

The Narrative of the Nakba and the Politics of Trauma

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In one of his last poems, *At the Station of a Train Which Fell off the Map*, Mahmoud Darwish wrote:

*I stood at the station, not to wait for the train,
or for my hidden feelings in the aesthetics of some distant object,
But to know how the sea went mad and how the place broke like a porcelain jar,
To know when I was born, where I lived,
how birds migrated South or North.*

(I Don't Want this Poem to End, 2009, p. 26)

“In the sixtieth year of his wound” the national poet tries to comprehend the incomprehensible. He contemplates the debris left by the war in his inner world. He relives the collapsing scenery of his childhood. He repeatedly invokes the trauma of loss and displacement and the attempts to heal the wounds to individual and collective identity that Palestinian literature began after the 1948 war.

Likewise, Emile Habibi's novel *The Pessoptimist* – through its innovative and masterfully mature phrasing, unprecedented in Palestinian or Arab literature – reflected what the trauma of the war produced in terms of a crisis of identity: a collective psychological disorder based on primitive defense mechanisms. It chronicles the attempts of the collective self to reconcile with the less favorable aspects of its history and identity.

Palestinian literature is fundamentally both “literature of trauma” and “literature of identity.” The so called “the poetry of resistance” has been characterized by its rhetoricality and revolutionary romanticism. It has engrossed itself in the mission of psychological healing of the collective self, a self crushed by its losses.

The Nakba was a turning point in modern Palestinian history. The horrifying collapse of a developing community structure and the traumatic loss of land, relationships, and memories – the pillars of personal and collective identity – cast their shadows over the narration and understanding of this history. Despite the accumulated efforts of research and documentation, the experience of the Nakba continues to be immersed in these shadows thereby preventing the dismantling and reconstruction of its significance.

As a traumatic event, the Nakba seeped into the personal and collective fabrics of the Palestinian narrative, tinting it with its colors, visible and invisible, present and absent, without allowing itself to be captured or its various facets to be known. At a time when the terrible human suffering of the Nakba is rising in the ranks of the events of major human misery, the story of the Nakba is recounted in a partial, truncated, and often superficial and whitewashed manner. Throughout history, it has been subjected simultaneously to generic interpretations dominated by the tension between its tragic and celebratory-revolutionary tones. The Nakba has been the victim of the posttraumatic tension between memory and forgetting, between narrative and silence, and between the event itself and its historical interpretation.

Such interpretations neglect other aspects of the Nakba's place in history. We see little even on the collective experience before, during and after the Nakba, something it seems would be of utmost importance. Aspects so neglected are the survival and steadfastness of the Palestinian community in Israel (itself regarded as the first victory since the Nakba); the launch of the Palestinian revolution from the Diaspora; its extraordinary cultural impact; and the resistance, in all its forms, which succeeded – to borrow the eloquence of Mahmoud Darwish – in “making a transition from the role occupied by the victim of history to sharing in the production of history.”

The Nakba has been transformed into an historical and interpretive reference for the events and collective experiences that preceded and followed it. Moreover, it has become a violent, aching womb of collective identity. Despite its pivotal formative status, it remains captive in a stereotype dominated by politics and media, labelled the “politics of trauma” by Ann Kaplan. It is impossible, according to Kaplan, to differentiate the dynamics of memory and forgetting borne of collective trauma from the socio-cultural context of a given group or from the complexity of the relationship between the executioner and the victim. The discourse of the Nakba, as a traumatic event within Palestinian society has been delayed. In the first three decades after the Nakba, the discourse of trauma was neglected in favor of a revolutionary narrative with no space for weakness or for the victim's pain and fear.

The process of forgetting has been necessary for the goals of liberation and the construction of national identity, and certainly for the survival collective posttraumatic psychodynamics distinguished by avoidance and dissociation. While we have witnessed such use of memory in recent years, it has not been for the purpose of liberation from the influence of the past or for investment in the future. Rather memory creates “loyalty” to a collective trauma that has been formative in national identity; this identity is defined primarily by the wound.

By way of digression, one can argue that discourse of the Nakba has taken complete hold of the Palestinian story and identity in recent years without producing

additional knowledge or broadening its horizons in light of new developments in Palestinian life over the past sixty years. The event has succumbed – starting with the definitive designation of its meaning – to being a one-sided account, one that absolves the victims of their responsibility to undertake any act of resistance in the midst of the tragic event.

There are seeds of neurosis latent in the term “the Nakba.” It does not name its subject but becomes the unnamed source of the trauma. As in the case of natural disasters, its name is a premature yet comprehensive legitimization of a paralysis that is deliberately absolute and disconnected from the traumatized self, and from a specific historical context has included coping and resistance as well. It is an ablation of dependency. This narrative of the Nakba often leads to what resembles fetishistic wailing, which derives dubious pleasure from the “fixative” flogging of the self. It evokes an imagined, idealized past that averts one's gaze from the truth in its entirety and impedes any positive interaction with it. It is such compulsive and regressive weeping over ruins that have taken on an air of sanctity and cannot be questioned, reconsidered, or incorporated into a broader and more extensive historical vision of the national entity. It seems the Palestinian national identity is post-traumatic or does not exist, an exclusive product of a trauma stripped of its historicity or objectivity, which rose from the depths of the primitive collective unconscious and from the darkness of a metaphysical history. In this sense the Nakba is a “chosen trauma”. According to Volkan, the history of national groups is replete with major traumatic events; however, they usually tend to “choose” a specific traumatic event through psychological representations of that event. “A chosen trauma reflects the traumatized past generation's incapacity for or difficulty with mourning losses connected to the shared traumatic event as well as its failure to reverse the narcissistic injury and humiliation inflicted by another large group, usually a geographical neighbor” (Volkan,1998, 2004).

The national identity of a group is seen as the product of traumatic experience alone, the psychological content inherited mostly unconsciously by individuals from generation to generation.

The ongoing persecution of Palestinians in Israel and elsewhere, in its conventional and non-conventional forms, weighs heavily on the fate of Palestinian national identity and its unburdening from its traumatic psychological legacy. This prosecution prevents the national identity from crystallizing into a mature collective identity protected from regression or absolute control. Still the following question remains unanswered: does the political necessity of a collective identity for Palestinians in Israel impel them to delve deeper into the birth of this identity, not to be compelled to stop with the trauma of the Nakba?

If Palestinian identity is more than the product of a traumatic loss, then it can

constantly develop through a dialectic: between history, historiography, life and literature; between the processes of the collective unconscious and the repercussions of the repressive reality; between the Nakba and the subsequent representations thereof. There must, then, be a dynamic story that is able to accommodate this movement, to rationalize it and enrich it as a creative energy of identity that does not ally itself with the past, be it traumatic or glorious, at the expense of both the present and the future.

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