Remembering Home: Palestine from a Distance

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the memories of a woman who was displaced and dispossessed of her home. Writing in retrospect of her childhood in Palestine, Ibtisam Barakat, in her memoir Tasting the Sky: A Palestinian Childhood, depicts with humor and resilience the love, attachment, struggle, and fear of the motherland she has left behind and of the new homeland she now inhabits. Between forgetting and remembering, Barakat's epistaloric narrative shows the conflict of a diasporic writer reconciling her past and her present. By investigating her notions of home, we draw conclusions on the memories and political concerns she evokes and how these recollections form her identity as a Muslim who is conscious of her roots.

Keywords: Home; forgetting and remembering; epistaloric narrative; Muslim woman

INTRODUCTION

To lose a home for any reason is a trauma that tends to leave one scarred for life. The dispossessed has to deal with the loss at the time it happened, and the consequences of the loss persist in many ways and forms. For many, that memory of the ordeal haunts even after relocation and a new life. In *Tasting the Sky* (2007), Ibtisam Barakat narrates her experience as a young girl who was subjected to the tribulations of having her life caught in the ravages of war. Her narrative exposes the memories of one who is displaced and dispossessed of everything that is familiar to her. As a refugee living on the fringes of Palestine, she is caught between forgetting and remembering her home; while her mother's advice is to forget, she is however unable to disregard the events that have taken place. Her relocation in the United States does not impede her recollections of what she has left behind. Her epistaloric narrative illustrates the conflict of the diasporic writer trying to reconcile both her past and her present.

This paper explores Barakat's memories of being displaced and dispossessed of her home in Palestine. We unravel her conflicts in reconciling her past in Ramallah and the present she now experiences in the United States. The way each individual perceives "home" is distinct, and to give it a single definition is, to say the least, problematic. In their paper "Notions of home for diasporic Muslim women writers," Ruzy Suliza Hashim and Nor

Faridah Abdul Manaf (2009) hinge on the concepts of "memory" and "diaspora" to address the issues of identity and home:

> Diasporic writers are those people who no longer reside in their motherlands but many of them still return to their respective homelands in their writings. Azar Nafisi, an exiled Iranian who now lives in the land of the Statue of Liberty, returns to Iran in her creative work, *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. Mohja Kahf's fiction has several notions of home – home of the protagonist's parents, home of all Muslims, Mecca, and the childhood home that the protagonist returns to in the story. By comparing these different settings of home and how they are remembered in the tropes of the writers' narratives, we hope to bring into focus the question of "home" because it is a place that they have physically left, voluntarily or otherwise, and yet it is also a place they mentally return to in their creative work. This contrast of several "homes" – the real home as remembered, and the physical one which they now inhabit, exhibits notions of the use of memory for the exiled writers. In remembering their respective homelands, the writers seem to view the remembered events from the outside, from the point of view of external observers. (545-546)

By writing her memoir, Barakat exploits the medium to address issues that prevail among the Palestinian people, such as loss and exile. Her experience mirrors those of her people. In another paper, "A brown skin writer as an imperialistic native informer: Remembering the homeland in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*", Jelodar, Noraini Md. Yusof and Mahmoodi (2011) discuss the use of the memoir by writers from the Middle East:

> Memoir is a recently acquired tool of expression in the Middle East, especially in Iran. These memoirs gained prestige and became well-known worldwide only after the revolution, indicating that it is a political and ideological phenomenon. Memoirs became a tool for the authors to express their ideology and political thoughts. Darznik (2008) asserts that these diasporic women have been making a literature engaged mostly with topics such as immigration, exile, religious fundamentalism and women's right. These memoirs, which were written in a diasporic environment, have adopted Western orientalism (Saljoughi 2008). Edward Said in his *Orientalism* (1978) theorized orientalism as a discourse by the west of the Other. However, these memoirists present and represent their own homeland from a western perspective. (34)

Barakat's memoir was published in 2007, the year that marks the fortieth anniversary of the Six-Day War. The choice of the date is certainly not a coincidence; it is indeed an expression of her ideology and political thoughts. Writing from the outside, she hinges on her memory of the past in order to return home in Palestine. She is certain of her agenda. In the historical note that precedes the memoir, Barakat states categorically:

> To learn more about the Middle East, and to deepen our understanding of both Palestians and Israelis, it helps to share stories. Mine is one of many. Together, these stories can show us how all people are interdependent and have the same basic needs. Together, these stories may inspire us to join hearts and minds so that, with our collective wisdom, a solution for this conflict – and many other – is possible. (x)

Central to our discussion on the concept of home is what Rushdie (1991) refers to as the "imaginary homelands", the spaces that are constructs of the writer's creative and re-creative power of "imagination". Barakat's narrative, which is written in two letters, is a construct of past events. The creative and re-creative imagination of her home shares similarities with autobiographical memories that according to Williams, Conway and Cohen are those "episodes [which are] recollected from an individual's life" (2008: 22). They state

that personal experiences are usually stored with no conscious intention to memorise them. These experiences also give rise to four dimensions of memory: (a) autobiographical memories may consist of noetic memory which is factual in nature and contrasts with autonoetic memory which is experiential; (b) memories are copies or reconstructions of the original event; (c) memories may be specific or generic or it could also be one that is representative of a series of similar events which Neisser (1986) calls repisodic; and lastly, (d) memories may be represented from an observer perspective or from a field perspective.

This fourth dimension of memory is one that is closest to the way Barakat retrieves her memories of the past. Nigro and Neisser (1983) reveal:

> ...when people examine their own memories some were remembered from the original view-point of the experience (the field perspective), but a larger number of memories seemed like viewing the event from the outside, from the point of view of an external observer. These "observer memories cannot be copies of the original perception and must have been reconstructed". (23)

As the writer, Barakat recounts her personal experiences in retrospect as an adult. Indeed, much time and distance have coated that past. In writing her story, she becomes the outsider looking back; like an external observer she has to reconstruct and re-imagine those past episodes as she is no longer the child who lived through those harrowing days. She is now the adult whose life has been transformed by the sequence as well as consequences of events. In this paper, we, therefore, investigate Barakat's recollections of that place she once called home. Our analysis draws conclusions about the memories and political concerns evoked in the narrative as well as how her reminiscence forms her identity as a Muslim woman who, while residing outside of her homeland, is nonetheless conscious of her roots.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND THE NOVEL

Palestine is at the heart of Barakat's narrative. The divergence in terminology of the two states – Palestine and Israel – is fundamental to the accelerating conflicts that have triggered terror and bloodshed on both sides. Calling the state Palestine or Israel is dependent on the ideological perspective from which one accords the land. According to Mohsen Mohammad Saleh (2001: 1-2):

> The name "Palestine" is designated to the south western part of the countries of *al Sham* (i.e. the greater Syria: Syria, Jordan, Palestine and Lebanon)...Palestine has a special place in the heart of every Muslim...it contains the Al-Aqsa Mosque, the first *Qibla* or direction of Muslim prayer, and the third most sacred mosque in Islam. It is also the land of *Al-Israa*...The land of Palestine is also holy among the Jews and Christians. The Jews regard it as their promised land, the focal point of their history and the resting place of their Prophets. The centres of their holy sites are in Jerusalem and Hebron. The Christians consider it the cradle of their religion, as Jesus (as) was born there...there great centres of their religion are in Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Nazareth.

This convergence of the three biggest religions in the world in this one small space of land mass has led to an-ongoing clash of religion, politics, and culture. The scramble for this land has continued from antiquity to the present day.

Barakat's story is set in an area known to the world as the West Bank. In 1948, while Europe was picking up the pieces from the devastations of World War II, the Middle East was reeling from the establishment of the State of Israel on land that for centuries the Palestinians had called home. This triggered altercations between Israel and the Arab

countries as the new state appropriated land that had been populated for the most part by Palestinian Arabs and forced them to relocate. Palestine was erased on the world map, and Israel emerged to gain control in the region; at the time only the West Bank, the Gaza Strip and East Jerusalem were still under Arab administration. However, in 1967, another explosive encounter, the Six-Day War, occurred in the region. The war was quickly ended but the outcome led to further discord in the region. Israeli forces began to occupy the West Bank and the Gaza Strip; they took over East Jerusalem too. According to Samera Esmeir (2009), the Palestinians were left with two options as a consequence of the Six-Day War:

> There are at least two lessons to be gleaned from the war on Gaza. The first is to consider how both war-making and unilateral ceasefires constitute strategies for the extension of Israel's power over the Palestinian population in Gaza, as well as for the transformation of that population. Israel unilaterally demands peaceful coexistence with the Palestinians who must resign themselves to imprisonment, or otherwise threatens them with—and practices—the destruction of their lives. The Palestinians have two "choices" in the Israeli script: obedience or annihilation. Obedience is not an alternative to destruction, but another way that a population can be deadened within life. It entails remaking the Palestinians of Gaza into a needy recipient of humanitarian aid, thus docile and dependent. Worse, this humanitarian aid is more often denied than granted. (http://www.merip.org/newspaper_opeds/oped012209)

The two choices for the Palestinians are bleak. Their story is indeed wrought with war and repression, and this is the region that forms the setting of the narrative in the memoir. The home that once belonged to Ibtisam Barakat was located in Ramallah in the West Bank.

Barakat's memories illustrate the most striking feature of the memoir genre, namely its obsession with the personal and collective past. Integrated into her life story are the shared experiences of her people, the Palestinians. In her historical note preceding the narrative, the writer claims the story is "set within the framework of that war and the Israeli occupation that followed" (ix). The narrative is divided into three parts – the first, *A Letter to No One*, is set in 1981 and begins the memory of the war. The second part, *The Postal Box of Memory*, commences on the first day of the war in 1967 and extends to 1971. The third, A *Letter to Everyone* returns to 1981. Memory is central to her story telling. Her memory is experiential; this allows her to "relive the experience with associated sensory imagery and emotions" (Williams, Conway and Cohen 2008: 23). In her memoir, Barakat unfolds her narrative in retrospect; she returns to her Self as a three-year old having to live through the period of turmoil. Ibtisam, the "I" of her narrative, gives Barakat, the adult-author, agency as she is a participant in all the actions; she is witness to all said events and as such, all she says is to be regarded as truth. As the adult writing about her childhood, she has to reconstruct those past experiences into her narrative.

The relationship between what is now the State of Israel and what was then Palestine is an ancient one. As the writer, Barakat perceives the Arab and Jew as no strangers to each other, accepting them as siblings who share many commonalities of which one is language. She dedicates a poem to echo the bond shared by the two languages:

> *To Alef, the letter / that begins the alphabets / of both Arabic and Hebrew– / two Semitic languages, / sisters for centuries. / may we find the language / that takes us / to the only home there is– / one another's hearts.* (v)

This poem indicates that the two peoples may share a common ancestry and language, yet misgivings and lack of communication have impeded any sense of shared belonging. In the story, *Alef* is personified and holds a crucial place in young Ibtisam's heart.

REMEMBERING: NOTIONS OF HOME

Ibtisam's claim to her home is intricately tied to her emotional bonds with it; it is the sense of recognition she has for the place, the area surrounding it and all the objects connected to it:

> My heart knew this was my true home. Unlike the many places we had lived in since the war changed our lives, this was the place I loved. I knew the road to it, and where the road led to beyond it. The skin of my bare feet recognized the skin of the red earth with all its wrinkles....And I liked to walk around the miniature pyramid-like mounds of fresh earth dug out by the moles. I knew the weak-sighted moles were there even if I had never seen them...Flapping my arms to let the breeze tickle me, for a moment I felt free, like a bird, tasting the sky. All here was mine, and felt like home to me. Sitting silently, I knew for sure that I did not want to leave this place ever again, no matter what Mother decided. (92)

These memories of Ibtisam's emotional ties to her old home are actually reconstructions of the original. While some memories are copies "because they are vivid and contain a considerable amount of irrelevant detail", Ibtisam's memories are not raw experiences as they "incorporate the interpretations that are made on hindsight, which suggests they are reconstructed" (Williams, Conway and Cohen 2008: 22). In the above excerpt, her recollection is clearly as an adult, as she is able to make references to having lived in the house as well as having lived in many places after the war. The Ibtisam-child and Ibtisam-adult come together in the narrative. Her reconstructed memory of the home is too complex for a child to make. The "home" referred to is not merely the house; it is also the red earth upon which the building is built. The child will imagine the house, but the adult also imagines land and its symbiotic relationship to the concept of home.

Home for Ibtisam is refuge. The protection she has known in the house in Ramallah eludes her when the Israeli attacks begin. She imagines the loss of her safe haven to that of the dogs:

> The packs retreated, but the injured dogs were left crying in voices that grew smaller and smaller until they resembled the whimpers of infants. Tears soaked my face. I knew that they were dying and that they had come to our door only because, like us, they were seeking refuge. But instead of understanding, we shot at them, the way the warplanes shot at us. (39)

She whimpers like the dogs in fear and pain. Sadly, she recognises that it is the lack of understanding between two groups that causes more pain and even death. For a child of three, to reach this understanding of life under dire circumstances is remarkable, if not barely possible. Barakat's narrative in retrospect slips when the voice of the adult merges with the three-year old Self.

Home is clearly where Ibtisam feels alive and safe. The house in Ramallah is at the core of her whole being, her true home. This is where she feels alive; this is where she feels safe. The house is surrounded by Israeli soldiers during the day, yet she can feel a sense of freedom even though she is ironically closeted inside. She knows she does not want to leave this home again, contrary to the wishes of her mother, but as a child she does not make the decisions. Thus, to be bound to this place means she is one with it. Wrenched from it violently, and at such a tender age, she is undoubtedly traumatized by the experience. She has to desert the only home she has known when war erupts in the region. Nadje Al-Ali and Nicola Pratt (2009) describe the Middle East as such:

> For many people in Europe and North America, the Middle East represents an area of danger and disorder – popularly characterized as a site of wars, poverty, despotic governments and an absence of women's rights. It is seen as a source of migrants and violent extremist groups and, consequently, as a threat to the security and stability of the West. (1)

Ibtisam, the child, is unaware of the polemics and controversies regarding Palestine, Israel and the Middle East. In the narrative, she remembers the commotion and her emotions on that night they had to flee from their home. Her initial trauma was first caused by the lost shoe and later by being separated from her family. The socio-political impact of government policies is beyond her. As a teenager, however, she has begun to be aware of the instability of the region she lives in. When questioned by her pen pals about her childhood, she suddenly has "nothing to say...[it's] like a curtain comes down and hides" her memories; she dares not part it to look (11). The hesitancy to disclose the experiences of war to her pals – Dimitri from Greece, Luis from Spain, Hannah from Great Britain and Sally from America – is revealing. In her own words, she decides to "skip all childhood questions and reply only about the day" and "tell my pen pals about my school, friends, teachers, studies...[and]...describe the seasons, the land, the wheat and olive harvests, and the Eid celebrations (10). She is also unable to understand Luis; she feels the reasons for the anxiety in her life are more acute:

> Luis from Spain. He is unhappy for reasons I do not understand. His country is not occupied, and he does not have a strict mother like mine. But I like it that he always writes something about basketball. He says when he gets out on the court he forgets all his worries. (9)

While Ibtisam deals with her exile from home by remembering, her mother, Mirriam, yearns to forget. She knows that when "a war ends, it does not go away...[it] hides inside us" (16). Hence, her advice to Ibtisam is to not walk that road. She forbids her daughter from speaking about politics or anything that can trigger bad repercussions from the Israeli. The refrain of "Khalas, insay, insay...forget, just forget" becomes the advice for Ibtisam to survive in Israeli-occupied West Bank (7). Mirriam's reaction to the loss of house in Ramallah is, alternatively, contrary to the way some Palestinian mothers respond to the injustice meted out by the Israelis. Richter-Devroe (2009) claims that the notion of "motherhood as a basis for political activism is accepted in Palestinian society":

> Palestinian women often stress their nurturing role as mothers to support their political activism. In such mother politics they politicize the domestic sphere by presenting their domestic duties and biological reproductive role as a form of political activism and domesticate the public sphere by basing their political activities and entry into the public sphere on their domestic role as mothers (Peteet, 1991: 175-203). A mother's responsibility to provide her children with a friendly and "normal" environment is often invoked as a way to prevent further radicalization. (180)

Mirriam's concern is to live with no more conflict; she does not want her children "to do anything that can cause [them] even the slightest trouble with the army" (8). She even went to an extreme, as stated by Ibtisam:

> "Imshy el-bayt el-bayt wu qool yallah el steereh," she says. Walk by the wall. Do not draw attention to yourself. Be invisible if you can, is her guiding proverb. (8)

Contrary to her mother's wishes, Ibtisam cannot be invisible. She wants to remember: "Sinking in the sea / Of forgetfulness / I reach for the raft / of remembering." (16). She claims that she "will never regret that [she] chose to remember" (170). However, at the end of the story, Mirriam's political activism is revealed too; when news of the death of Jamal Abdel Naser reaches the people in Ramallah, Mirriam reacts as such:

> ...she carefully cut out the portrait of Nasser standing in a decorated military uniform. Under the photograph she wrote in the best form she could muster: "Inna burreyyata al-kalemah heya al-muqaddermatu al-oula lel-deemuqtateyyah." Freedom of the word is the first prelude to democracy. She had heard Nasser say this on the radio, and she repeated it often. Mother made a frame with cardboard, glue, and thread, and Nasser's photograph, with this sentence written underneath, was the only picture in our home. (162)

Mirriam has politicized her domestic sphere. Her repetition Nasser's words – "Freedom of the word is the first prelude to democracy" – must have influenced the young Ibtisam. Not only does she provide a "friendly" and "normal" environment for her family, she also asserts her political stance. The message in those words lived with Ibtisam all her life, and the freedom of speech she attained as an adult in her new home in the United States allows her to speak out and tell the story of her people. The imagined homeland of her memory is revealed for all her readers to see.

The place where Ibtisam recalls her memories is in her narratives. She keeps a journal which her mother reads, but she has another which, more significantly, is at the core of her being:

> My true journal is written with no pen or paper, but in my mind, with an invisible hand in the air. No one will ever find it. When Mother says to come home, I write in my mind that I feel at home nowhere. I want to wander the streets after school, walk forever, walk away from a world I do not understand, a world that tells me daily there is no place in it for me. (12)

She exists physically in a world she does not recognise; home is merely a word she barely comprehends. The home she yearns for is imagined, one that is constructed by her imagination. Remembering allows her to reach back into the past and make sense of that childhood. At the end of her narrative, Ibtisam feels she is now ready to answer questions about her childhood. Her control of the written word helps her to reconstruct her past:

> Dear everyone: Written on my heart, all that I lost – my shoes, a donkey friend, a city, the skin of my feet, a goat, my home, my childhood – shattered at the ends of history. But my eternal friend Alef helps me find the splinters of my life...and piece them back together. (170)

Ibtisam reaches out in a letter to everyone; this forms the final section of her memoir. The voice is now that of a mature woman who has learnt from her loss and moved on. She still uses "Alef" to spread her message. Interestingly, it is the imagined home in her narrative that helps her to reconcile with her past.

The notion of home in the narrative is also intricately linked to its loss. Barakat deals more with the missing home than she does with the actual one. Thus, the young Ibtisam yearns for the imagined home, the one she thinks she knows and now has lost. To lose one's home is like to lose everything. For Ibtisam's mother, Mirriam, the loss is multiplied for she feels the foundation of her whole being has crumbled along with the house. House demolition by the Israeli forces is a political injustice inflicted upon the Palestinians. According to Richter-Devroe, "political injustices, like house demolitions or the construction of the wall,

have different and often disproportionate consequences for women as opposed to men, Palestinian women not only make but also feel and live the link between the personal and the political every day" (2009: 176). The impact of house demolition on Mirriam, and other Palestinian women like her, is more than just personal; it is a political loss as well. When analysing the gender-specific impact of house demolitions, Shalhoub-Kevorkian asserts that "[f]or Palestinian women, the threat of losing the house/home means an increase in their vulnerability but also increased determination to combat such oppression" (2007: 7). Many resort to non-violent resistance; Mirriam has to fight for the survival of her family in new locations. Ibtisam is determined to write about her experiences, first in letters to friends overseas and later as an adult in this memoir.

The Six Day War ends with two words at the shelter: "Behawenha Allah" which means "We have lost so much that only God can ease our loss" (42-43). In a span of six days, Ibtisam has lost more than a shoe; she loses the only home that she has known. She even feels she understands the sadness of the donkey, Souma should he too lose his home. It is the loss that allows one to understand home; being away from it makes one yearn even more for it:

> But we did not dwell on the possible dangers. After living for two weeks in a shelter, a month in Hamameh's kitchen, a month in a classroom, then two months in Marka, what mattered most was how homesick we felt. (66).

Having lost the actual home, one needs to recreate it in one's imagination; this is what Barakat does when she revisits her past in her memoir. The home she lost in Ramallah is not only recollected in the memories of the child that she was, but it is also regenerated in the imaginary landscape of her narrative.

CONCLUSION

The concept of home is fundamental to an individual's identity. To lose it to another, for any reason, can cause anguish; for it to happen to a child as a consequence of war and violence is an experience that is traumatic. Barakat narrates the story of her home and her loss of it. Home is signified not just by the house that she was born in, but also Palestine, the land of her forefathers. While the house is her refuge, a place she feels safe and has a sense of familiarity to it. The land is more complex; it is her soul, central to her sense of identity. The loss of both detaches Barakat from her sense of her Self.

The only alternative for the writer is to recreate the home in her narrative. This memoir is an acknowledgement of the personal stories behind every home wrecked by war and violence. What is now rubble to the world was once a place called home for another, and for that reason, Barakat remembers it even if from a distance. The reconstruction of her home in Palestine within the pages of her memoir is a political act – she may not live it physically but it remains alive within the recesses of her consciousness that no one can take away.

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