

# **Palestinian Diaspora goes global through**

## **American-Palestinian Prose**

**by**

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### **Introduction**

The year 1948 marks the beginning of *al-ghurba* (exile or diaspora) and *al-nakba* (disaster or calamity), words intensely resonant in the Palestinian lexicon. After this decisive date, one can affix “pre-” or “post-” as markers of an apocalyptic moment. In this cultural and political orbit, a new spatial world took shape. In 1948, through a combination of expulsion and flight, around 750,000 Palestinians became refugees in neighboring Arab countries. About 100,000 Palestinians remained in their homeland. And since then, “to be Palestinian is, in part by upbringing, in part by sensibility, to be a wanderer, an exile, a touch moon-mad, always a little different from others. Our name, which we acquired after 1948, was not so much a national title – we had had no nation – as an existential term. (Turki, 1994: 272)

For decades, the Palestinian experience in the Diaspora and “the narrative of their present actuality”- in Edward Said’s words- “which stems directly from the story of their existence in and displacement from Palestine, later Israel- that narrative is not [there].” Nonetheless, part of the struggle for self-determination by Palestinians has been to tell the truth about their experience as Palestinians across geographical barriers. Lisa Majaj, “On Writing and Return: Palestinian-American Reflections”— argues that return “is not simply going back: it is also to go forward; to create a new future from the fragments of a reclaimed past” (Majaj, 2001: 116)

Edward Said’s, and the other Palestinian intellectual figures’ seminal scholarly publications, formal public lectures, classroom teaching and political discourse have played a pivotal role in changing the way in which the Americans and others all over the world perceive the people of Palestine and the Palestinian Israeli conflict. However their publications in politics, history and economy of Palestine have influenced on the American political, intellectual and cultural elite.

The typical American doesn't get the opportunity to read the non-political story of the Palestinians and the Arab World, because it is rare and difficult to find. Arab American discourse usually comes in one packaged form: dry, statistically correct, dissertations on Politics that any career academic would love to read.

In order to steer the involvement of the American public and the new generation of the Arab Americans, it is necessary to narrate the collective past of the Palestinians using literary writing in which the Palestinian trauma is given a human face and sensibility.

Said's memoir *Out of Place*, Shaw Dallal's autobiographical novel *Scattered Like Seeds* and Ibrahim Fawal's novel *On the Hills of God*, among other memoirs and works of fiction give the Palestinians in the Diaspora, and in the United States in particular (the concern of this paper) the freedom to go beyond the confining thresholds of national torpor; The freedom to remember, to dream of a different reality, to deliver themselves into history's keeping. They are emblematic of a recent trend in Palestinian literature: writing rooted in diasporic countries but focused in theme and content on Palestine.

By exploring the themes of identity and return, they highlight ways in which contemporary Palestinian literature embodies the reality of today's Palestinian Diaspora. They typify the relationship of Palestinian exiles and their descendants with their diasporic countries (in this case the United States) and with Palestine. These relationships are crucial to the realities of the Palestinian Americans face in the twenty-first century; rendering the physical, or political, estrangement a personal "exile," or alternatively, expressing the communal trauma in the terms of an individual's internal existential conflict. Since Palestine as a nation-state is as yet unrealized, the name becomes a cipher for existential ruminations on the nature of both physical exile, and a more characteristically modernist personal "exile" in the world. (Salaita, 2003) This is part of a more general trend, in the years following on from another devastating Israeli military victory in 1967, to personalize the political, and clothe it in metaphor. "Strong affinities emerge between the fragmented individual typical of the Palestinian diaspora, and literary modernism, an aesthetic that, as a result, often becomes the preferred form for Palestinian writing about land and belonging." (Salaita, *ibid*)

Said's memoir *Out of Place* masterfully captures the heart and the soul of the Palestinian tragedy. It portrays the Palestinians not as victims, but as normal human beings who had and have lives, personal history and faces and names.

"Out of Place," is a memoir of youth, an intimate autobiography of life, family and friends from Said's birthplace in Jerusalem, schools in Cairo, and summers in the mountains above Beirut, to boarding school and college in the United States, revealing an unimaginable world of rich, colorful characters and exotic eastern landscapes. Underscoring all is the confusion of identity the young Said experienced as he came to terms with the dissonance of being an American citizen, a Christian and a Palestinian, and, ultimately, an outsider. Said has lived in a multi-cultural, multilingual environment since he was born. He doesn't remember which language he spoke first, English or Arabic. He says that "the two [languages] have always been together in my life, one resonating in the other sometimes ironically, sometimes nostalgically, most often each correcting, and commenting on, the other." (Said 1999: 4) Expressing his feeling towards his out of placeness, Said articulates:

I occasionally experience myself as a cluster of flowing currents. I prefer this to the idea of a solid self ... These currents ... at their best; they require no reconciling, no harmonizing. They are "off" and may be out of place, but at least they are always in motion. (Said, 1995: 251)

In reading Said's memoir, one finds the presence of political crises provoked by international events. He connects personal experience

with geopolitics and a critical attitude toward American foreign policy.

"Scattered like Seeds" is again an autobiographical novel. It explores the identity complexity of the Palestinians in the Diaspora by telling the story of Thafer Allam, a Palestinian American lawyer and nuclear physicist returning to the Middle East. He is married to the Irish American Mary Pat, and a father of four children. Thafer's assimilation to the American society is called into question after the Arab defeat in the 1967 war, when he must re-confront his identity as a Palestinian.

At the Allenby Bridge (the crossing borders between the occupied territories of the West bank and Jordan), Thafer is strip-searched and denied entry to the West Bank to visit his aged mother. This trip is conforms a turning point in Thafer's ideological transformation. He is gradually made to alter his philosophy to better suit the realities of the Arab world. Thafer resisted this politicization before finally capitulating to his new position as a Palestinian nationalist:

"What happened at the [Allenby] bridge changed you, and you know it.... It all began in Beirut, at the refugee camp.... Then those encounters with Suhaila, your countrywoman, awakened that slumbering passion hidden within you. But it was the humiliation at the bridge and your inability to see your mother that changed you forever" (Dallal, 1998: 213).

He remains confused, however, about both his identity and his role in the struggle. His children's struggles, on the other hand, are more emblematic of Palestinian American life than anything Thafer experiences. Consequently, their role in the novel indicates how the diaspora has transfigured Palestinians. It is not surprising that Colleen and Andrew, both in college, prefer to return to the United States

while Katherine and Sean, still teenagers, seek further fulfillment in the Middle East. They do not yet have enough invested in the United States to consider it a living necessity. (Salaita, *ibid*) More crucially, their actions signal a cultural schism between Palestinian immigrants to the United States and American-born Palestinians.

In *Scattered Like Seeds*, and *On the Hills of God, Land*, as in all Palestinian literature, becomes central. Dallal infuses Palestine into the figure of Suhaila, thus representing her with a metaphorical presence. Thafer's renewed dedication to Palestine is codified by his relationship with Suhaila, a Palestinian working for OAPEC. The following scene illustrates how this awareness becomes actualized:

[Thafer] can't go to sleep. It is as though he is embracing his homeland. Hearing [Suhaila] breathe, he feels comforted and protected by her presence. Her breasts remind him of the gentle hills of his homeland, her smooth soft skin of its plants, and her long, light brown hair of the rays of its sun. (Dallal, *ibid*: 190).

The symbolic merger of the body with the landscape has long been a technique of male Palestinian authors. Women's bodies have often been invoked by writers to represent the land from which the Palestinians are exiled assuming a forbidden quality that only increases their desire to return; and the land which encapsulates the pride and honor of Palestinians, who must suffer from afar while it is penetrated by a foreign entity. (Harcourt, 1999)

Fawal, with more subtlety, does the same with Salwa in his novel *On the Hills of God*. Yousif has been in love with her since he was a child, but the strictures of Arab society do not allow them to pursue a romantic relationship. Once the pursuit of Salwa becomes taboo, she is

immediately transformed into a symbolic icon of the statehood struggle. When her father accepts an engagement offer from hotel manager Adel Farhat, Salwa becomes even more taboo and unattainable, prompting Yousif to pursue her with increased vigor.

Fawal's choice of metaphor here is complex. If Salwa represents the threatened land for which the Palestinians yearn, then Adel Farhat is the alien presence intruding on the physical object of their love. Yousif fights furiously to break the engagement, ultimately succeeding and marrying Salwa near the close of the novel. The emotional attachment of Palestinians with their land is thus crystallized. The marriage indicates that Palestine and its people will always be symbolically united.

Fawal's novel takes us to Palestine during the final year of the British Mandate, which Fawal call "Palestine's last summer of happiness." (Fawal, 1998: 9)

Unlike Dallal's *Scattered Like Seeds*, Fawal avoids explicit engagement with Arab American themes by fashioning an historical novel focused solely on Palestinians. As a result, *On the Hills of God* complements *Scattered Like Seeds* in a critical framework; both cover different but equally important issues while remaining confined to the same point of departure, Palestine.

The 1948 War provides *On the Hills of God* with its primary theme. Much of the early plot follows the endeavors of Yousif, a Christian, and his two best friends, Isaac Sha'lan, a Jew, and Amin, a Muslim. Fawal employs this tripartite religious dynamic in order to mirror the demographics of Mandatory Palestine and, more importantly, to depict a community that at the time privileged national culture over religious lines.

In *On the Hills of God*, Zionism is not an alien Jewish force that disrupted and then destroyed the lives of Palestinians; rather, it is an alien European force that disrupted and then destroyed the lives of Middle Easterners, Palestinian Jews included. The Safis, Sha'lans, and other residents of Ardallah may be the actors in the text, but Zionism is the story. (Salaita, *ibid*)

The novel ends with the dispersal of the residents of Ardallah. Yousif and his mother, evicted from their year-old house, join the human caravan into Transjordan. On the way, he and Salwa are separated. He vows to find her, and in so doing, it is implied, return to Palestine. Isaac appears later as a Zionist spy and land surveyor. His contingent is captured in Ardallah by armed fighters and he is murdered. Yousif, watching the death of his best friend, reinforces his dedication to diplomacy over warfare. Countering this ethic is his cousin, Basim who believes in the armed struggle for liberation and retention of identity. Fawal never manages to find a resolution to these opposed philosophies. Instead, he allows the story to conclude with both Basim and Yousif clinging to their different styles of resistance. The conflict between nonviolent action and armed struggle is perhaps the most pronounced development in the text.

Fawal's reduction of the novel's setting to a solely Palestinian framework denotes that "the historical nature of the novel coupled with its American publication and, presumably, American readership shows that the cultural dynamics of Palestinian society have now taken root in the transit countries. (Michael, 1999: 123)

## **Conclusion**

For more than sixty years, since the date of al-nakba, the Palestinian question lost the common understanding of the average Americans and denied the human face of the agonies of the Palestinians inside the Palestinian occupied territories and in the Diaspora due to the fact that the Palestinian question was constantly addressed in a rigid, dry and detached political discourse and elitist academic research.

Recently, a number of Anglophone and Palestinian American writers have recognized the pivotal role of memoirs and novels in giving the Palestinian political question a soul and spirit. The American Palestinian writers have utilized the tools and aesthetics of literature to narrate directly the experience of displacement Palestinians in the diaspora share across geographical borders and linguistic barriers. A recurrent theme among all these works shows how the diasporic communities share the same identity as Palestinians despite the lapse of sixty years and the different geographical landscape.

Palestinians in the diaspora identify and collectively remember in their narratives the lost home. Looking at their artistic production, one major element that categorizes their works is the symbols used to address their collective identity as Palestinians.

The retention of a Palestinian identity in the United States is a marker of the diaspora; the literature produced under its guise, then, embodies the ambivalent modern Palestinian condition. Diasporic writing adopts American poetics and explores the complexities of America's cultural landscape, but Palestine simultaneously remains the pivotal source of inspiration. Such textual evolution is the typical

outcome of displacement. The emphasis on Palestine, though, is a result of revived political awareness. Palestine is therefore in constant transit, and has been carried to all areas of the world where its people have taken up residence.

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