

Hala Nassar

The Invocation of Lost Places

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*The struggle of man against power
is the struggle of memory against forgetting*
Milan Kundera

When it comes to narration and oral literature, modern scholars have given a lot of attention to the traditions of *Hikaya* (storytelling)¹. Both men and women told stories in the Arab world. Telling stories during the day was not common because everyone had work to do, but primarily tradition forbade it because to tell a story is "an act which savours magic". Besides entertainment during the summer or winter times, in the 20th century storytelling had taken a strong political dimension as well. The storytellers who used to relate

*inert episodes now bring them alive and introduce into them modifications which are increasingly fundamental. There is a tendency to bring conflicts up to date and to modernise the kinds of struggle which the stories evoke, together with the names of heroes and the type of weapons. The method of allusion is more and more widely used. The formula "this all happened long ago" is replaced by "what we are going to speak of happened somewhere else, but it might happen here tomorrow."*²

In the process of political struggle, storytelling acquires the function of collective memory. Accordingly, the storytelling tradition can be used not only to tell stories of a glorious past buried deep in the memory of the teller for the sake of entertainment, but also as a political weapon, when other means of struggle are proven to be futile and absent³. Telling

1. According to Pellat two distinguished forms of storytelling exist in the Arab world: "The tales of the supernatural, the ancient *asmar*, which correspond to the German *Hausmärchen*, are told by women, especially old women, while the heroic tales and historical legends are the province of men." Pellat, *Hikaya*, *Encyclopaedia of Islam*

2. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 1963

stories of a past life is not only restricted to the *Hakawati* storyteller, but rather it reaches to a whole society.

In Palestinian theatre, traces can be found of earlier productions which in one way or another have attempted to deal with the issue of collective memory. Currently, on the Palestinian stage the most outstanding performances based on collective memory are interpreted by female actresses: *az-Zarub* (The Narrow Lane); *Tarnimat al-Kursi l-Hazzaz* (The Melody of the Rocking Chair); or *Fatima*⁴.

az-Zarub was presented at the Second Jerusalem Theatre Festival, in December 1992. Directed by Fuad Awaæ, written and performed by Samya Qazmuz al-Bakri, the play uses a female narrator who tells significant political stories from the history of the Palestinian people, instead of telling legends and stories of a glorious Arab past.

The spectators are admonished to "remember" collectively as the actress impersonates the role of the storyteller and *travels* back in the history of the Palestinian/Israeli conflict. In a period when the media is focused on the escalating events in the West Bank and Gaza Strip under the Israeli occupation, *az-Zarub* presents the previously untold tragic accounts of Palestinian Arabs living in Israel, as a political weapon in a process of national struggle, in which wars and peace agreements have proved to be ineffective.

In documenting the narratives of five different women who survived the tragic events of 1948, the narrator evokes for her

audience scenes from their early life histories as well as her own in Acre: visits to the Pasha Palace and its baths, to Jacob's Wednesday Celebrations and the Feast of Ramadan, and scenes recalling the Palestinian fishermen on the sea front. Taking the listeners to a rock, to the seashore, the female narrator travels in time, recollects and tells stories about the Acre citizens who became Palestinian refugees in Burj al-Barajneh in Lebanon, and then she returns to the Acre of the present time.⁵ Listening to her stories, the audience is also reminded of Israeli attempts to obliterate the remnants of Palestinian heritage, culture and history through demolishing historical places and renaming the sites of Arab homesteads. Hence the play articulates a perspective on the conflict between the two peoples' claims to the same piece of land, where both nationalisms articulate identities rooted in the landscape.

Palestinians, who lacked an official state apparatus, entered the arena in which culture was increasingly mobilised to validate the authenticity of rights to the land. They had nothing but their stories and cultural statements with which to express their claims to Palestine. *az-Zarub* relies on personal interviews with Palestinian women villagers⁶ who experienced the 1948 War and are now minority Palestinians living in the State of Israel. The female *Hakawati* tells their stories by using their exact words. Before she enters the stage, the audience is shown many slides, posters, and pictures of the city of Acre taken before 1948.

As *al-Hakawati* (the storyteller) makes her

3. In Iraq it is known as *al-muhaddið*, in Morocco *fdawi*, in Algeria *al-qawwal*, in Turkey *al-makla*.

4. The play *Faóima* is based on the short story *Fatimas Träume*, written by Khalil Abd Rabbo. The play was first performed in Berlin in October 2000, directed by Awni Karoumi and acted by Samya Qazmuz al-Bakri.

5. On the 29th of September 2000, I saw the play at Palast T. in Berlin. This reflects how the issue of renaming with Hebrew names instead of Arabic ones is still alive.

6. Some of the Palestinian women whose stories the play narrates lived either in villages in the north of the Galilee, or in small villages on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, now erased.

entry among the waiting crowd and takes her seat, she says *every day I read the newspaper, but find no one with whom to talk about it, I said, I will talk*⁷. *al-Hakawati* then invokes the collective memory of Palestinians living in Acre, walks with them through the narrow lanes of the old city to Khan al-Akki (the Acre Merchants' Court), named after a famous local family, where children used to play before the 1948 War, and now empty. The storyteller also reminds the audience about another famous lane in Acre, Khan al-Umadan, at the centre of the city. In this big alley with its water fountain, merchants from Egypt used to rest in Acre before continuing their journey to Lebanon and Syria. The trading centre - which now exists only in old pictures - was full of merchants and shops selling silk, carpets, flowers, meat, cotton, herbs and spices. It was also a place where during the feast Palestinian children gathered in front of *Sunduq al-Agab* (The Box of Wonders) where the Khyal used to shout, telling stories with coloured pictures. At this point *al-Hakawati* abruptly alerts her listeners to the fact that Khan al-Umadan is closed right now and the keys are with an Israeli company for urban development.

al-Hakawati tells stories of past happy events like the ones in al-Ahli Cinema; known among the inhabitants of Acre as Masrah al-Shiek al-Lababidi. In the past this cinema-theatre-hall hosted many Egyptian artists on its stage. The beautiful big building with its wooden Arabesque balconies, its marble corridors, and coloured glass, was torn down, and now in its place stands a branch of the Israeli National Bank. A third striking example is the Pasha Baths in Acre that were turned into an Israeli museum. *al-Hakawati* impersonates a tourist guide as she informs the visitors to the museum about

the different sections of the palace and its famous bath:

*Yes, ladies and gentlemen, the bath was turned into a museum in the late 1950s, after the establishment of the state of Israel. It is one of the most beautiful architectural designs and I personally admire it. Here is the steam room, Hader hasSauna. The Pasha used to come with his harem and sit in the middle, while the harem around him massaged his body. I am not going to tell you about the Sultans and their lives, probably you know better, but here I am obliged to tell you that in recent years, the excavations that were done under the Palace, have revealed sites and evidences from the Second Temple.*⁷

Travelling in the past, the play reaches its peak as *al-Hakawati* reminds her listeners not only of important events, but of places and people who have left an impact on the lives of the people of Acre. She mentions what happened to some parts of the seashore - Shatt al-Arab - which was suddenly encircled with a fence and turned into a private beach. The people of Acre cannot go and bathe there anymore without paying an entrance fee, since it has become private property.

In digging up past memories of the people of Acre, *al-Hakawati* tells a story about the famous doctor Anwar Shuqayri, a surgeon and a gynaecologist. The Shuqayri family owned a big house along the seashore in Acre. In 1948, like many other Palestinians, they fled the country and ended up as refugees in one of the neighbouring Arab countries. Recently, the big house was demolished and in its place an Israeli company built a residential area. During the demolition process, the graves were

7. The quotes in italics are from the play *az-Zarub* and the English translation is mine.

destroyed, and the remains were collected in a box and were given to the Qadi of the Muslim court in Acre so that he could bury them. *al-Hakawati* comments that the people of Acre heard that the Shuqayri relatives in the city of Nablus were notified, but even in death one is still a refugee. *al-Hakawati* explains how she found among the ruins a piece of stone on which was engraved:

Dr. Anwar Shuqayri
A surgeon and a gynaecologist
Opening hours from 8 until 13 at noon
From 16 until 19 in the evening

al-Hakawati deviates from her original text and either updates her story or changes it depending on her audience's Palestinian experience.⁸

Towards the end, *al-Hakawati* tells about Umm Salim, a woman who has been separated from her son for forty-three years.

I am Umm Salim al-Bek from Tarshiha, I have a son in al-Nayrab Palestinian refugee camp in Aleppo. Who knows anything about him? I want to see him.

At the end, *al-Hakawati* says that Umm Salim left, and her footsteps on the sand of the seashore remained deep until a wave came and erased them *as if she was never there, and how many things were erased!*

In reviving the old tradition, as *al-Hakawati* finishes her story, she says *our story is*

finished, then thanks her attentive listeners, steps down from her chair, and mingles with the audience. The actress Samiya al-Bakri revives the ancient Arab tradition of storytelling in Palestine since it is assigned an essential role in the future of national culture and "its riches are equally part of the values which have ordained the struggle for freedom". *az-Zarub* documents stories of five Palestinian women who survived the events of 1948, a turning point in the lives of Palestinian people whether in Israel, under occupation, or in the Diaspora.

In a society where only stories, cultural statements, and past lives are left to express Palestinian claims to historic Palestine, *az-Zarub* tells stories not only to remind, but to be used as a political means when a society lacks more potent and effective ones.

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8. Interviewing Samya Qazmuz al-Bakri on the 2nd of October 2000, in Berlin, the actress said that "as I was performing in an Arab country (she refused to say which) and showed the piece of stone, I could not escape the fact that some members of the audience were crying. After the performance a couple approached me and the man said that al-Suqayri was his father. With tears and emotion, I gave them back the stone". During the performance in Berlin, many Palestinian refugees who also fled Palestine to Lebanon, and later, because of the civil war there, came to settle in Germany, were constantly agreeing with the events al-Bakri told them. Some of them corrected her if she mispronounced a name and helped her give the directions of how to get to places in Acre.