A Gazan Memory for Forgetting

For Mahmoud Darwish, while memory serves as a tool of resistance against the erasure of existence, it also represents another form of symbolic death for identity and history. This is because it enforces a kind of stagnation and immersion in old pain, trapping the individual in a cycle of grief and reflection on past losses. In his reading of "Memory for Forgetfulness," Ra'ad Abu Sa'ada questions, as a Gazan, the role of memory in the ongoing Palestinian struggle and in the collective Israeli identity, with a view toward the Holocaust, the besieged Beirut of 1982, and Gaza today.

Essay / Raed Abu Saadeh December 19, 2024

"Memory for Forgetfulness" is a book by the late Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish, published in 1990. It is still considered a literary document reflecting the pain and suffering of the Palestinian people. It is one of Darwish's most important works, expressing his literary and political positions on Palestinian issues: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories since 1948, and subsequently the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in 1967, the right of return of Palestinian refugees to their lands, the policies of expulsion and displacement that Palestinians have endured since 1948, as well as the struggle for the establishment of an independent and sovereign Palestinian state.

Darwish wrote this book as a response to the occupation, among other reasons, seeking to emphasize the importance of memory as part of the struggle for Palestinian rights. Driven by the power of words, the book shows how literature can be a means of resistance. Darwish uses words to record memory, inspire hope, and give voice to the Palestinians. The book reflects the author's experiences as a Palestinian refugee, expressing his personal suffering and the anguish of the displaced Palestinian people. He re-examines the concept of Palestinian identity, in such a way that reflection on the past creates a tool for understanding the present and building a bridge to the future.

You get forgotten as if you never existed لم كأنك تنسى تكن(literature Arabic translated)

Video of You get forgotten as if you never existed تنسى كأنك لم تكن(translated Arabic literature)

The book consists of several chapters, and its main parts deal with familiar themes of the Palestinian issue:

Memory: This part deals with the importance of memory in shaping Palestinian identity and how it contributes to the preservation of history and heritage.

Loss: Addresses personal and collective experiences of loss, emphasizing the impact of the Nakba on the continuity of loss and the sense of grief felt by Palestinians.

Exile and Alienation: Reviews the suffering of Palestinians in the diaspora and how distance from the homeland affects their sense of identity.

Hope and Resistance: Darwish emphasizes the possibility of hope and resistance despite the challenges, and the power of words and literature as means of expressing resistance and clinging to life.

Through the idea of identity and belonging, Darwish addresses the connections between Palestinian identity and belonging to the land. These themes intersect throughout the chapters of the book, making "Memory for Forgetfulness" a multi-dimensional text expressing pain, sorrow, and hope for a free life.

However, a fundamental question arises here: What is the relevance of the book to the current situation, and what can Darwish's perception offer regarding the Palestinian situation at this time?

Untitled-2.jpg **[1]**



[2]Fahed Halabi, Nakba, oil and Acrylic on cardboard, 27x23 cm ,2024
Courtesy of the artist

The Victim's Memory

Whether it is Darwish himself or the "Palestinian" in general, in both cases he confronts several intertwined issues, between the subjective and the collective, the individual and the political, embodying a state of collision with the self and with reality. The victim is constantly preoccupied with thoughts about the meaning of life in the shadow of war and death that surround him. The siege and bombings force him to think about survival, while trying to find justifications for clinging to life, and also with an emphasis on small and everyday details like a cup of coffee, symbolizing a normal life, or smoking cigarettes in front of airplanes, as citizens in Gaza do today in the ongoing war.

Darwish expresses this duality between life and death, as if actions like smoking or drinking are rituals that can restore the victim's sense of humanity.

Memory plays a central role in the victim's thoughts. War and conflict seek to strip identity and destroy memories, and therefore the victim finds himself in a constant struggle against forgetting. Memory here is not only about the personal past, but about the history of a people, in a land. For Darwish, while memory is a tool of resistance against the erasure of existence, it is also another form of symbolic death of identity and history, because it enforces a kind of stagnation and immersion in old pain, as the person is trapped in a cycle of grief and reflection on the loss of the past.

The victim oscillates between the present, filled with pain and destruction, and the past to which he yearns. Thus, for example, the residents of Gaza illustrate this gap today, when they publish pictures of the homes from which they were displaced, or pictures of their children in clean clothes, food and their vehicles that have gone out of use.

This longing is not only related to place (cities, villages, houses) or things (food, car, clothes), but also to a time when the future seemed clearer and more hopeful than now. A longing for the future, dreamy and full of expectation, that helps to cope with the destroyed present. With the dreaminess, an analytical, practical and balancing line is also created, in which they try to understand the tragic reality in which they live, they think about the reasons that led to this war and try to find meaning in all the violence and death. An active victim is created who lives, thinks, operates, deciphers and wonders:

Is this the work of God? Is this the product of political injustice? Can this conflict end one day?

The victim here is not passive, but seeks to understand his position in this world and the reasons for what is happening to him. Darwish believes that there is hope that stems from the belief in the justice of his cause, and which embodies the strength of the Palestinian in the face of crises. Hope does not stem from naive optimism, but from insistence on the righteousness of the goal and absolute faith in it.

IMG_20240123_115737_edit_65910220625878.jpg **[3]**



[4]Fahed Halabi, Child,Mixed media on canvas 40x40cm, 2017
Courtesy of the artist

The Holocaust - Beirut Yesterday - and Gaza Today

The siege of Beirut that Darwish experienced in 1982 is part of the broader history of Palestinian and Arab wars. At that time, Darwish saw death around him, and at the same time tried to keep the flame of life in his heart. This experience is repeated today in Gaza, where people live under constant bombing, losing their homes and loved ones, but trying to maintain family ties and the small and intimate details of life within death.

Today, as it was in Beirut then, Palestinian families find themselves looking for the simplest means of survival: food supply, water, electricity and protection of children. We have seen time and time again, on social media in Gaza, pictures of children laughing among the ruins, reflecting the desire to

continue living despite death.

It is interesting to compare the ways in which each side, the Palestinian and the Israeli, uses its historical experiences to strengthen its political and social identity.

When comparing Palestinian memory with the memory of the Holocaust, we see that in the first case, the Palestinian's connection to memory is part of his ongoing struggle, while in the second case, the Holocaust is placed at the heart of collective memory, and continues to evoke the pain of the past to draw lessons for the future. The essence of the difference lies in the context and purpose of each memory, and in the way they are anchored in the present: memory backing a struggle, versus memory warning. In the Israeli public, the Holocaust is perceived as a warning of something that has already happened but could happen again. Palestinian memory is related to the results of the Nakba and the current reality of life under occupation. It exists in every area - in everyday life, in politics and in society. Palestinians suffer directly from the effects of the occupation, migration and conflicts, so this memory is alive and active in their reality, which strengthens it. In contrast, the Holocaust is perceived as a historical event. Jews remember the Holocaust as part of the past, however the fear of this history repeating itself still exists.

The existential memory of the Holocaust is preserved in documentation and writing and has become a collective cultural heritage and a historical fact. In contrast, the legacy of the Nakba is preserved as an oral Palestinian memory that is passed down orally from generation to generation. This dynamic represents a fundamental difference in the way the two sides deal with their past - their memory. Palestinian memories are not just historical events. They are preserved and passed down from generation to generation (mainly) orally, in songs and conversations between people, and become a weapon in the struggle to preserve collective identity and narrative. This is a central tool that resists the danger of the disintegration of Palestinian memory. Therefore, oral memory becomes a central focus in the Palestinian national discourse in terms of its ability to keep Palestinian issues alive in the collective consciousness, and as a form of resistance against attempts at extermination and forgetting.

I would argue that for the Palestinian, memory is not only a way to understand the past, but it is also a way to deal with the present and fight for the future. It is not dealing with the future for the sake of the past.

Untitled-3.jpg **[5]**



[6]Fahed Halabi, Migration, monotype on paper, 45x25 cm, 2020
Courtesy of the artist

Darwish notes that the "forgetting" that is demanded of the Palestinians, whether by some intellectuals or by Israel, is nothing more than a trap. Israel, which asks the Palestinians to forget their past, refuses to do so itself. I will add to his words that it revives its memory in an extreme way, which makes the lives of Israelis and Palestinians a continuous hell.

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