

Palestinian Exile, Experience of Occupation and its Modalities of Resistance in the Works of Mourid Barghouti

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The experience of exile has significantly gained importance in the Palestinian movements of resistance worldwide as it shaped the modus operandi of the movements at large. The importance of Palestinian literature is that it helps to define Palestinian identity with the recollection of historical memories while in exile. The theme of exile is central to the works of the late Palestinian writer in exile, Mourid Barghouti. For Barghouti, exile is an unjust political condition forced upon them and their people. He examines the past and present of the Palestinian people who live under occupation and in exile. His works are filled with emotions and experiences of being an exile. Literature has become a tool for Palestinians to remember their past, mourn their losses, and celebrate their present. Using the frameworks of theories of memories and neocolonialism and limiting to the concepts of Palestinian exile and resistance, the study provides a new analysis of how Palestinian literature by exiled writers influences the politics of displacement and resistance.

Keywords: Palestinian exile, resistance literature, displacement, settler colonialism, homeland.

Exile and home are binary opposites where exile invokes an absence from the homeland or an involuntary movement beyond a familiar homeland. The Palestinian experience of exile is rooted in the

permanent displacement of Palestinians from their homeland since the *Nakba*, and they continue to experience more than seven decades of life in displacement and are denied an independent state. The experience of exile has significantly gained importance in the Palestinian movements of resistance around the world as it shaped the *modus operandi* of the movements at large. For them, exile is a burden, and they will always seek to go back to their homeland.

Palestinians call this involuntary displacement as *Ghurba* (separation or estrangement) or *Manfa* (banish or expel). It refers to concerns of displacement and expulsion from one's home, family, and community as a concept. *Ghurba* or *Manfa* invokes a feeling of a permanent state of being a foreigner in another country. For Palestinians, this concept is not a different mode of being but a geopolitical process of forced removal from their homeland to faraway destinations with the expectation of alienating permanently from their identity as Palestinians. Exile is not a choice for Palestinians; rather, it is an enforced reality by the occupying state. They are born into it, carrying deep sorrow and alienation.

Being a Palestinian exile carries a vacuum with their existence as they are away from their homeland, waiting for an impossible return. They are always reminded of their 'otherness' in their host countries, and their voices and identities are denied. This experience of otherness forces every Palestinian exile to search for their roots to survive the act of being in a vacuum. A person needs an identity to survive, even if it is a lost identity. A Palestinian exile lives in one place with the reality of another place where they have no access and are ultimately lost between their homeland and host land.

The concept of return is embedded in the idea of Palestinian exile as it holds an essential part in the development of the Palestinian identity of being an exile. The experience of continuous otherness invokes the idea of returning to the homeland. The demand for a return to the homeland is not merely to have a homeland but to correct the injustices to the exiled Palestinians. The idea of exile is inevitably connected to the concept of return. Whenever the occupier allows the exile to return to their homeland or when the occupation ceases to

exist, and exiles are free to return to their homeland, the act of being an exile ceases to exist.

When the state of Israel was established in 1948, the Palestinians were forced out of their homeland to make way for the newly arriving European Jews who were systematically oppressed by the European societies. Palestinians call this event *Nakba* or the 'catastrophe'. Within a few months, at least fourteen centuries-old Arab society became a Jewish state. This marks an important point in displaced Palestinians' collective memory and identity. To understand *Nakba*, one should realise there were no such cases of permanent exile except in the Palestinian case.

The word 'exile' evokes many thoughts in the minds of an exile when they hear the word. The word exile brings the reality of a person's uprooting from their homeland, their temporality of space and non-belongingness to wherever they are. The memory of the homeland will haunt an exile throughout his/her life. In his writings, Mourid Barghouti, the Palestinian poet, talks about the reality of exile. For Barghouti, being an exile is a responsibility to keep the memory of their homeland alive and pass it on to the next generation, who may see their homeland free and also to counter the coloniser's attempt to erase Palestine. In his works, Barghouti talks about the experience of being a Palestinian in exile. His memoirs *I Saw Ramallah*, *I Was Born There*, and *I Was Born Here* are filled with his emotions, reality, and experience of being an exile. The exile was forced upon him and his people so a coloniser could occupy their house.

Mourid Barghouti's Experience of Exile

Mourid Barghouti was born in the village of *Deir Ghassana* near *Ramallah* four years before the creation of the State of Israel. His exile began when he was not allowed to come home after finishing his degree in English literature from Cairo University when Israel occupied the West Bank and Gaza in 1967. The occupation left him stranded in Egypt, denying him his right to return for the next thirty years. Oslo Accord allowed him to return to his village after three decades in 1997, and he wrote his memoir *I Saw Ramallah* based on this visit. His second memoir, *I Was Born There and I Was Born*

Here, when he visited Ramallah with his son *Tamim* in 2009. He also talks about exile in his poems. *Midnight and Other Poems* comprised of several poems on exile, memory and history. His works discuss worries of exile. Their past, present, future and displacement.

Barghouti had experienced multiple displacements in his life. He was exiled from one place to another. Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Hungary. He was exiled from his homeland, his mother in Jordan, and his family in Egypt. The experience of exile for Palestinians began in *Al-Nakba* in 1948, and it represents a life forced upon them. Living a life in exile without and with an identity. Existing by refusing to be forgotten. Palestinian literature in the diaspora is filled with their desire to go back home one day. They desire to connect every aspect of their life in exile to their lost homeland. Whatever they experience around them will remind them of their homeland. The literary efforts of writers in the diaspora are to keep their collective memory and identity of Palestine through their writing. Barghouti was no different. His works also reflect the Palestinian experience and feeling of being in exile, the experience of being uprooted from the homeland, the experience of being marginalised and the experience of being negated and unwanted. His works are also filled with his aspirations to return to his homeland to continue his life as a human being.

Narrative of Resistance in the Works of Mourid Barghouti

Mourid Barghouti talks about the reality of exile. His works are filled with emotions, reality and experience of being an exile. Palestinians experience either a life in exile or in confinement, enduring a life of restricted movements and enforced IDs. The identity of an exile exists anonymously. They exist in between self and home, in a condition defined by temporality and displacement (Habib, 2013). The life of an exile is in a sad and apologetic state where permits and proofs define their life. The experience and feeling of being in exile is being uprooted from the homeland, marginalised, negated and unwanted. Exile is stripped of their identification with the land.

The life of an exile is motivated by their desire to return to their homeland. To give up that desire is to give up their homeland. To keep that desire alive, every Palestinian is creating memories recording

those memories and passing them on to the next generation, who may have a chance to see their homeland free. When the coloniser tries to erase Palestinian villages, the life and home of the people who lived there by expelling them, the exiled people create memories to keep the memory of their homeland for their children (Barghouti, 2000, p. 62). For Barghouti, the act of writing itself is a form of exile. He describes writing as a displacement from the normal social contract (2000:132). To destroy the existence of Palestine, the Zionist regime breaks Palestinians' relationship with their homeland by stealing history and culture and appropriating it as theirs. Colonisers become natives by appropriating the culture of natives, while the natives become aliens in their own homeland. The coloniser tries to turn Palestine into just an idea. Barghouti says:

The long occupation that created Israeli generations born in Israel and not knowing another 'homeland' created at the same time generations of Palestinians strange to Palestine... The occupation has created generations without a place whose colours, smells, and sounds they can remember; a first place that belongs to them, that they can return to in their memories in their cobbled-together exiles... The long occupation has succeeded in changing us from children of Palestine to children of the idea of Palestine (Barghouti, 2000, p. 62).

In the forward to *I Saw Ramallah*, Edward Said describes this:

Every Palestinian today is therefore in the unusual position of knowing that there was once a Palestine and yet seeing that place with a new name, people, and identity that deny Palestine altogether (Barghouti, 2000).

For a Palestinian, Palestine is reduced to an indefinite exile. The accessibility to the homeland is only possible through acts of memory for those who lived there for a brief time before being exiled. For the second-generation exiles, travel to the homeland is only possible through the narration of memories by their ancestors. That is why creating memory becomes important for an exile. To give their child an identity other than an exile. For a Palestinian, being in exile could be inherited (Bernard, 2007).

Barghouti remembers the very moment he got displaced. After completing his studies at the university, he was out on campus and listening to the radio to learn about the Israeli war on Palestine. In the Arab radio, it said, “Ramallah is no longer mine and that I will not return to it. The city has fallen.” (Barghouti, 2000)

For every exile, the moment of displacement is the moment of shift in their identity, from being a native of a place to being a stranger wherever they go. Living the life of a stranger is also living in a kind of confinement, conscious about the laws of the land at every moment. Showing ID’s and permits. Living under the continuous distrust from the authorities wherever you, the exile lives. Barghouti writes:

Stranger is the first to feel consequences... he is always afraid when they [Govt] are afraid... He is always the ‘infiltrating element’ in demonstrations, even if he never left his house that day. He is the one whose relationship with places is distorted; he gets attached to them and repulsed by them at the same time (Barghouti, 2000).

Barghouti explains here how an exile lives in a continuous state of doubt and lives a life of inferiority. They are denied the privilege of assimilation and continuously reminded of their outsideness. This experience of continuous outsideness deepens the desire to return to their homeland. The experience of outsideness also sustains the exile’s memory of the homeland. The continuous condition of being in exile is important in the production and reproduction of literature in their homeland.

The long exile created an existential paradox for him. He became a universal subject and an exile who sought his homeland at the same time. For an exile, occupation affects them to the same degree as it affects his/her people. Occupation distorts time and distance between people, places, families and even between birth and death. For an exile, his/her entire life is a combination of many distances. Barghouti says an exile has to call his/her homeland ‘there’ while the occupier calls it ‘here’. This is how distance distorts ownership (Barghouti, 2012). The experience of being in exile and memories of homeland also bring agony and trauma to an exile. When Barghouti

makes a trip back to Ramallah after thirty years, he confronts the trauma and anxiety of an exile who waits at the border of his homeland, waiting to cross the border only if the coloniser permits him to cross. Return to an occupied homeland is not really a return to his/her homeland. For Barghouti, returning to his occupied homeland with the mercy of the coloniser was a humiliation. The experience instantly takes them back to their past when the coloniser had taken their land from them. Though it is humiliating, it is important for Barghouti to remember that past. A Palestinian experienced/experiences two humiliations. One is the humiliation of losing their land, and the other is the loss of self-respect in front of the coloniser.

For Barghouti, it is important to maintain the memory of the homeland through writing. When an exile loses contact with their homeland, they preserve the relationship with it through writing. The reality of Palestinian identity and the existence of a Palestinian homeland can be maintained for the future generation of Palestinians only through writing. Barghouti calls writing as a form of exile. “writing is a displacement... a displacement from the normal social contract” (Barghouti, 2000). Writing will help an exile be free and not bound by anything. For Barghouti, the role of a writer is to deconstruct the symbols created by the occupier and to recreate the reality.

When Barghouti crossed the bridge and finally reached Ramallah, he felt a non-belongingness there. He faces a dilemma. He was not able to escape his past, and at the same time, he could not return to his past. He asks himself, “What deprives the spirit of its colours? What is it other than the bullets of the invader that have hit the body?” When he met the reality of Palestine, his Palestine in memory collapsed in his heart, being a mere fantasy. At some point in his long exile, he became a person with no land to go to. He could not go anywhere. Not even to his own homeland. A universal being. The long exile created an existential paradox for him. He became a universal subject and an exile who sought his homeland at the same time. For an exile, occupation affects them to the same degree as it affects his/her people. Occupation distorts time and distance between people, places, families and even between birth and death. For an exile, his/her entire life is a combination of many distances. Barghouti says an

exile has to call his/her homeland 'there' while the occupier calls it 'here'. This is how distance distorts ownership.

No nation welcomes a Palestinian exile, and they are not in power to return to their homeland. Barghouti says Palestinians are forbidden to enter their homeland, even in coffins. For an exile, homeland is not a question of romantic attachment to it but of eternal exclusion from it. When Barghouti travelled to Ramallah, he saw the coloniser reminding him of the law of the colonial state, to remind the exile his/her homeland has long gone. To make sure an exile doesn't feel at home even when they return to it. For those who did not leave Palestine, exile is the talk of the evening gatherings in the family or in the village so that they can connect with the exiles of their family or village. The exiles and their people, who live under occupation, are experiencing a kind of bond and distance at the same time.

For the Palestinians, homeland is not a question of romantic attachment to it, but of eternal exclusion from it. The coloniser reminds the exile of the colonial state's law to ensure the exile doesn't feel at home even when they return to it. Barghouti reconceptualises exile in terms of time and space. With time, an exile becomes a stranger to his memories and land (Barghouti, 2004, p. 131). In all of his works, Barghouti creates a metaphorical notion of exile, which helps him connect Palestinian identity with his exilic experience. For him, an exile is a victim of different modes of dispossession. Every Palestinian exile keeps their desire to return to their homeland through memory, identity and culture. The continued feeling of loss and absence makes the continuity of Palestinian-ness. As long as the occupation continues, the generation of Palestinian exile will remain.

Memory and Resistance in Mourid Barghouti's Literary Response to Settler/Neo-Colonialism

Literature plays a significant role in the field of Memory Studies, where it is often seen as connected to memory itself. Literature and memory are connected in two ways: literary works draw on widely accepted cultural ideas of memory and then represent these ideas in a condensed, artistic form through literary techniques (Neumann, 2008,

p. 335). Literature acts as a reflection and creator of memories where literary works draw upon culturally dominant concepts of memory and then distil these ideas into a more concentrated, aesthetically refined form. This duality of literature as a repository and a shaper of memory makes it a significant area of study within Memory Studies.

The exploration of literature through the lens of memory provides a rich field of inquiry that deepens our understanding of individual literary texts and sheds light on the broader cultural dynamics of specific groups of people. By analysing how literature engages with memory, Mourid Barghouti uncovers the ways in which Palestinian cultural narratives are constructed, transmitted, and contested over time. Moreover, literary memory reveals the power dynamics involved in the formation of Palestinian cultural memory, including the roles of inclusion and exclusion of certain people from it and how it created the ‘others’ by the settler colonial regime.

Mourid Barghouti’s memoir *I Saw Ramallah* and the poetry collection *Midnight and Other Poems* are deeply rooted in the collective memory of his people and serve as a literary resistance against settler colonialism. By invoking and connecting personal and collective narratives of self and the Palestinian people, Barghouti not only preserves the history and culture of Palestine but also challenges the ongoing colonial oppression that seeks to erase or distort it. Barghouti’s literary works utilise memory as a form of resistance against colonialism, emphasizing the enduring power of narrative in the fight for liberation and self-determination.

Literature plays an important role in Memory Studies, which is often seen as closely connected to memory. Literature and memory are connected in two ways: literary works draw on widely accepted cultural ideas of memory and then represent these ideas in a condensed, artistic form through literary techniques. For Astrid Erll, there are four key areas within Literary Memory Studies; *Ars memoriae*, which focuses on the historical importance of ancient memory techniques in literature; *Memory of literature*, which involves studying recurring themes, intertextual references, and the development of literary genres, as well as how literary works are remembered and canonised over

time; Memory in literature, which examines how memory processes are showed and analysed within literary texts; and Mediality of memory, which looks at how literature interacts with other media forms in the creation and transmission of cultural memory (Erl & Nünning, 2010, p.288).

Barghouti did not directly draw on ancient mnemonic techniques, but his works reflect the importance of memory as a cultural and historical practice. In his memoir *I Saw Ramallah*, the detailed recollections of Palestinian geography, landscapes, customs, and experiences serve to preserve these memories, signifying the purpose of *ars memoriae* in retaining cultural identity across generations. His use of vivid imagery acts as a form of cultural mnemonic device that preserves the Palestinian experience. Barghouti's writings actively engage with the memory of literature by incorporating references to Palestinian literary traditions, historical narratives, and oral traditions. Through his intertextuality and reflection on themes of displacement and exile, he builds on a rich tradition of Palestinian literature that preserves the memory of a collective past and contributes to the preservation of Palestinian voices in world literature. His works also become part of the cultural memory by representing key elements of the Palestinian struggle for identity and home.

Barghouti's works represent the process of remembering and forgetting in the context of exile. In *I Saw Ramallah*, the act of returning to a homeland he barely recognises becomes a meditation on the fragmented and sometimes painful nature of memory. His literary depiction of dispossession's psychological and emotional impact captures the complexity of remembering in a state of constant loss, making it a case of how literature can portray memory processes. Further, his reflections on personal and collective traumas capture the longing for home and identity in a land alienated by displacement. Barghouti's works engage with other cultural forms, including oral history, poetry, and possibly visual elements, representing Palestinian culture and identity. His use of language and narrative forms often reflects a blending of media, capturing the fluidity of memory through poetry's musicality and the memoir's narrative depth. Barghouti's

works function as literary texts and resonate with the broader cultural and media practices that shape and sustain Palestinian memory.

Mourid Barghouti's works offer a rich exploration of memory through literature, aligning with the view that literary techniques can distil culturally predominant ideas of memory. His writings serve as both a repository of Palestinian cultural memory and a tool of resistance against neocolonial erasure, reinforcing the idea that literature plays an active role in creating and preserving collective memory.

Conclusion

The Palestinian exile is the result of the Zionist colonial project in Palestine. When half of the Palestinians were pushed out of their native land, the coloniser expected them to vanish like how the natives vanished in earlier experiences of settler colonial projects. But the Palestinians remained in an indefinite exile. The forced identity of refugee did not negate their Palestinian identity. They maintained their collective memory and culture of their homeland through writing. Their bodies remained visible everywhere to question the coloniser. For a Palestinian, the experience of exile is also an act of resistance against the coloniser who wants to bury them as a myth or just an idea of the past. Exile becomes important with this resistance against the negation of their connection to their homeland.

The whole idea of exile gives the Palestinian exile to live in the hope of returning to their homeland. The idea of return helps them create memories and pass on their Palestinian-ness to the next generation. After all the attempts of the coloniser to negate the Palestinian exile as something not existing, an exile remains Palestinian through their act of preserving and recollecting memories. They refuse to become anything other than a Palestinian. This experience of exile may end only when the Palestinians are able to return to their homeland without any conditions. Until then, the resistance of an exile against the coloniser will continue.

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