

Bourgeois Nostalgia and the Abandoned City

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Testimonies commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Nakba in the spring of 1998 kept on flowing in a manner that confounded narrators and listeners.¹ The former were perplexed at their own silence for what seemed like eternity, before releasing their concealed stories. The listeners were also perplexed at the narrators for having failed to explain those stories—whether the stories portrayed divine retribution or a collective inability to face a superior enemy.

Besides the testimonies, which constituted a collective biography of the war generation, commemorative activities included a “march of the million” organized by a number of political parties, poetry recitals, documentary films, the production of posters, and endless lectures and essays analyzing the past and reinterpreting it in the light of the present.

The most poignant of the Nakba oral testimonies were primarily contemporary eyewitness disclosures of the war of 1948. In the main these were unembellished episodes of events lived by the narrators, mediated only by the problematic prism of their memories, and by the presence of a younger audience and their recording machines. Most of those narratives were distinguished from intellectual discourses by their spontaneity, their simplicity and by the distance their narrators kept from the world of the intelligentsia and politicians.² Most of the narrators were “average” people who were involved in the events while being on the margin of society—mainly as drivers, fighters, mukhtars (notables), sheikhs, peddlers and the like. Many of them were, and still are, illiterate.

The dominant characteristic of those narratives was the emphasis on the dramatic nature of the incident, as if the war itself and the displacement that followed were not dramatic enough. Siege, confrontations with the enemy, fighting, massacres, martyrdom, and expulsion were at the core of the stories. The following is a typical example:

When the training period in Syria was over, we entered the country via the Allenby Bridge. We then headed to Jaffa via Ramla and then to Yazour. Two hundred and forty of us fighters gathered in Al-Ajami in four detachments. We witnessed several skirmishes in Tel Al-Reesh, from where we moved to Manshiyya, where the situation started to deteriorate. I recall a Yugoslav group that included three Christians who

committed suicide at Hasan Bey Mosque, each of them by allowing himself to be shot by his colleague. After that, I left Manshiyya to Ajami for the second time with Musa Al-Qattan who was an explosives expert, and from there, we went to the Salamah Duwwar [rotary]. When we tried to withdraw, car drivers refused to take us with our weapons, and we refused to withdraw without our weapons. This continued until the British secured our exit in a caravan that included 21 fighters. I then returned to Silwad where I joined the fighters. The last scene I witnessed was the departure of most Jaffa inhabitants in motorboats and light barges to the steamers waiting at sea.”³

What is absent in this story—and numerous other similar episodes of war—is the fabric of daily life, which could have provided the framework of these incidents and explained them. There is an assumption here, it seems, that what is “normal”, in the perception of the narrator, is taken for granted and needs no recalling. The moderators of these testimonies, mostly academics, tried in vain to provide the social and political background that engulfed the dramatic moment, and to give it the necessary interpretation, but they invariably collided against a barrier of astonishment, denial or forgetfulness.

Above all, however, *there is an overriding sense of localism*. What happened then is seen as having happened to this town or village in a context isolated from an onslaught that affected Palestine as a whole. While the narrators recognize that the Nakba, the collective tragedy, happened to the country as a whole, this realization is not reflected in the protocols of narration—nor in the pattern of the stories thus retold. There is an astounding absence of the overall picture, and of the networks that affected the lives and behaviour of the combatants and onlookers alike. Thus the siege of Jaffa and Lydda, the massacres of Deir Yasin and Dawaiymeh, and the exodus from Safad and Haifa—all happened in these narratives as disparate incidents unconnected to the general saga of the war.

The Vision Transformed

Equipped with hindsight we can today explore the transformations that eventually differentiated the consciousness of exiled Palestinians from those who re-

mained in Palestine in order to examine the shifting concepts of what the “homeland” meant to them and how they understood notions of return to the homeland.

In the era of the first dispersion (1948-1967), the concept of a categorical Return to Palestine came into being and was linked to an abstract vision of liberating the land. This dream/vision was personified in the paintings of Tamam and Ismail Shammout, focusing on the image of a paradise lost and idyllic peasant landscapes. In Shammout’s paintings all internal conflicts in Palestinian society were obliterated and a pastoral picture based on the collective memory of the Palestinian refugees in the Arab host countries was produced. The most salient traits of this vision are found in the tortured relationship between the exiled refugees and their usurped homeland. These exiles’ homeland was their homes to which they were continually seeking to return—their village communities or their town neighborhoods. The people who remained steadfast on their land, on the other hand, were excluded from this vision in a magical act, as if their staying in Palestine was no more than a coincidence unworthy of consideration.

In the period of the second conquest (after the war of 1967), the relationships between the Palestinians in exile and those who remained in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, as well as in Arab communities of the Galilee, was reformulated. The Palestinians who had remained in the Galilee—as well as in other Israeli territories, were looked upon as heroes, albeit ineffective ones. This motif prevailed until the Land Day incidents broke out in the Galilee and the Negev, when their status was “upgraded” and these steadfast Palestinians were now given the appellation equivalent to that of the “heroes of return” (“*abtal al-awda*”), a term until then reserved for Palestinian refugees living in exile.

This relationship changed yet again after the establishment of the Palestinian National Authority and the signing of the Oslo Accords. With the return to the occupied territories of tens of thousands of exiles, it signified a shift in Palestinian decision-making and self-identity in the direction of a new territorial base inside the homeland. As a result, the diaspora Palestinians, and not the ones inside, now found themselves marginalized—especially those in refugee camps.

With this political/demographic transformation, the concept of return to Palestine has now acquired different nuances. Tension emerged immediately after the signing of the interim accords because the vision of an abstract liberation collided with a “realistic” political vision of limited and qualified repatriation. Returning to Palestine was now possible only through individual visits. Returning collectively was impossible due to the existing balance of forces between Israel and the Palestinians.⁴

This qualified return to the homeland was mediated by two new developments. The first involves the rediscovery—or actually the “discovery”—of the forsaken Palestinians in their homeland—the presence of living communities who have retained their own social fabric, their specific cultural traditions, and their literature and art. These communities engendered a new problematic in relation to Palestinian society in exile, which in the past had hardly acknowledged their existence.

The second phenomenon involves what may be referred to as “visiting encounters” by the third generation of Nakba victims. This generation lived the Nakba through the imagery of their parents and grandparents. The members of this third generation had only lived in a Palestinian society under colonialism (in the West Bank and Gaza Strip), or subjected to a military invasion (Lebanon), or lacked a normal daily life (exile in the Arab countries).

A Vindictive Return

In the summer 1994, a number of activists intellectuals who returned to Palestine with the PLO cadres following the Oslo accords began publishing a series of essays on the experience of return from exile.⁵ These pieces collectively constitute a rich body of discourses on journeys towards the reformulation of self-identity. If there is one theme that unites them it is the theme of shock at the rediscovery of the homeland. They all seem to have landed after a prolonged flight, but it is not clear in whose homeland they have landed.

The poet Ghassan Zaqtan portrays the homeland as the new exile. He returns to his village Zakariyya, now the Hebraized Kfar Zakariyya, and tries to recall the stories of his forefathers:⁶

Zakariyya did not look as it was described at all. The hill was not astonishing as in the description, and the Jews who were wandering along the roads did not relate to the place; rather, there was a distance separating them from it...the body movement...shoulders in particular. It seemed to me that they were totally removed from what was happening...I said something I no longer remember. I did not abandon it. I have no right to do that; I have no right to abandon it. This is a knowledge that is more sublime than the vehicle of yearning that brought me here, or rather the exile that brought me to my father's place.⁷

Zaqtan extrapolates from his testimony, falling back on Arab exodus from Andalusia:

We have become the new Andalusians. It seems very appropriate. The text has chosen its language, comparisons and exile. All of a sudden “our return” seems like a white. It seems like a treachery of exile, text, and the idea of Andalusia, the land we inhabited for centuries. We had to take back our suitcase and leave with-

out any notice. We had excluded Awda from our Andalusian condition but have yet to find Andalusia.

Zaqtan refers to the disintegration of the concept of holiness when imagining the sacred land as he confronts the Israeli Other:

Sacredness here presents another problem when facing the holiness of the other who cannot be expunged from the scene. The ability of the other to propagate his own sacredness and make it part of the contemporary universal scene cannot be negated. I was never convinced that the sacred... stands on our side. The "other" had already established his mythology, reformulated it as a racial doctrine, and descended on our villages, towns and roads like a huge silver plate coming from a neighboring unseen mythology. This was at a time when our own myth was collapsing and disintegrating on the ground with the elapse of time, forgetfulness and a fading conviction.⁸

This fetishism of the homeland dominates the imagery of poet Zakariyya Mohammed. Contrary to his colleagues however, he decided not to philosophize things. He chose instead literary metaphors to treat current dilemmas of the returnees. The aridity of the Palestinian new return is equivalent to the arid soil left to the remaining part of Palestine after the Israelis appropriated the coastal regions:

I thought I would double my idols and mirrors in the homeland. What is this homeland? It is no more than a piece of land that is left for us. It is a piece of stone. It is a land of mountains and hills...a land of stone and rock. They took the coast and left rocky hills for us. No, in fact, they did not leave it; we try to make them leave it. What can we do with stone? We can at least bear our agony.⁹

Hasan Khader, by contrast, attacks Palestinian narcissism and its accompanying self-pity. This narcissism, he claims, lifts the concept of return to the level of a cult, which needs to be transcended in favour of "normalizing" daily life through a new praxis.

What we lived through in the past was the time of a transitional culture of contingencies [thaqafat tawari'], the culture of transforming refugees into a people. The problem now is to how to transform those people into a new normalcy away from the domain of the "miraculous children".¹⁰

This search for "normalcy" is viewed as the problem of a culture that has finally shifted from attempting to rise to focus on an "exemplary homeland" to coming to grips with a "flesh and blood" homeland--that is to say, towards a shift from ideology to reality. "This is a shift that requires the writer to depart from the illusions of a 'stolen homeland'."

There is no possibility of reproducing the homeland as a paradise lost. The homeland is at hand, disfigured and distorted and waiting for salvation. We have an

identity that is still in the formulation stage. This identity will become larger with every meter we are able to extract from the occupier, with every road we construct, every book we print, every woman we free (sic), every window we open in our life, which is so burdened with stagnant air, and every decision we take in the fields of social and political organization and human rights.¹¹

Of all the returnees Khader is the one most obsessed with the process of return to the normalization in Palestinian daily life--a normalcy which he sees as a categorical pre-condition for normalization with his protagonists.

Mureed Al-Barghouthy is arguably the author with the utmost inner peace among the returnees. He is probably the only one among them who is not a refugee, or whose family did not leave coastal Palestine to become a refugee family. He is also the most relentless in self-criticism when viewing his own past. "How can we explain today," Barghouthy says in *I Saw Ramallah*,¹² "after we have grown and become mature, how we in the towns and villages of West Bank treated our people who were expelled by Israel from their coastal cities and villages...and came to stay in our mountainous towns and villages. We called them refugees, we called them immigrants!"

Barghouthy's return to Palestine involved a qualified sojourn to his village of Deir Ghassaneh (a formerly feudal estate in the Ramallah district). But it was Jerusalem that became the focus of a nostalgic recollection of the sensuous memories of his adolescence:

That vague enjoyment we felt when our adolescent bodies touched the bodies of European tourist women on the Saturday of Fire [Sabt enNour, during the orthodox celebrations of the day before Easter Sunday], when we shared with them the darkness of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher and carried the white candles that illuminate the darkness, just like them. This is mundane Jerusalem, the city of our little times that we had forgotten too quickly. Because it is normal, just as water is water and lightning is lightning, and just as our hands were lost, it has now emerged as an abstraction.¹³

To a poet who grew up in the socially repressive milieu of the highland villages the Holy City evokes a keen sense of eroticism. Thus, tragedy for Barghouthy is not the Nakba itself, but rather the loss of the city which it gave rise to. "The occupation has left the Palestinian villages as they were and reduced our cities to villages."¹⁴ At the end, the writer preserves his Palestinianism in the imagination, and returns to his promised land in Cairo.

The Abandoned City

In the current debate concerning the significance of the Nakba and Awdah, the political and emotive are intertwined. So long as the lines separating exile from

the homeland are clear, the Palestinian discourse pertaining to notions of Return remains clearly delineated in their abstraction. The main price for this clarity and purity, however, was--until recently-- the exclusion of the people who remained rooted in their homeland from the discourse of liberation. But as exiles begin to return, as they did with the establishment of the new Palestinian entity the West Bank and Gaza Strip, the issues have become confused, and the imagined constructs of the homeland had to be reformulated.

I will review here the nature of this debate through the heated polemics pertaining to the meaning of Nakba and Awda. It is a debate that has been taking place among exiled intellectuals and natives of the city of Jaffa, who have pondered the meaning of the city's iconography over the last decade. The significance of this contested dialogue is due first to the centrality of Jaffa in the culture of Palestine before dispersion, and secondly, because it sums up the nature of this new relationship between exile and the homeland.¹⁵

In a collection of testimonies gathered in this debate, the concept of return was discussed and the incidents of 1948 invoked, often producing contradictory visions of the Palestinian experience. The discussion also dealt with experiences of internal estrangement on the part of those Palestinians who remained in Jaffa, including those who moved into the abandoned city since the war. It dealt with the experience of those who returned to Jaffa on personal visits after the 1967 war, while refusing to accept what had happened. And finally, the discussion dealt with the experience of Palestinian intellectuals who have tried to reconstruct a vision of what happened to the city in the light of hindsight, trying to understand why the city's social elite abandoned it before it fell militarily, and whether this fate could have been avoided?

In these experiences we find the following overlapping themes: an attitude, bordering on hostility, on the part of the city's remaining residents towards the returnees for ignoring the realities of the present city, and elevating it to the level of an abstract memory; the vision of the Other (the Israeli Jew) and attempts to come to terms with their displacement; the attempt by refugees to restore the past through modification of the new reality, or through a protracted attempt to co-exist with this new reality.¹⁶ Altogether, we can distinguish here the responses of three groups from Jaffa, all of who lived through the experience of the Nakba but in different places and at different times.

The experience of the first group is exemplified through the writings of the first generation that lived the events of war and expulsion and tried to restore through their memoirs the vision of the city before it fell to Israeli control. This is a restorative memory that expunged contradictions and tries hard to enable one to make a

mental return to the lost paradise. The issues that occupy this group's vision revolve around three themes:

- An obsessive nostalgia. The group attempts to restore the city through the reinvention of its dramatic landmarks such as the festival of Nebi Ruben and the invocation of idyllic vignettes from pre-War Jaffa.¹⁷
- The reconstruction of the social fabric of the daily life in Mandate Palestine in a pastoral, and static form. Much of this reconstruction is genealogical, and is based on a documentary-type record of the "original" families within the city's urbanscape. Invariably this genre is "frozen" in the sense that it fails to take into account any changes in the city structure since it fell. It also neglects to seek the connection between the city's social fabric and its national networks.¹⁸
- Attempting to understand what happened. Here we locate a number of memoirs and monographs whose objective is to interpret the factors behind the fall of Jaffa to the Israeli forces within the larger epic, namely, the fall of Palestine. Those who provide these explanations and justifications focus on the atmosphere that prevailed in the city during the Rebellion of 1936, the British suppression of Jaffa's rebellion by 1939, and the heroism of the Jaffa's defenders in the 1947-48 period, in spite of the "defeatism" of the Arab leadership.¹⁹

The second group consists of second generation post-Nakba Palestinians, who have experienced life in Jaffa through their parents' memories. They have carried the burdens of separation in exile, and tried to comprehend the experience of the Nakba while living through Israeli occupation and the war of 1967. This generation differs from the Nakba generation because it visited the city and saw its later transition from the "bride of Palestine" to the "hashish den of Israel". The dominant narrative of this generation is characterized by a critical nostalgia bordering on cynicism. Although much of the writing of this group is in a sarcastic vein, nevertheless it is also affectionate.²⁰ Recalling her relationship with the family, Samira says:

I was fourteen when my uncle, who lived in Greece, visited us. For a certain reason that I knew later, my mother, who was a non-Jaffite, was quarreling silently with my father one day. When she said something about the many orange orchards that the family had lost in Jaffa, my uncle, who did not know how much family history my father had told my mother, intervened and said to me "Your grandfather did not have any orchards in Jaffa, he was a merchant in the wholesale market, not the owner of an orchard." My mother lived for twenty years of her marriage recalling stories about the family's glory and its orchards in Jaffa. As

for my father, he never had the courage to tell her the truth.²¹

In another scene, which takes place at the Clock Center in Jaffa, Shaker, who was born in Jaffa in 1945, visited the shop of Shlomo the Moroccan, who sold oriental records and cassettes. When Shlomo asked Shaker where he was born, he replied, "In Ajami" (a neighborhood in Jaffa). "Strange, I came to Jaffa from Morocco and started my new life there the same year, isn't that a coincidence?" "No", said Shaker, adding politely, "You could say that it was an exchange operation." Shlomo opened his mouth in astonishment and kept on repeating the word. "Exchange...exchange..." until all of a sudden he was able to comprehend the meaning of the word, and shouted in a loud voice. "Exchange!" smiling, then shaking his head sadly.²²

The third group consists of Jaffa residents who remained entrenched in the city after the majority were expelled or had departed, and those who came to the city from the northern areas looking for work. The voice of this group of people is almost not heard outside Palestine, in spite of the impressive record of resistance to subordination by the various associations of Jaffa Arabs. It is intriguing that the Nakba generation opted to ignore the present reality of Jaffa and the conditions of its resident Palestinians, even while visiting the city, despite their continuous encounters with these residents.

One can venture several explanations for this myopia; for one, it allows the returnee to ignore the present squalor of Jaffa. The city's poverty and dilapidated buildings contrast sharply with its "glorious past," which the first generation has maintained in their memories and narratives. But there are other reasons for dissociation: the majority of the present Arab residents of Jaffa are not descendants of the original Jaffites and families who left the city in 1948. Thus, the visitors/returnees does not recognize that the city his family was compelled to abandon is a heritage he shares with the current residents, except perhaps in a tenuously symbolic manner. This whole phenomenon underlines an essential localism in the way the 1948 war is felt, common among both urban and rural Palestinians, who distinguish between indigenous members of their towns and latecomers ("ghuraba" or "wafidun").²³ Moreover, as already mentioned above, the majority of Jaffa Arab residents who remained in the city from the original pre-war generation belong to marginalized social groups that account for very little in terms of the city's past glories in the eyes of the returning middle class families.

This idyllic (and highly selective) vision of exiled Jaffites towards the present Jaffa situation is exactly what provokes the anger of the present Arab residents of Jaffa, including many of its intellectuals and professionals, toward the Nakba generation. This reaction is well

articulated by Andre Mazzawi who took it upon himself to deal with what he deemed "the poverty" of the nostalgic writings of the Jaffa residents in exile.²⁴

In criticizing the visiting/returnee Nakba generation, the author is struck by how the image of Jaffa in the writings of the Nakba generation reflects a romanticized pastoral picture of the city, "which ignores social differentiation or conflict", while the reconstructed image of the city is confined to a pattern of life that was lived by the mercantile elites, orchard owners, and the professional strata, while the texture of daily life as experienced by the majority of city dwellers, including sailors and port workers, is not reflected save as background vignettes illustrating seasonal festivals such as Nebi Rubeen. Mazzawi cites Ahmad Zaki Dajani's assessment of the social makeup of the city in support of his claim about class-blindness:

The majority of Jaffa residents belonged to well-known indigenous families. These were families that occupied a prominent position in the economic life of the city, such as in commerce, ownership of agricultural land, and in the higher echelons of the civil service and the judicial apparatus. One does not find a poor class in Jaffa, except those seasonal workers who came to the city from Syria and Egypt to work in agriculture or in municipal services such as paving streets and the like.²⁵

We find a similar streak, albeit in a more sophisticated style, in a well known collection of memoirs of Jaffa before the war. These writings dwell on the exoticism of life in exclusive social clubs, private schools and the nightlife of the city's middle classes.²⁶

Mazzawi also criticizes the writings of the Nakba generation for their unmitigated and deliberate failure to recognize the existence of the current realities in the city. A prominent example is cited in the well known compendium by Hisham Sharabi, *The Perfume of a City*, which includes interviews with 53 former residents of Jaffa now living in exile in Amman, Cairo and Beirut but not a single interview with any current-day resident of Jaffa. No vision of the contemporary conditions of the city is presented to the reader, as if the city died when its original inhabitants left it in the war of 1948.²⁷

Mazzawi tackles the diaries of several members of the Nakba generation, and their justifications for leaving the city. Reviewing the memoirs of Dr. Yusif Haikal, the last Arab mayor of the city, he points out that Haikal left the city and took refuge in Amman in May 1948, when Jaffa was being held under siege by Jewish forces. Claiming that he wanted to get military support from Jordan, Haikal authorized his administrative staff in the city council to handle the affairs of the city, but he never returned to Jaffa. In doing so he paved the way to the Zionist conquest and subordination of the city. Had he remained in the city, according to Mazzawi, he would

have been able to negotiate with the Israeli forces officially as an elected leader or at least ensure that the city remained an open city, thereby preventing it from being plundered and ransacked.²⁸ In this regard, Mazzawi poses the question:

Why did Mayor Haikal obstinately insist on leaving the city for 'Amman, after May the 3d 1948 ?Why wouldn't he remain and negotiate with the Jewish side from a more powerful stand than a delegated commission of second-rank politicians and in his capacity as the city's mayor? Had he stayed wouldn't he be able to protest, ex officio, the Jewish takeover of the city and the subsequent transgressions of the Jewish-Arab agreement, especially the annexation of Jaffa to Tel-Aviv.²⁹

It seems to me that Mazzawi's criticism of Haikal is in fact an indirect indictment of the behavior of the social class that deserted the city, leaving it to its inevitable destiny in spring 1948. The people of that social class did not understand the extent of the consequences resulting from this evacuation. When recalling their joyful past in the city, they do not link their frivolous life-style before the Nakba to the collapse of the city when they decided to leave. Finally, they subsequently behaved, in retrospect, as if their own departure from the city was synonymous with the demise of the city from history. The rejuvenated contemporary city and its residents thus exist today as background for the tragic nostalgia in the memoirs of many people of this class.

This critical approach by several post-Nakba generation intellectuals aims at a deconstruction of the nostalgic discourse of ante-bellum Palestinian history, and focus on countervailing tendencies that are inherent in a new reading of that past. A number of historians are already working in this revisionist vein.³⁰ No satisfactory political solution is likely to resolve the aspirations of the exiles in the foreseeable future., Therefore, side by side with these critical assessments,romantic pastoral histories of Palestine are bound to continue to be generated by exiled writers. ,The current debates between those exiles and residents are likely to create more "realistic" linkages with the current situation in predominantly Arab towns and in mixed urban centers in Israel, such as Jaffa, Haifa, Akka, and Ramleh, focusing on the lives and struggle of its Arab residents, their relations with the new and old Jewish residents, and the synthetic social formations that are emerging within them.

While I agree with much of Mazzawi's critique targeting the Jaffan nostalgia, or "Jaffamania", as Musa Budairi calls it, I believe that he is sometimes inclined to direct his critical vision at the wrong target. In his attempt to enhance the contemporary conditions of Jaffa and the people who are confronting/adapting their presence under to Israeli rule, his writings seem to question the de-legitimize the collective memories of the

exiled Jaffa elite, which disappeared from the scene during and after the war. This depiction of nostalgic collective memory as a class memory is, however, not convincing. In the Arab World, the memoirs and diaries of political activists and other intellectuals often reflect the bourgeois (and sometimes aristocratic) social background of their authors. One can easily claim that the Nakba was much more devastating to the lives of "ordinary" Palestinians such as farmers, laborers, and craftsmen than to the lives of the bourgeoisie of Jaffa and Palestine. After all it was much easier for middle class refugees to rebuild their lives than it was for plebeians. But very few of the latter left us with a written record of their tribulations and yearnings.

Nevertheless the absence of the voice of average people from these private histories and biographies is indeed an astounding void. It is the task of the new researchers to provide this voice with a forum and appropriate tools (such as oral histories) so that it can articulate its own experience. It is a mistake, however, to attempt to exclude or dilute the suffering of the bourgeois intelligentsia and historians of the middle class because the other voices are absent.

In Mazzawi's work, as in other current writings about the Nakba, we note more than a sustained critique of the life-style of the pre-war Jaffa elite, and other Palestinian urban elites. These writers also attributes to them, and the political class that articulated their interests, the collapse of the national will when confronted with the military onslaught of the Jewish forces. There is a tendency here to underestimate the considerable imbalance of forces that separated them from the enemy's capacity. Suppose we accept the allegation that this elite, or part of it, was able to remain in the city, to defend it, and to negotiate on behalf of its residents. What guarantee is there that its destiny would have been different from its actual fate during the critical days that followed the occupation? What could have guaranteed that its destiny would have been any different to the destiny of other cities in Palestine (such as Nazareth), in which a high proportion of local elites opted to stay?

The point that I am suggesting here is that the romantic re-imagining of pre-1948 Palestine is not necessarily a bourgeois vision. Rather, it is a vision of escapism, which is found as much in the writings of the radical intelligentsia as in the images of the citrus plantation owners. It is also the essence of nostalgic writings and paintings. We find it in Shammout's canvasses and in an enormous number of autobiographies and fiction dealing with Palestinian rural life in the 1930s and 1940s. Examples include *Ghorbat Al-Ra'i* (The Shepherd's Exile), by Ihasn Abbas, and *The Plums of April* by Ghasan Kanafani. Another clear illustration of escapist visions is in a series of monographs that aimed at systematically reconstructing the social history of de-

stroyed villages before they were expunged from the map. In these studies, a pastoral and harmonious world, free of any conflict or contradictions is presented. It is indeed paradise lost. Almost all of these studies are far from elite fantasias or discourses by an upper class intelligentsia.³¹ Obviously this critique should in fact target the discourse itself, not the social background of the people who created it.

With the beginning of the 1990s, and after the entry of PLO forces into Palestine (but not necessarily because of it), Nakba narratives began to exhibit a more balanced, but also a more problematic account, of Palestinian history. In regard to the social history of Jaffa, this started with the serious effort of the first generation to record their bitter experience as accurately and as honestly as possible. This effort, however, faltered at the start. Writers were able to imagine that experience only through the lens of nostalgia.³² But there are important exceptions. For example, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, in his autobiographical works was able not only to transcend nostalgia in his treatment of his early years in Bethlehem and Jerusalem, but he asserted an Arabist nationalist identity which went beyond the confining atmosphere of Palestine.³³ Writing from a revolutionary humanist perspective, Ghassan Kanafani also transcended a nostalgic vision by examining the enemy through the lens of psychological empathy.³⁴

The second generation, on the other hand, had suffered from both the heavy burden of the Nakba experience and from the estrangement of exile. Tackling the memories of their fathers' generation, they directed acute criticism at their patrimony of defeat and defeatism, into which they were dragged as well. The third generation has been liberated, or so it seems, from the conditions of exile but not from self-exile. They returned to explore the past with the spirit of avid investigators, faithful to finding the truth of what happened, not caring about the consequences, even if the price was to undermine the story of the received narrative.

Palestinian political realities today have destined a large proportion of Palestinians for perpetual exile. Those who managed to end their exile, either by coming back to the homeland or by adapting themselves to their adopted homes, have managed to come to terms with their predicament. But for most exiles only a political solution to their refugee status will satisfy them, an outcome that is unlikely to be realized in the current political environment. As for the intelligentsia, whose articulations we have discussed in this essay, one can say that their self-estrangement is a perennial consequence of the intellectual condition—and one that is compounded by physical exile. To them an end to their territorial exile may be indeed the beginning of a new and profound internal exile. And it is this condition that many of the returnees have expressed in their anti-return narratives.

Conclusion

This discussion has attempted to bring together several experiences of exile and the reconstruction of the homeland in the imagination of Palestinian writers. The most striking feature of this reconstruction is the delayed reaction to the experience of war and uprootedness, and the accompanying repression of those memories. When the waves of disclosures did emerge, as happened during the commemorative ceremonies of the Nakba half a century after the event, the ravages of war appeared as localized incidents, disconnected from the larger tragedy that had engulfed the refugees.

Among exiled writers I have discerned several trends. Among the earlier generation of exiles there is a dominant tendency to “freeze” the homeland into frames of pastoral, idyllic, paradise lost. This is especially true of artists and poets, but it was also a natural flow from the nationalist historiography of the period.

Within the second and third generations of exiles a more radical current appeared, questioning the conventional experience of exile and the causes of the exodus. Of particular interest here is the manner in which these critics interrogated the composition of pre-1948 society that allowed itself to be defeated and dismantled. The bourgeois nostalgia of this stratum was seen as a blindness that joined its pre-war fragility to its impotent behavior in the war itself.

The turning point is this nostalgic narrative was the return of the PLO and its intelligentsia to Palestine in the mid-nineties. Here we encounter the shock of return to a virtual part of the homeland under conditions of political compromises and physical confinement. Its main impact was to de-mystify the whole ideological discourse on the right of return under the rubric of political realism, and to initiate a new discourse which centered around notions of normalcy and the normalization of daily life. Here normalcy is related to the question of carrying on with dual (and conflicting) intellectual agendas; on the one hand, building and consolidating a new social formation based on the institution of statehood; on the other hand, the conceptualizing and implementing a mundane, normal society based on the “heroic” images of Palestine, whose intellectuals have become addicted to their exiled status. The main victims of this process have been those Palestinians who were not exiled, those who stayed steadfast as an Arab minority in Israeli society. Their portrayal in the literature of exile has shifted from the forgotten lot to an abstract heroic status that remained marginal to the Palestinian experience. The turning point referred to above is therefore both a conceptual and historic benchmark. It refers to the beginning of a Palestinian narrative that attempts, under the conditions of the new and tenuous normalcy, to synthesize these

exiles' different experiences, of three generations and three geographies. In doing so it will have to deal with exile as a permanent condition: for those who returned and experienced an internal exile, and for those who did not return and established their lives as part of the cultural scene in their diasporas.

NOTES

¹This chapter appears in an earlier version in Ron Robins and Bo Str ath, eds., *Homelands*, (Brussels: Presse Universitaire Europ enne-Peter Lang, 2003).

²These impressions are based on my attendance of the major Nakba activities that took place in March, April, and May 1998 in Ramallah, Jerusalem, and Bethlehem. The most prominent among these activities were organized by the Khalil Sakakini Center in Ramallah, the Popular Art Center in Al-Bireh, and the local universities. The reader can obtain a list of those events from the Sakakini Center published as "Commemoration of Nakba Events: Lectures, Films and Exhibitions", Ramallah, 1999.

³Testimony by Hajj Hussein Abdel Rahman Al-Hilmi from Silwad, Khalil Sakakini Center, 2 May 1998.

⁴At the end of 2000, Palestinian and Israeli negotiators were wrestling with a formula for the interpretation of UN resolution 194 which allows those refugees who "will leave [please check original text: should this word be "live"?] at peace with their neighbors to return to their homes" in the context of final status talks. The refugee issue, more than Jerusalem and settlements, proved to be the decisive factor in the collapse of the Camp David and Taba negotiations.

⁵*Al-Karmil* magazine in Arabic started publishing the essays in spring 1997 ("Shahadat" ["Testimonies"]- *Al-Karmil* No. 51) and continued doing so until the summer of 1998 (*Al-Karmil* No. 56/57 - "The Memory of the Place ... The Place of the Memory"). See specifically Shafiq Al-Hoot "Jaffa The City of Stubbornness," Hasan Khader "Al-Ghurba - Absence from the Homeland," Mohammed Ali Taha "Time of the Lost Childhood," and Elias Sanbar, "Return to the Homeland."

⁶All references, unless otherwise mentioned, are to the respective *Karmil* issues identified above.

⁷Ghassan Zaqtan, *Nafi Al-Manfa [The Banishment of Exile]*, pp.141-145, in Arabic.

⁸Zaqtan, pp. 144-145, in Arabic.

⁹Zakariyya Mohammed, *Bone and Gold*, p.137, in Arabic.

¹⁰Hasan Khader, *Were You There?* p.124, in Arabic.

¹¹Khader.

¹²Madbooly, Cairo 1997, in Arabic.

¹³Mureed Al-Barghouthy, *Living in Time*, p.156, in Arabic.

¹⁴Barghouthy, p.158.

¹⁵The reader can review this discussion at the electronic forum run by Haitham Sawalhy and Andre Mezzawi, which appeared first in the web site www.yafa.org, and now in www.jaffacity.com.

¹⁶That this reality can shift suddenly in the perception of native Jaffites, both Jews and Arabs, can be seen in a revealing survey of attitudes in the city in the aftermath of the bloody events that took place during the first week of the second Intifada, in October 2000. See Lily Falili and Ori Nir, "City of Strangers," in Haaretz, November 27, 2000.

¹⁷The best example of this tradition can be found in Imtiaz Diab and Hisham Sharabi, *Yafa: Itr Madina (Jaffa: The Perfume of a City)*, Dar al- Fata al-Arabi, Cairo, 1991. See especially "Mawsim Rubeen" by Elias Rantisi, pp 70-73.

¹⁸See Hanna Malak, *Zhikrayat al-'ailat al-Yafyyah*, Jerusalem, 1993, and *al-Juthur al-yafyyah*, Jerusalem, 1996.

¹⁹See Yusef Haikal, *Ayyam Al-Siba (Days of my Youth)*, in Arabic, Amman 1995; Ahmad Dajani, *Yafa wa Thawrat 1936 (Jaffa and the 1936 Rebellion)*; and Zaki al Masri, *Hadith al-Dhikriyat, 1936-1994*, Ramallah, 1994.

²⁰See Musa Budeiri, "The Last Plane from Jaffa", forthcoming.

²¹The electronic forum www.yafa.org. "Samira Tells the Story of Her Family".

²²The electronic forum www.yafa.org "Exchange".

²³These terms mean "strangers" or "newcomers" respectively, and have immense significance in mapping marriage strategies and business partnerships among Palestinians.

²⁴Andre Mezzawi, "Memories and Counter-Memories: Production, Reproduction and Deconstruction of some Palestinian Memory Accounts about Jaffa", in English. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Middle East Studies Association, San Francisco, 1997. Some of the quotations cited below have been re-translated from the Arabic text, and may differ slightly from the original English.

²⁵Quotation from Ahmad Zaki Dajani, *Jaffa and the 1936 Rebellion*, in Arabic, p.69 (my translation, st).

²⁶Imtiaz Diab and Hisham Sharabi (eds.), *Yafa: Itr Madina (Jaffa: The Perfume of a City)*, page 14ff.

²⁷Andre Mazzawi, "Memories and Counter-Memories."

²⁸Mazzawi, p 21; and Yusif Haikal, in *Perfume of a City*, pp.55-56, in Arabic.

²⁹Mazzawi, pp. 18-20.

³⁰Some of this work can be seen in an anthology of writings edited by Jamil Hilal and Ilan Papp , *Palestinian and Israeli History Re-Examined* [working title], forthcoming 2004.

³¹See "Destroyed Palestinian Village Series," Documentation and Research Center, Birzeit University published over a twelve year period (1982-1994).

³²The reference here is to the mainstream among the writers of this era. No doubt, there are authors who were able to transcend the spirit of the stage they lived through (see references below about Jabra and Kanafani).

³³In the "First Well", and "Princesses Street."

³⁴In *Return to Haifa*, his most important novel.