the Palestinian Nakba or catastrophe of 1948, that the listeners and narrators “were perplexed at having kept silent for what seemed like an eternity before releasing their concealed stories”. The Palestinians having been negated and traumatized by the history of the last 100 years have been unable for the most part to tell their story. Furthermore, the absence of a willing audience has made this task yet more difficult. The two novels that I will be discussing in this paper are Mourid Barghouti’s 2011 translated English edition of I was Born There, I was Born Here, and Deborah Rohan’s 2001 novel, The Olive Grove: A Palestinian Story, as they essay to write the Palestinian narrative back in history.

The Invisible Palestinians

Lila Abu-Lughod and Ahmad H. Sa’di write:

Israel’s creation was represented, and sometimes conceived, as an act of restitution that resolved this dialectic, bringing good out of evil. The Palestinians were excluded from the unfolding of this history. Their catastrophe was either disregarded or reduced to a question of ill-fated refugees.2

The Palestinians had only their memories to create a counter-history or a counter-memory against “the thundering story of Zionism”3. In his memoir, Edward Said describes his own feelings at the eradication of Palestine:

What I experienced, however, was the suppression of a history as everyone around me celebrated Israel’s victory, its terrible swift sword ... at the expense of the original inhabitants of Palestine, who now found themselves forced over and over again to prove that they had once existed. ‘There are no Palestinians’, said Golda Meir in 1969, and that set me, and many others, the slightly preposterous challenge of disproving her, of beginning to articulate a history of loss and dispossession that had to be extricated,

minute by minute, word by word, inch by inch, from the very real history of Israel’s establishment, existence and achievements. I was working in an almost entirely negative element, the non-existence, the non-history which I had somehow to make visible despite occlusions, misrepresentations and denials.  

Meir’s denial of the existence of the Palestinian people was reported by the London Sunday Times in 1969, in which she clearly said they were no Palestinians in Palestine and therefore no one was expelled:

It was not as though there was a Palestinian people in Palestine considering itself as a Palestinian people and we came and threw them out and took their country away from them. They did not exist.

For Palestinians have long struggled against the claim that a land without a people was given to a people without a land. In October 31, 1991, and in his opening speech as Head of the Palestinian Delegation in the Madrid Conference, Dr Haidar Abdul-Shafi challenged this persistent myth in front of a world audience when he remarked:

For too long, the Palestinian people have gone unheeded, silenced and denied. Our identity negated by political expediency; our rightful struggle against injustice maligned; and our present existence subdued by the past tragedy of another people. For the greater part of this century we have been victimized by the myth of a land without a people and described with impunity as the invisible Palestinians. Before such willful blindness, we refused to disappear or to accept a distorted identity.

The Palestinians have refused to disappear in spite of their near complete eradication from the land and their continual exile. In his introduction to Mourid Barghouti’s earlier novel, I saw Ramallah, (Arabic: 1997, English 2000). Said refers to the Palestinians as a displaced and a misplaced people.  Regardless of their nationalities, their stateless position and irrespective of the countries they live in, they carry with them the trauma of events that led to the loss of their homeland, and the grief of this loss and endless displacement. Furthermore, they struggle to be able to tell their story against the negations of their history and the denials of their existence that still persist. As the Israeli narrative has successfully eradicated Palestinian entity from the land and from history, the Palestinians have difficulty in presenting a counter-narrative. The Palestinian story was effaced by the destruction of their villages and towns. In a conversation between a father and a son in Mahmoud Darwish’s prose work, Journal of Ordinary Grief, the son enquires of the father as to why he is picking up pebbles, to which the father answers that these are petrified pieces of his heart; it is the loss of the homeland and the being that he is searching for as he is adamant not to get lost in the loss that has characterized his life. This sense of loss pervades modern Palestinian literature and the two novels I will be analyzing here provide pertinent examples.

Writing becomes the place in which to dwell

Theodor Adorno states: “For a man who no longer has a homeland, writing becomes a place to live” 10. It is through writing that the Palestinian can regain his or her existence. Both Rohan’s and Barghouti’s novels are essentially narratives in which the central characters insist on telling their stories as they obstinately refuse to accept a distorted or a non-existent identity. I will be looking at the narratives of both protagonists who are now exiled as they revisit what is left of the historic Palestine with their adult children, at once to make sense of this absence and distorted identity and their need to pass on their stories to the next generation, hoping that by doing so they will be able to address part of the ordeal that has long plagued their lives. Both novels recount the histories of two large Palestinian families, the Moghrabis from Akka and the Barghoutis from Deir Ghassaneh, and their respective dispossession. Rohan’s novel tells the story of a Palestinian family from Akka through the eyes of Hamzi, the second son of the family, from the year 1913 when it was under Ottoman rule and until the family’s dispossession in 1948 when the state of Israel

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3 Haydar Abd-al-Shafi, “Madrid Speech October 31, 1991”, Journal of Palestine Studies 21, no. 2 (1992): 133. On November 29th, 2012, the 139 countries in the United Nations voted to allow Palestine the role of a nonmember observer status in the international body. The people of Palestine are to this day striving for some recognition that they exist.
4 Mourid Barghouti, I saw Ramallah, trans. Ahad Sourif (Cairo: American University of Cairo, 2000), IX.
was created. Barghouti’s village of Deir Ghassaneh, on the other hand, came under Israeli occupation in 1967. Both novels begin with a journey to and from the homeland.

On her website, Rohan remarks:

... her knowledge of Israel was drawn from books of her youth, such as Exodus by Leon Uris, and later by the works of Herman Wouk, including The Hope and The Glory. Stunned by the suffering of the Holocaust, she delighted in reading about the creation of the state of Israel as a safe harbor for those who suffered a loss of such horror and magnitude.11

The safe haven that was created for the refugees from Europe not only dispersed and destroyed an existing people but also traumatized and set in turmoil a whole nation till this day. In 1993, Rohan meets a Palestinian person for the first time, who when seeing The Hope in her hands, told her before even introducing himself “there will never be peace in the Holy Land until Israelis and Palestinians recognize one another’s humanity”12. Up to this point, Rohan was not even aware that the Palestinians existed. After extensive research and persuading Hamzi to tell her his family’s story, she interwove their detailed story into the historical events of Palestine. Her novel follows the story of the family from 1913 to 1998, from prosperous land owners with an established family name built on generations before to poor and distraught refugees in Lebanon with a name that no longer means anything13. 

The Olive Grove begins with the arrival of the adult Hamzi who is accompanied by his daughter, Ruba, at Ben Gurion International Airport after 50 years of absence. Hamzi, who presses his forehead against the plane’s window in hope that he find a recognizable landmark, is uneasy as this is a homeland that he has only visited in dreams in the last fifty years of his life.14 As he examines the faces of the other passengers on the plane, he describes this arrival as one that would bring tears of sorrow rather than joy, “for [his] family who had to flee [their] home, [their] town, [their] country, so that [the Israelis] could call it home.”15 He tells us that he wants to remember the land and his life on it as it used to be rather than joy, “for [his] family who had to flee [their] home, [their] town, plane, he describes this arrival as one that would bring tears of sorrow

imperative that Hamzi can relive the years of his early childhood in order that he can get confirmation that this land, which was once his country, and whose history and presence has been denied him through a willful negation, did actually exist – and accepting that it is no longer there is a way to help him grieve the loss. In the last page of the novel, Ruba insists that she and her father visit Sumayriyya, a village near their hometown of Akka, and in which they owned olive groves, for confirmation that their family once existed and to prove that “it wasn’t all just ... a story”.16 In her review of the novel, Lynn Rogers writes: “The novel’s protagonists are Hamzhi Moghrabi and his father, Kamel, a secular and civil conscious man whose life trajectory symbolizes the destruction of a nation and an agrarian way of life”17. When Hamzi requests at the airport that the immigration officer does not stamp his American passport, as he “simply can’t bear to have the word ‘Israel’ stamped there”, he is in effect reluctant to admit that the homeland he grew up in is no longer there.18 When the immigration officer asks Hamzi to specify the reasons for his visit as he flips through their passports, Hamzi informs him that he was born in this land and that his reason for return is to “see [his] home. To take photographs for [his] mother” as she would want to see how Palestine has changed19. The officer abruptly reminds him that he is now in Israel. Soon afterwards, Hamzi remarks as he studies the map before he embarks on the journey to his hometown of Akka that all the names are now in either English or Hebrew.20 Later in the novel when Hamzi is narrating the history of the Moghrabis to his daughter who demanded to hear the story of her family, he describes a conversation between his grandparents, Kamel and Haniya, in which his father remarks on how quickly the country was renamed within days of the end of the British mandate:

‘Three days ago, one day before the last of the British troops left Palestine, the Jews declared statehood. They renamed our country, Haniya. They want to call the land “Israel”. And the newspapers act as if it is that easy...already, today, they have begun referring to our country as Israel...I do not accept such a thing can happen in a matter of days.’21

13 Rohan, The Olive Grove, 12.
14 Rohan, The Olive Grove, 11.
15 Rohan, The Olive Grove, 12.
16 Rohan, The Olive Grove, 12.
A few pages later, Kamel questions the apathy of the world regarding their plight, wondering if Palestinians are just a “blurb read in the morning paper over coffee” and why they have to continually pay the price for Hitler’s sins. Joseph A. Massad states that “… the renaming of Palestine as Israel by the European Jewish settler colonists was not only of symbolic value, rather it involved (and still involves) a geographic overhauling of the entire country.” According to Massad, naming itself functions as locating the place in history. Once the name is lost the history and, with the passage of time, the narration of that history is lost with it. Barghouti states:

The battle for language becomes the battle for the land. The destruction of one leads to the destruction of the other. When Palestine disappears as a word it disappears as a state, as a country and as a homeland. The name of Palestine itself had to vanish.

Once the nation is lost, a person who originates from this nation likewise no longer exists; the suffix ‘ian’ in the word Palestinian is linked to the proper noun ‘Palestine’, which no longer exists as a sovereign state but is a state that now belongs in history books. The former Defense and later Foreign Minister of Israel Moshe Dayan explained in a lecture on March 19, 1969, to a group of students at the Israel Institute of Technology the systematic transformation of Palestine into Israel. Dayan described the process and the reason behind the eradication of the name and the place. Dayan said: “Jewish villages were built in the place of Arab villages. You do not even know the names of these Arab villages, and I do not blame you because geography books no longer exist; not only do the books not exist, but the Arab villages are not there either … There is no single place built in this country that did not have a former Arab population.” Nonetheless, the names are yet to be erased from the collective memory of Palestinians, as the stories are handed down from one generation to another, as is apparent in The Olive Grove and I Was Born There, I Was Born Here. Whereas the Palestinians in the diaspora reluctantly accept the new names, this is not the case with the Palestinians who remained in Israel post-1948 and post-1967, who tend to use the Hebrew names out of necessity, yet remember the old ones. Columbia University professor Lila Abu-Lughod confirms the latter when she describes a similar visit to Hamza’s that her own father undertook to Palestine/Israel; she writes how on his arrival at Ben-Gurion International Airport, or as he refers to it by its old name, Lydda Airport, he was shocked to see a sign that read “Welcome to Israel.”

Anna Bernard sees in “Hebrew renaming of formerly Arab towns and villages”, an act of layering, “the Hebrew name obscuring the Arabic and yet continuing to gesture towards its past existence.” This process of layering is not always a gesture towards the past but is also one towards the future. When on his first visit, Abu-Lughod’s father asked some Arab children who continue to live in his hometown of Jaffa the direction to a street, using its Arab name although “the street sign said something

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29 The Olive Grove: A Palestinian Story with permission from the author, Deborah Rohan.
altogether different", they were able to guide him. Abu-Lughod writes: "From this, [her father] knew that Palestinian parents were still teaching their children the old names of things even as Palestine was being buried, erased, and re-written by Israel. Passing on the names and telling the story to the younger generation is essential for the formation of the Palestinian identity, to be able to exist in spite of the eradication of their land and them as a people; the older generation feels that it acts as a custodian of a past that is still vivid in its memory.

In addition, Abu-Lughod, during the visit with her father to their ancestral land, as she looks at the hillsides that are now occupied by Israeli settlements, remarks how the land is being claimed by "modern green signs in Hebrew and English, or non-native evergreen forests to hide razed villages". Haim Bresheeth writes that the forests that were built in Israel to commemorate the victims of the European Holocaust, in reality, formed part of the active destruction and erasure of hundreds of Palestinian villages and towns taken over in 1948. Most of these villages were bulldozed in the 1950s and planted with trees so as to remove all signs of earlier habitation that would tie past occupants to the land. The trees, like those who planted them, are in the main foreign. The trees were firs of European origin, not native to Palestine; they covered up the evidence of an earlier Mediterranean ground cover.

In The Olive Grove, when Aziz who was the manager of Hamzi’s lands informs the latter when he first meets him in Lebanon after fleeing the Israeli aggression that all his olive trees have been destroyed and uprooted by Zionist bulldozers, Hamzi remarks as he sobs, “It seems they want no sign anyone ever lived there.” Incidentally, Kamel was more upset over the destruction of the olive groves than the fact that three Jewish families were bulldozed in the 1950s and planted with trees so as to remove all signs of earlier habitation that would tie past occupants to the land. The trees, like those who planted them, are in the main foreign. The trees were firs of European origin, not native to Palestine; they covered up the evidence of an earlier Mediterranean ground cover.

Kamel who cannot understand why the olive groves were not spared or why his earlier prayer of asking God to spare them was not answered.

The relationship between the olive tree and the Palestinian is very intimate and symbolic. The tree’s longevity and healing properties of its oil symbolize eternity. Its products provide sustenance. The olive picking season was an activity in which the whole village partook. Towards the end of the novel, young Hamzi, a refugee in Lebanon, recollects the hunting trip their father, Kamel, took him and his brother Riad on. On that trip, Kamel showed Riad the olive grove he had planted for him as a baby, believing that in this way no one will be able to take away their land. Earlier in the novel, Kamel told his sons that olives are part of his soul, and their sturdy roots remind him of his family’s own roots in the land. Juliane Hammer notes that trees “especially olive... symbolize the rootedness of the Palestinians in their homeland ... [and that Palestinian literature often showed] the Palestinian himself as a tree, rooted in the soil, having a long history, and unwilling to give up his homeland.” The uprooting of the olive trees for the rural Palestinian society signifies the loss of the homeland and the being.

The right to tell their story helps at confronting the melancholy of loss and ultimately grieving that loss; albeit this came much later. Bresheeth writes, “Power is not only exercised over the land and its people, it also controls the story, its point of view, and the meta-narrative of truth and memory.” Bresheeth adds that the “narrative of Palestine in the cultural arena carved by Zionism is, first and foremost, a story of erasure, denial, and active silencing by historians and intellectuals.” In The Olive Grove, Hamzi has been silenced for fifty years. It is when he arrives with his daughter in Palestine/Israel, and upon her insistence, that he begins to tell her the story of his family. Ruba says that the only part of the story that she knows is that she is a Palestinian “born far outside Palestine” and that life in Palestine was wonderful and the fruit was delicious. Hamzi also realizes that it is essential to pass on the history of his family to his daughter, even though he realizes that this visit will change her forever, in order to remove the vacuous meaning of the word Palestine, the abstract,
generic, and utopian description of pre-1948 land, which is in effect repossessing through renaming. Memories recalled of Palestine have tended to be ones of the fruits and the beauty of the land but not of actual people living on these lands. The link to the physical land is somehow more concrete than the once lived lives of the people, as these lives have been abruptly interrupted. The geography stays in spite of the place being stripped of its original citizens. Therefore, Palestinians' identity tends to be with the physical concreteness of the land they once dwelled in rather than with the lives and livelihood of the people who once part of this land, as the latter evaporated and were erased unexpectedly. However, as the painful events continue to unfold, Palestinians have been for the most part unable to handle the continuous trauma in order to be able to narrate their stories. Nurith Gertz and George Khleifi state that “The trauma brings back to life not only the traces of the horrible event but also the object that was lost in this event”.

It is worth noting that the written recollections of the previous lives in pre-1948 Palestine only started to appear in the post-1980s and 1990s era. The “village memorial books” make up for apt examples—these books were mostly written by Palestinian refugees in Gaza, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and the West Bank. Hammer, who has conducted extensive research of Palestinians born in exile, remarked that the images of Palestine that she encountered centered around “stories of the sweetest grapes and figs, the most beautiful orange and lemon trees, the amazing seashores...” This is namely due to the makeup of the Palestinian society prior 1948. Said thus describes the Palestinian society at the end of the 19th century, which was predominantly agrarian:

A significant segment of Arab Palestinian history has been made up of peasant farming and agricultural life. Through the nineteenth century rural settlement accounted for at least 65 percent of Palestine. Pastoral and rural forms of existence dominate in [the Palestinian] society. 45

It is not surprising that the physical and now symbolic link to the land dominates Palestinian narratives. The relation with the land is an essential component of the Palestinian’s identity; hence, the destruction of the land not only symbolizes the destruction of an agrarian society but also of the human being. According to Said, once uprooted from the land, living in exile becomes “a series of portraits without names, without contexts”. On the other hand, Tamari argues that the Palestinian narratives in exile were namely recollections of a town or village. He writes that there was:

... an overriding sense of localism. What happened then is seen as having happened to this town or village in isolation from the onslaught that affected Palestine as a whole. While the narrators recognize that the Nakba happened across the country, this is not reflected in the protocols of narration—nor in the stories retold.

One likely explanation for this overriding sense of localism is the inability of the Palestinians to grasp the enormity of the events that were unfolding at the time. They never thought that the erasure of their land could be that simple. Up to his last day, Kamel continued to hope that a return to the homeland will be possible, even though on occasions he questioned his decision to flee from the violence in order to protect his family. The sense of localism is also evident in the story that Hamzi is narrating to Ruba; his association with Palestine is very much linked with his hometown of Akka and the agricultural land his family owned in the nearby villages; it also defined who they were. This recollection is understandable as agriculture and land formed a large part of the identity of the Palestinian. In her study of Palestinian Memorial Books, Rochelle Davis notes that these works not only revealed “a discourse of the glorification of the peasant life, of living closely attached to the land”, but also memories of a pre-destruction utopia, which eventually shaped a nationalist discourse. In some respects, memories of these idealized pastoral lives are directly linked to the current Palestinian identity. The need for a pre-1948 idyllic identity to be continually relived through the stories that the refugees or the exiled keep on telling themselves is essentially holding onto a presence that was and is attempting to continue to be. Davis adds, “understanding how Palestinians represent pre-1948 spaces and places relates directly to the identities that Palestinians are

45 Rohan, The Olive Grove, 146.
48 Davis, “Mapping the Past, Re-Creating the Homeland”, 55.
49 Hammer, Palestinians born in exile, 50.
actively creating in the present”55. Davis believes that this “geographic
nostalgia” is namely due to three reasons:

... first, the physical destruction of the majority of the villages that these
people came from makes them nostalgic for a lost place; second, the
process in 1948 that turned peasant populations into landless refugees
makes them associate the land with a life before catastrophic change; and
third, the fact that these refugees now work in business and civil service
jobs and not as peasants [or land owners] intensifies their idealization of
what they no longer have.56

This denial of the loss of the homeland and the false hope of return to
Palestine accompanies Kamel till the day he dies. In a letter that Riad
sends Hamzi, who has taken up a job in Bahrain to help support the family,
he describes his father’s final days: “Baba talks only now of going home,
as if our return were imminent. For a man only fifty-three, he looks very
old. Sometimes it seems his soul has died”57. Even though Kamel realizes
the futility of their wait, he refuses to confront the reality that they will
never be able to go back. When Hamzi tells him that the United Nations'
resolution will never be enforced and that:

Baba, they have brought hundreds of thousands of Jews to Israel since we
left, and there’s no end in sight. They have overtaken our land, our
businesses and our homes ... Each day of hard reality diminishes our
dream of return a little bit more. You know that in the first months after we
left they demolished hundreds of Arab villages and built Jewish settlements
in their stead ... There is no home for anyone to return to! Our home is
gone! WE ARE NEVER GOING BACK!58

Kamel’s reaction was to push “his body into the seat of his wheelchair
though escaping physical blows rather than the ugly verbal barrage” as he
asks his son never to utter these words to him again, “Never, ever speak
such nauseating lies to me again”59.

Gertz and Khleifi argue that the Palestinians’ narrative is constructed
around three pivotal points, “the memory of a lost paradise, lamentation of
the present, and a portrayal of the anticipated return”60. Kamel realizes that
the paradise is lost forever, and the harsh reality of living life as a refugee

makes this loss much harder to bear. His only hope of survival is the
dream that one day they will return. The only return that is possible is
through the story he has chosen to pass on to his son, Hamzi, who in turn
is passing it on to his daughter, Ruba, and is ultimately recorded by Rohan.
It is a second generation return to the place in which parents or
grandparents lived61. But given the expulsion of 1948, the old family
house is rendered a place of painful memory and a symbol of what was
lost62. Hamzi describes his feelings as he and Ruba stand outside his
family home: “I am filled with a mixture of fear, anger and melancholy as
I knock on the wooden door, and in any case am not prepared for the
barrage of Hebrew when the front door opens”63. Hamzi learns that his
family house has been turned into a Polish synagogue and being gentiles
he and his daughter Ruba are denied entry64. The novel ends with Ruba
and him looking at the ten parcels of land on which his father had planned
to plant an olive grove for him, but he tells us that nothing has been built
on them nor has anything been planted, “[t]hey lay completely barren”;
and according to Rogers the barren grove dismantles the “Israeli myth of
‘greening the desert’”65. The bareness of the land adds to the anguish
within Hamzi as he realizes that his children would also suffer the “pain of
statelessness. The pain of not belonging anywhere”66. It also signifies the
loss of the land.

Loss as historical pain

In his novel, I Was Born There, I Was Born Here, Barghouti argues that
in long conflicts the pain of dispossession and loss becomes a historical
one. It is a pain that due to its repetitive nature refuses to go away. In this
novel, the narrator is both the protagonist and the author. Barghouti returns
to Palestine/Israel in 1996 in his first novel I Saw Ramallah after being
exiled in 1967 when Israel occupied the West Bank, and returns in 1998 in
I Was Born There. The purpose of his second visit is namely to introduce
his son Tamim to his homeland, to pass on the story that needs to be told
and to show him literally where he was born. Invariably in the novel there

63 Rohan, The Olive Grove, 423.
64 Rohan, The Olive Grove, 423.
65 Rohan, The Olive Grove, 425 and Lynn Rogers, “In The Olive Grove, a
is a comparison of the homeland that he once knew and the reality that he encounters, as when he describes the Ramallah of his time and the one he will be showing Tamim. Time is not the only factor that has caused this change. The people and places he encounters are mostly marred by occupation and the absurd situation the Palestinians inside historic Palestine have survived under. Barghouti is, in essence, lamenting the loss of a homeland and a way of life. He is vocal in his criticism of the events that have shaped his people under occupation. The novel opens with a journey in a shared taxi with other passengers as the taxi driver attempts to wade through puddles, mud, ditches trying to avoid various Israeli checkpoints on his way towards the Jordanian border; Barghouti remarks that to “the inhabitants of these same cities and villages, who haven’t been distanced by successive exiles – everything has become food for jokes”.

He later remarks how little achievements, such as the time when the taxi is back on asphalt or buying a loaf of bread, become great joys of celebration. On this trip to Jordan armed with the Israeli permit that Barghouti and his son visit Jordan, the West Bank of the River Jordan, historical Palestine from Jordan, a bridge that “is a symbol of discrimination, distance, [and] disunion”.

Barghouti adds that the term West Bank is in itself a pollution of language:

West Bank. West of what? Bank of what? The reference here is to the River Jordan, the west bank of the River Jordan, not to historical Palestine. If the reference were to Palestine they would have used the term eastern parts of Palestine. The west bank of the river is a geographical location not a country, not a homeland.

The entrance to Palestine or more precisely the West Bank of the River Jordan he tells us is both a real and a symbolic hell. But as with Ruba, everything that Tamim will witness from the moment he crosses that bridge will impact his life forever. Tamim’s knowledge of Palestine is one that has been formed through the stories told by his family and via the media. His father resents that no one hears of Palestinians unless they are being “bombed by F-16 missiles or under the rubble of houses”;

to the homeland stronger. Barghouti adds that the stateless Palestinian suffers endless “Kafkaesque interrogations before being granted an entry visa to any place in the world … The Palestinian is forbidden to enter his own country by land, sea, or air, even in a coffin”, while the “soldier of the Occupation stands on a piece of land he has confiscated and calls it ‘here’ and I, its owner, exiled in a distant country, have to call it ‘there’”.

Identity – who we are, where we come from, what we are – is difficult to maintain in exile. Most other people take their identity for granted. Not the Palestinian, who is required to show proofs of identity more or less constantly … Such as it is, our existence is linked negatively to eulogies about Israel’s democracy, achievements … We are ‘other’, and opposite, a flaw in the geometry of resettlement and exodus. Silence and discretion veil the hurt, slow the body searches, soothe the sting of loss.

Barghouti’s entrance to Palestine is a counter-narrative to the story that has been long propagated about the Palestinian. The author and his son enter through the bridge that separates the West Bank from the East Bank of the Jordan River, historical Palestine from Jordan, a bridge that “is a symbol of discrimination, distance, [and] disunion”. Barghouti adds that

The destruction of the olive tree is in part the destruction of that essential part of the Palestinian’s story. To those Palestinians who stayed under occupation it was their link to the land while for those who are in exile it is what formed their collective memory, an essential component of the Palestinian narrative, a point I discussed in depth earlier in the paper. Barghouti says that his friends tell him “that the world is wider and more beautiful than [their] villages’ and [their] families’, but it is the Palestinians’ inability to return, tell their stories or hold on to their identities and having been forced into exile is what makes the attachment

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68 Barghouti, I was Born There, 3.
69 Barghouti, I was Born There, 21.
70 Barghouti, I was Born There, 10.
add that the Palestinians have not chosen to be just corpses. On the other hand, Abu Lughod and Sa’di, write:

Excluded from history as the remnant of a nation whose right to independence, statehood, and even existence was denied, Palestinian refugees were seen, at best, as a humanitarian case, deserving what they often experienced as the demeaning support of UN agencies.

Barghouti is adamant that the history of the Palestinians as a people is recorded, with their simple sorrows and desires. Allowing Tamim to experience his homeland first-hand is his way that the story will continue to be told. A few pages later, Barghouti writes:

We have to break the state of denial with which the world confronts us. We shall tell the tale the way it has to be told ... recount our little stories ... We shall retell history as a history of our fears, our anxieties, our patience ... A history of all the journeys we have made ... A history of the obstinacy of our bodies and our souls ... and here I am, writing it.

Barghouti is not only documenting the history through his writing but also tries to relive the history through his son, retracing the steps he and his own father took earlier through the Via Dolorosa: "It amazes me that I am now walking in the city as a father, when half a century before I walked in it as a son, and that now my son walks beside me." He is at once reliving his own history and imparting the story onto his son. A few pages later father and son stand in front of the Dome of the Rock feeling like strangers even though they are its rightful owners. The father reflects in a short poem:

This is the Dome of the Rock.
Stand, stranger, in its shadows.
Take it in with all your senses.
Think of the fact that today it is you who is the stranger.

To diminish part of this feeling of estrangement, they decide not to take photos so as not to be mistaken for tourists.

Writing the story and passing on the story is Barghouti’s way at giving the Palestinians a voice. Later in the novel and during a visit in which he accompanies an international writers’ delegation to al-Am’ari refugee camp in the West Bank, he reflects:

The cruelest degree of exile is invisibility, being forbidden to tell one’s story for oneself. We, the Palestinian people, are narrated by our enemies, in keeping with their presence and our absence. They label us as it suits them ... In this sense, the entire Palestinian people is exiled through the absence of the story.

This exile has rendered the Palestinians absent. This anguish stemming from the absence of being is reiterated by Said when he questions: "Do we exist? What proof do we have? ... When did we become 'a people'? When did we stop being one?" In an article, Barghouti stresses the contradiction that is inherent in being a Palestinian:

For decades, Palestine has been pushed to the edge of history, the edge of hope and the edge of despair, present and absent, reachable and unreachable, fearful and afraid and ragged into zones A and B and C. etc. This Palestine is my identity, this Palestine is the absence of my identity; my imposed memory and my imposed oblivion.

This absence of being compels Barghouti to write his story, even though the story would probably survive the page numbers of the novel. In an interview with Stuart Reigluth following his first novel, Barghouti remarks:

We are not seen. Now at least there is one person who is seen. The life of a Palestinian, from A to Z, is in the limelight for 184 pages and then he’s seen. He occupies the stage for a while. For those reading this book, I occupy the stage – or my people, or victims of the Israeli occupation are occupying the stage. It seems this was useful, that one has a voice.

However, this one voice, which lives through the pages of his novels, is also the voice that will live through Tamim. In the novel, Tamim wants to know exactly where his father was born, and standing in one of the rooms in their family home in Deir Ghassanah, he can tell his son that he

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78 Barghouti, I was Born There, 45.
80 Barghouti, I was Born There, 58, 59, 60.
81 Barghouti, I was Born There, 70.
82 Barghouti, I was Born There, 72.
83 Barghouti, I was Born There, 73.
84 Said, After the Last Sky, 34.
85 Mourid Barghouti, “Verbicide”.
was born here. And standing in this room, Barghouti remembers his grandfather “entirely alone, with his stick carved from an oak tree... dancing with the reflection of his shadow on this wall opposite the oil lamp” upon hearing good news of an engagement.

**Conclusion**

Palestinians have managed to survive through their collective memories of a nation that has ceased to exist as they had once known it and from which they have been exiled. When Tamim was asked to help the 90-year-old Abu Hassan to the mosque, the old man enquired whose son he was, and upon hearing the name, he told Tamim that he used to know his grandfather’s grandfather. The old man was still able to recite Tamim’s great grandfather’s poem from memory; these memories are kept alive through oral tradition of handing down stories from one generation to the next. Tamim, who like his father is a poet, can only be a true poet if he recites his verse amongst his people and on his ancestral land. In Deir Ghassaneh, the poet is born here.

Both Barghouti and Moghrabi (albeit through Rohan) have chosen to tell their stories, and provide a counter narrative to the story that is being told by another. Their novels are attempts at repossessing an identity and an acknowledgement of an existence in lieu of at least sixty years. Moreover, their stories are not only carried by their children but also by the readers of their novels. The late Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish wrote:

> Who am I? This is a question that others ask, but has no answer. I am my language, I am an ode, two odes, ten. This is my language. I am my language. I am words’ writ: Be! Be my body.

Words are all that is left to grieve the loss – to elude getting lost in the loss.

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88 Barghouti, I was Born There, 89.
89 Barghouti, I was Born There, 91.
90 Barghouti, I was Born There, 94-5.
91 Barghouti, I was Born There, 104.

**References**


This article claims that Israeli discourse in general, and the discourse of military loss and bereavement in particular, has undergone what will be referred to as a process of “Victimological Militarism”, i.e., on the one hand, the discourse has become one that emphasizes the victim over the hero, trauma over heroics, those who pay the price of nationalism over those who promote it. On the other hand, the right to socially express this trauma is reserved for those who were “victimized” in military circumstances. In other words, although there is room in the social and political discourse in Israel for the framing of military death as unnecessary, traumatic and unproductive – a death that forced the bereaved parents to become victims – yet the very same discourse which emphasizes victimization excludes an entire class of victims: those who lost loved ones in non-military circumstances. Even in an era in which the discourse of victimization and trauma are prominent, there is still a hierarchy of grief which places bereaved parents whose children were killed in the military above other grief classes. The transition from a discourse of heroism to a discourse of victimhood occurred alongside a reproduction of the social status of military symbols in Israel, i.e., reproduction of the militaristic dimension in Israeli culture. This paper will illustrate these cultural developments, as well as: