

Palestinian racial subjects: Co-memory of catastrophe and melancholia

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Abstract:

Memory of catastrophe, sacralised and banalised (Bauman, 2004), is a currency of the ‘confessional culture’ of ‘liquid modernity’ (Bauman 2000), and an increasingly valid social sciences theme, no longer the exclusive realm of historians and psychologists.

I concur with Lila Abu-Lughod and Ahmad Sa’di that the memory of the Holocaust, after an initial silence, became so dominant a narrative of our times, particularly, but not only, in Israel, that the Palestinians could not make themselves heard over the louder story, ‘told by European Jews who stressed their alliance with the cultural and political values of the West’ (Abu-Lughod and Sa’di, 2007: 12). Yet all Israeli Jews live in the shadow of the 1948 Palestinian refugees. This paper is underpinned by this dialectic link, not an easy one to make, between the Holocaust and its implications for the Jewish state’s dispossessed Palestinian victims.

Theorising Israel as a racial state (Goldberg, 2002), where what Giorgio Agamben (2005) terms ‘the state of exception’ constructs some lives as ‘bare life’ (Agamben, 1995), this paper uses Bauman’s writing on memory and the making of strangers to theorise the co-memory of the *Nakba* by Israeli Jews, which, I argue, is affected by unresolved melancholia for the Palestine they / we destroyed and the Palestinians they / we dispossessed.

Introduction

All biographies like all autobiographies like all narratives tell one story in place of another story (Hélène Cixous, 1997: 178).

Until recently, the 1948 Palestinian catastrophe, or Nakba, in which 750,000 Palestinians were expelled from (or escaped) 513 villages and several urban neighbourhoods, was largely denied by the Israeli state. However, as Stanley Cohen argues, denial is a paradox. When describing the statement 'I didn't know' as 'denial', we must assume one knew or knows what she claims not to know (Cohen, 2001: 5-6). The most profound cultural repression becomes part of the consensus as societies arrive at unwritten agreements about what is publicly remembered and acknowledged. Thus, in the 1980s, when the complex realities of the Nakba were excavated by Israeli Jewish 'new historians', official Israel was outraged that its 'own' intellectuals had exposed what 'everyone knew from personal memory' – acutely demonstrating the denial paradox (Cohen, 2001: 139).

While all Israeli Jews live in the shadow of the 1948 Palestinian refugees, the memory of the Holocaust was and is so dominant a narrative, that the Palestinians could not make themselves heard over the louder story, 'told by European Jews who stressed their alliance with the cultural and political values of the West' (Abu-Lughod and Sa'di, 2007: 12).

Inspired by recent developments in memory studies (Olick 2008), and anchored in anti-Zionist dissent, this paper focuses on early and contemporary remembrance of the Nakba by Israeli Jews, enabled by the opening of state archives and by the 'new historians'. Like other anti-Zionist Israeli Jews, I keep returning to 'the facts, the details which were never highlighted, and the chasm between them and the narrative we (Israeli Jews) were brought up on' (Pappe 2008: 94).

Another inspiration is the dialectic link, not an easy one to make, between the Holocaust and its implications for the Jewish state's dispossessed Palestinian victims. I am guided by Said's (1978) argument that Zionism has an 'immense traumatic effectiveness' for the Palestinians, and Jacqueline Rose's (2005) claim that Zionism has been traumatic for the Jews as well as the Palestinians. As Ilan Pappé (forthcoming) reminds us, 'everything in Israel is measured vis a vis the Holocaust' and 'only when the association is made – rightly or wrongly – the moral space of Israelis begins to include the Palestinian victims of their government's policies'. However, it is Bauman's insistence (1989) that the Holocaust must be explicitly compared and positioned within history that leads me to making this link central to my work (Lentin, 2004, 2008a, 2010).

Collective memory (Halbwachs, 1992) is narrated and constructed by what Goldberg (2002) calls 'racial states', in order to 'invent tradition' (Hobsbaum and Ranger, 1983) and construct homogeneity. Israel, I concur with Goldberg (2009), must be theorised as a 'racial state' par excellence, where what Agamben (2005) terms 'the state of exception' constructs Palestinians as racial subjects and 'bare life' (Agamben, 1995), at the mercy of Israeli sovereignty which excludes them from legal protection, enacts the law, while putting itself above this very law.

In 'Categorical murder, or, how to remember the Holocaust', Bauman (2004) writes that despite the common belief that the success or failure of any political struggle 'hangs on the effort to keep the memory alive', memory is a mixed blessing. The past, he suggests, is a bagful of events; memory always *selects* and *interprets*, and the resurrection of the past, keeping the past alive, can only be attained through the active, choosing, reprocessing and recycling work of memory. 'To *remember* is to *interpret* the past; more correctly, to tell a story is meant to *stand for* the course of past events' (Bauman, 2004a: 28). The Holocaust, Bauman says, is a 'categorical murder', categorical since the victims were targeted due to being assigned a category. Its memory is thus a shared experience, conducted between the two traps of sacralisation and banalisation. This is particularly true of memory of catastrophe which, by highlighting the group's victimhood, sets it against other groups, and particularly against those who perpetrated the catastrophe.

While neither 'categorical murder' nor genocide, the Nakba has been described as 'ethnic cleansing' (Pappe, 2006) or 'spaciocide' (Hanafi, 2005), perpetrated by self categorising 'Jews', 'Zionists', or 'Israelis', against people they categorised as 'Arabs'. Not unlike the Holocaust, which changed not only modern Jewish history, but also the condition of modernity itself, the Nakba is a

foundational event for the Palestinians, a memory and a narrative standing for a series of catastrophic events whose influence continues in the present. After years of denial and silencing, and of self silencing (Kanaaneh, 2007) and ‘failure to narrate’ (Abu-Lughod and Sa’di, 2007: 11), the memory of the Nakba is in the process of being recovered, recorded, revived, theorised, and politicised not only in order to reclaim the past, but also shape the present and envision the future.

While not the only act of ‘ethnic cleansing’ in current history, the Nakba is unique in that the dispossessed Palestinians continue to be deprived of the right of return to their usurped lands. In particular, ‘internal refugees’ (Masalha, 2005) who remained in Palestine live side by side with those who expelled them, took over their lands and properties, re-conceptualised them as ‘Israeli Arabs’, and continue to deprive them of their citizenship and property rights. ‘For Palestinians, still living their dispossession, still struggling for return, many under military occupation, many still immersed in matters of survival, the past is neither distant nor over’. After sixty two years ‘neither Palestinians nor Israelis have yet achieved a state of normality; the violence and uprooting of Palestinians continues’ (Abu-Lughod and Sa’di, 2007: 10). In this sense the Nakba is about memory or commemoration, but also about ongoing dispossession, which makes the memory of the Nakba unique.

Edward Said (2000: 177) suggests that ‘memories of the past are shaped in accordance with a certain notion of what “we” or, for that matter, “they” really are’. The memory of 1948 remains disputed, and, as the writer Elias Khouri (2005) argues, the past and its narration are a burden which does not allow Palestinians to live in the present.

As memory is always a social and collaborative act, this paper is the story of co-memory, acquired not only ‘in society’, but also in conquest, constructed with the conquered other’s unresolved, ever-present ‘another story’. Furthermore, this paper proposes that Israeli practices of commemorating the Nakba in Hebrew are ways of assuaging unresolved Israeli Jewish melancholia for the Palestine they / we destroyed and the Palestinians they / we dispossessed, ultimately amounting to a narcissistic devouring of the colonised subject by the coloniser of the land.

Memory and melancholia

Each one of us, Israelis and Jews – has a shadow, the shadow of the 1948 Palestinian refugees. Our houses are built on the ruins of their houses, we till their lands. I spent my childhood and my youth bathing in the shadow of the Sidna Ali mosque. Only ten or twenty years later did I become aware of the full meaning of this sick privilege... (Davis 1994: 190).

Carl Jung (1989) insisted that all Germans participated in the Nazi atrocities either actively or passively, consciously or unconsciously (in Olick 2007: 304-5). Jung developed his theory of ‘the shadow’ to explain how we can feel badly for an act we did not personally commit and to diagnose collective guilt in postwar Germany: ‘the murder has been suffered by everyone, and everyone has committed it: lured by fascination of evil, we have all made this collective psychic murder possible’ (Jung 1989: 54, in Olick 2007: 308).

In ‘Mourning and melancholia’, Freud distinguishes between mourning – a finite process of coming to terms with the loss of a loved object, and melancholia – an unresolved pathology that can often destroy. In the work of mourning a reality check usually shows that the loved object no longer exists. While mourning is a finite reaction to loss, the melancholic puzzles us because we cannot quite see what it is that is absorbing her. Whereas in mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty, in melancholia the ego itself becomes the centre of attention: the person has suffered a loss with regard to an object, but she reports it as a loss regarding her own ego (Freud, 1957: 246).

Crucially, the energy invested in the object can regress into narcissism, which Freud expresses in pathological terms: ‘This substitution of identification for object-love is an important mechanism in the narcissistic affection... the ego wants to incorporate the object into itself, and... it wants to do so by devouring it’ (249).¹

¹ Interestingly, according to Said, although Freud’s work is often dismissed as being for of about Europe, his interest in ancient civilisations, like Egypt, Palestine, Greece and Africa, attest to his true universalism (Said, 2004: 54).

Re-reading the works of Israeli '1948 generation' poets and novelist, and examining the work of *Zochrot*, an Israeli-Jewish group dedicated to co-memorating the Nakba in Hebrew, leads me to suggest that the psychic re-production of Nakba co-memory by Israelis emanates from deep unresolved melancholia for the disappearance of Palestine and the dispossession of the Palestinians.

Thus, the poet and 1948 fighter Haim Guri is one of the most prominent protagonists of the tribal Israeli Jewish mythology. His emblematic 1948 war poems remain an indelible part of the Israeli Jewish ceremonial commemoration of the (Jewish) fallen of that war, affecting generation after generation of Israeli Jewish youth, and 'the Israeli Jewish ethos, the essence of collective memory and camaraderie that shaped "our" identity' (Horowitz, 2004: 7).

However, like denial, the victors' melancholia is also a paradox, especially when it expresses the love for the object that the ego destroys, love and hate mixed and blurred. It is worth remembering, as Freud has it, that narcissism is often accompanied by guilt. When the love for the lost object – a love that cannot be given up even when the object itself has to be given up – takes refuge in narcissistic identification, it is often replaced by hate for the lost object that the ego turns upon itself. Thus Guri expresses his paradoxical melancholia for the Palestine he participated in destroying:

This world has been destroyed forever. And my heart often cries when I recall it. Because it was part of my life, my childhood, and it had beauty and connections. Not only fear, not only death. *Many of us loved the villages we detonated, that world gone forever...* (Haim Guri, 2004: 189).

Guri's work depicts the illusory paradox of the simultaneous Israeli melancholic yearning for the loss of Palestine and the delusion that conquest may mean co-existence. The disturbing paradox of the melancholia Guri writes about evokes postcolonial melancholia and post-imperial nostalgia in the age of the post colony (Gilroy, 2004; Rosaldo, 1989).

For Israeli Jews preoccupied by the co-memory of the Nakba, the incorporation and arguably appropriation of the Nakba story, while definitely part of a search for a more just future, may mean turning mourning the lost object into melancholia for the mourning subject herself whose loss of 'the land' then becomes central as it re-creates its lost object by incorporating it into itself, and devouring it.

Another emblematic 1948 writer is S. Yizhar, whose famous 1949 story 'Khirbet Khizeh' tells of a group of pre-state Jewish soldiers destroying a Palestinian village and executing its inhabitants, which the soldier-author is repelled by, yet cannot do anything about.

Although Yizhar's narrator is stunned by the expulsion and by his comrades' response about the Jewish future of the depopulated village, and although his aim was to tell the story that haunted him and expose the 1948 lie (Yizhar, 2008: 7), he never actually mourned the expelled Palestinians, but rather 'all the good and the beautiful that came to an end in 1948... like Palestine, like the darkened orange groves... like this pre-state land' (Laor, 1995: 60). However, the 'Yizharian sorrow' does not become a tragedy because Yizhar cannot bring himself to reject the dominant Zionist ideology (Laor, 1995: 63). Yizhar the ethical fighter never doubts the Zionist project, and his stories must be read 'as... variations on how you can hide forever what you cannot see at present' (Laor, 1995: 71). Ultimately, despite the melancholic tone of his 1948 stories, Yizhar is unable to complete the work of mourning, and remains fixated within the *melodrama* of Israel, becoming one of the key architects of the Zionist myth. And myth, Laor reminds us, does not deny things, but purifies them, making them innocent, justifying them (Laor, 1995: 75).

***Zochrot*: Co-memorating, appropriating**

Jewish activists in *Zochrot* wish to fundamentally change their approach to the disaster of the Palestinians which formed the foundation of the Jewish state in the land... They also try to understand the *Nakba* as *their own history*. The Zionists expelled the refugees and prevented their return, making this story also a 'Jewish story' (*Zochrot*, 5 February 2006).

Zochrot – remembering (in the female form) – an organisation dedicated to co-memorating the Nakba in Hebrew – specifically targets a Jewish Israeli public through organising tours to Palestinian villages and urban quarters destroyed in 1948, posting signs to provide Israelis with information about the Nakba, and distributing printed material written by former Palestinian inhabitants. *Zochrot* aims to uncover ‘a kind of memory that was deliberately and systematically hidden’ from Israeli Jews, and, crucially, ‘Hebraicise’ the Nakba by creating a space for it in the ‘public discourse of Hebrew Israel’, and promoting an ‘alternative discourse on memory’.

Though a welcome negation of Israeli Nakba denial and erasure, *Zochrot*’s commemorative acts are problematic in two main ways: subsuming the Palestinian voice by *Zochrot*’s Israeli-Jewish narrative, and insisting that commemorating the Nakba is above all about Israeli-Jewish identity building.

Zochrot’s director Eitan Bronstein writes that *Zochrot*’s activities not only do not ‘depend upon the consent or approval of the Arabs in Israel, even those internally displaced’, they ‘might even exclude Palestinian groups in Israel because the main target is to change fundamentally the discourse in the “national Jewish camp”’ (Bronstein 2005: 233).

Indeed, according to Olick (2007: 98), ‘remembering is an ongoing process of mediation rather than of storage and retrieval, we must ask whether the verb ‘zochrot’ is misleading, and whether it should be ‘mazkirot’ – reminding. Is what Hirsch (1997) calls ‘postmemory’ – distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection – in fact not memory per se but invocation – a process of retrieval and reminding, guided by a politics of reconciliation.

Further questions are whether representing Palestinian refugees as victims compounds their trauma, while at the same time depriving them of voice; and whether the emphasis on Hebraicizing *Nakba* memory, despite the good intentions, is akin to Hebraicizing the Palestinian geography (see Pappe, 2006; Benvenisti, 2000).²

Reading these elegies for the Palestinian villages we destroyed in 1948 make me think about the persisting melancholia where mourning work cannot be completed, as with the Palestinians who live with the lost country within reach yet unattainable. And I wonder whether the incorporation and appropriation of the Nakba is not only a signifier of narcissism, stemming from guilt and unresolved melancholia, but also creates a (Palestinian) racial subject which the (Israeli Jewish) ego wants to incorporate into itself... by devouring it.

Conclusion

I am as much constituted by those I grieve for as by those whose deaths I disavow, whose nameless, faceless deaths form the melancholic background for my social world (Judith Butler 2004: 46).

I conclude with a brief discussion of Ari Folman’s 2009 film *Waltz with Bashir*, another illustration of Israel mourning itself rather than its Palestinian victims.

Folman’s film, the (animated) realisation by a group of IDF soldiers of the repressed memory of what actually happened that dreadful night in Sabra and Shatila, aims to make viewers feel sorry not for the Palestinian victims but rather for the soldiers’ post traumatic suffering. However, as Gideon Levy’s and Naira Antoun’s reviews point out, the film obscures several layers of self deceit, primarily regarding ongoing massacres, ‘the blood, which we have spilled and continue to allow to flow, from Jenin to Rafah’ (Levy, 2009). Just like Yizhar’s soldiers,

in *Waltz with Bashir* the soldiers of the world’s most moral army sing out something like ‘Lebanon, good morning. May you know no more grief. Let your dreams come true, your nightmares evaporate, your whole life be a blessing’. Nice, right? What other army has a song

²While agreeing that ‘it’s possible to work with the Jewish side, through people who can break into the Israeli Jewish consciousness’, the Palestinian writer Salman Natour cautions against ‘a situation, that because of their better resources, the anti-Zionist Palestinian narrative will be written by Israeli Jews. It’s not right’ (interview, May 2006). Other Palestinians told me informally that while *Zochrot*’s raison d’être is to work as a group of Jews with other groups of Jews, they do not need *Zochrot* to write the Nakba story.

like this, and in the middle of a war? ... And then the tank, from inside of which this lofty and enlightened singing emanates, crushes a car ... turning it into a smashed tin can, then pounds a residential building, threatening to topple it. That's how we are, singing and wrecking. Where else will you find sensitive soldiers such as these? (Levy, 2009)

The main point of *Waltz with Bashir* is the IDF soldiers' inability to remember their, not the Palestinians' trauma. As a therapist reassures Folman that the soldiers shone the lights but 'did not perpetrate the massacre', Israeli viewers heave a sigh of relief. The therapist further explains that Folman's interest in the massacre 'derives from a different massacre: from the camps from which his parents came. Bingo! How could we have missed it? It's not us at all, it's the Nazis ... It's because of them that we are the way we are' (Levy, 2009).

At the end of the film, animation is replaced by footage of the actual massacre. Suddenly we see the real victims, not those who needed psychotherapy. But as Antoun points out, the words of the woman screaming 'my son, my son' in Arabic are not subtitled, and her wailing cannot compete with the quiet reflection of the Israeli veteran ... Not only are Palestinians essentially absent then, they are also of one time – Sabra and Shatilla. 'Palestinians are not part of time's passage; they are frozen in an incomprehensible, and in effect inaudible, wail' (Antoun, 2009).

Beautifully executed but infuriating, *Waltz with Bashir* obscures another, older hidden trauma. Making a subliminal visual link between the Palestinian child whose raised hands cling to the lorry which takes the refugees to an unknown destination with the famous image of the Jewish child who raises his hands in the Warsaw ghetto, Nurit Gertz adds:

The repressed memory insists on seeing another shadow, beyond the silhouettes of these two children from Sabra and Shatila and the Warsaw ghetto: the same terrified, angry child's eyes, the same lorry, the same convoy of refugees, the same soldiers standing around, the same camera angle looking from a distance at the throng approaching it, and the same Israeli fighter standing on the sidelines, shaken, but doing nothing. This happened in Yizhar's story 'Khirbet Khizeh', depicting the expulsion of civilians from an Arab village in 1948... (Gertz, 2009).

Memories of catastrophe, Bauman (2004: 28-9) reminds us, are stories that need both storytellers and listeners. Yet 'the past' is never just a 'stubborn, once-for-all, unalterable, irreversible and solid "thing"', but rather a reprocessing job that 'had to be performed before the past could turn into a story'. And because the dead have no power to monitor the conduct of the living, the stories – told by contemporary storytellers in service of racial states and emerging nations – are the troops fighting on the battlefield of memory.

Judith Butler (2004) suggests that the loss of the Other impinges on our own humanity in ways which cannot always be accounted for, and our grief for that loss cannot always be rationally understood. The shadow of 1948 impinges in ways which cannot always be accounted for rationally, resulting in grief which is not necessarily given to the successful resolution of mourning work, but rather creates ongoing melancholia. Yet Butler suggests that staying with grief without seeking resolution through violence and without 'banishing melancholia' and 'getting over' the suffering of others, 'can be a point of departure for a new understanding, if the narcissistic preoccupation of melancholia can be moved into a consideration of the vulnerability of others' (2004: 30).

This paper argued that Israelis' impetus to co-memorate the Nakba stems from melancholic concentration on 'our' grief rather than from the Palestinians' loss. However, while at some early moment of realisation some Israeli Jews did have a sense of a lost dream, as my friend Nitza Aminov says, 'at some point melancholia became rage, and made way for political activism'.

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