Palestinian Collective Memory: Present-Oriented and Forgotten

For Palestinians living in historic Palestine and for those referred to as "Palestinian refugees," the Nakba (Catastrophe) of 1948 never ended. This memory shapes Palestinian identity, but is it a lack of narrative that has existed for decades? Nour Saed analyzes factors inhibiting Palestinian society from investing in the arts while emphasizing the importance of storytelling and documenting a national experience versus forgetfulness.

Essay / Nour Said November 30, 2024

While memory is usually a concept associated with the past, for Palestinians, it is one of the core elements, if not the central one, that constitutes their identity. A people is often ascribed to one country or another. The Palestinians, however, are a people associated with the problematic and mostly catastrophic situation of not having a land equivalent to a state. This persistent emptiness is the result of the expulsion and other continuous and daily colonial violence, land theft, uprooting, imprisonment, and mass killings that followed the greatest political and social event that the Levant experienced in 1948. For Palestinians, 1948 never ended. This transforms the Palestinian Nakba – the Arabic word for catastrophe – from a historical moment or a past loss into an identity: the devastating changes and traumatic awareness that the Nakba left in the lives and consciousness of Palestinians is not yet overcome.

However, this fact raises the question of whether this memory, with its impact on the lives of contemporary Palestinians, gains the attention it deserves or whether is it the absence of narratives that has existed for decades. Particularly in light of the immeasurable suffering that Palestinians endure to this day, this essay aims to address forgetfulness as a possible reason for the erasure of the Palestinian cause and collective memory.

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[1]Raida Adon, The Two Women Sitting on the Bench, 2021, 60*84, watercolor on canvas paper
Courtesy of the artist

As for the Nakba of 1948, it cannot be ignored that the Palestinians are a people divided not only by generations but also by places of residence and destinies. The first category of Palestinians that can be addressed in this context are the Palestinians living in historic Palestine, under Israeli occupation, either in the West Bank or Gaza. Or those who had insisted on remaining on their lands and in their homes after the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948, despite having to endure all the measures of the new state, which defined itself as a “Jewish state” and that had recently emerged from the catastrophe of its own people. Together with the second category of Palestinians, who to this day are politically and socially referred to as “Palestinian refugees,” whether in Lebanon, Syria, or other countries, they suffer the most among the Palestinians. While the first group struggles to live in their homeland under the aforementioned harsh conditions of colonial violence in the territories occupied in 1948 and 1967, the second group are citizens of no country and do not hold a Palestinian (or Israeli) passport or any other passport that entitles them to any kind of civil rights. Therefore, it can be said that these two communities of Palestinians, those living inside historic Palestine and the “Palestinian refugees,” are the most capable of chronicling the Palestinian experience, as they are the Palestinians, regardless of which generation they belong to. They are directly confronted with the ongoing misery: those who are still fully experiencing the Nakba. Nevertheless, there is a lack of narratives documenting and detailing their national experience.

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[3]Raida Adon, Ghost Houses in the Red City, 2021, watercolor on canvas, 60*84 cm
Courtesy of the artist

The study of humanities and art in its various forms can advance the act of storytelling, which is lacking in Palestinian society due to two main factors: poverty and siege. Together with the conservative nature of the community, these factors limit society's awareness of the importance of the arts and their involvement in society.

The first factor I am addressing is that, for Palestinian society, especially in historic Palestine, which suffers from an extraordinary economic and political siege, it is extremely difficult to invest in the arts. Rarely will you find Palestinian parents encouraging their children to study art or literature or to become writers, literary scholars, playwrights, or actors. However, you will find many parents who want their children to study medicine or engineering, for example (subjects that often receive much more support from the academic institutions), no matter what passion their children may show for writing, dramatic work, theater, or cinema. The situation is not much different for Palestinian refugees outside Palestine, especially those living in refugee camps in Syria or Lebanon, in a similar culture and even more challenging conditions. This is especially true considering the fact that in these societies, people working in the humanities are often paid less than many other jobs in other fields.

the conservative nature of Palestinian society should also be emphasized as a second factor, which

represents a further obstacle to the emergence of fully narrated stories or art of different kinds and in different milieus within that society. Art necessarily needs open environments to thrive. However, more attention is given to the Palestinian narrative and documentary attempts among Palestinians living inside Israel, and this is likely influenced by the enormous importance that Israeli academic and institutional circles give to literature and the humanities and artistic endeavors in general, especially those that focus on Jewish collective memory and narrative as a counterpart. Although support for Palestinian art and narratives is far from sufficient, several Palestinian writers, poets, literary scholars, singers, playwrights, and actors whose works revolve around the Palestinian question and memory have shone among Palestinians inside Israel, such as Reem Ghanayem, Sheikha Helawy, Rim Banna, Basilius Bawardi, Dalal Abu-Amneh, and Saleh Bakri.

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[5]Raida Adon, Immigration, 2024, oil on canvas, 105*83 cm
Courtesy of the artist

The third Palestinian society I would like to discuss in this context is the Palestinians who have lived in the diaspora for generations and have been citizens of countries such as Australia, Canada, the USA, and Jordan for decades. Although the new generations of these Palestinian diaspora communities show an emotional affiliation with the land of their parents and grandparents, their Palestinian national identity is weaker. They are less likely to relate to the Palestinian catastrophe, for example, as they are citizens of other countries, immersed in different kinds of life that are, above all, safe and significantly more decent. As a Palestinian who hails from the West Bank and has diasporic family members (some born in the diaspora), who are now in their twenties and are citizens in Sweden, Brazil, Canada, or Jordan, I can say that despite the "support for Palestine" that they flaunt on social media and in occasional demonstrations, their involvement in the Palestinian issue remains marginal and occasional. They lead a completely different daily life than the Palestinians who live in Palestine do.

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