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DISPLACEMENT, NOSTALGIA AND EXPERIENCE OF RETURN: READING MOURID BARGHOUTI'S *I SAW RAMALLAH*

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Abstract

As Boym writes, "Nostalgia is an ache of temporal distance and displacement", and restorative nostalgia takes care of both of these symptoms. Distance is compensated by intimate experience and the availability of the desired object. Displacement is cured by a 'return home' (44). In this article, I study *I Saw Ramallah* by Mourid Barghouti and examine how this return becomes very important for the displaced. I expand on the analysis of nostalgia as a means of creating identity continuity, in the face of displacement, by adding an explicit focus on the experience of return. Set at the borders of Israel and Palestine, *I Saw Ramallah*, engages with Barghouti's life long struggle with his absence from his home. More specifically a memoir than a life narrative, it is an important walk through an individual's construction of his self in the moment he returns to the land which has brought him so much joy, and pain.

Keywords: Nostalgia, identity, person, memory, space, interaction, occupation, etc.

Nostalgia often emerges after displacement as individuals attempt to regain a sense of identity continuity through recognizing and redefining a shared past. A major source of identity continuity is the locations or types of locations within which given identities are enacted. Loss results in identity discontinuity, which nostalgia can repair by creating a shared generational identity to mend the lost one (Davis 107).

Place attachment can significantly influence identity. According to Goffman, face-to-face interaction occurs, by definition, in specific locations or settings. These locations constitute the *built environment*, or physical surroundings given meaning through

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interaction. Space does not determine interaction, but shapes, constrains, and influences it.

A major source of identity continuity is the locations or types of locations within which given identities are enacted; when continuities of location are disrupted, disruption in identity continuity likely follows. Repeated interactions in specific sites or types of sites will typically result in 'place attachment', or the bonding of people to place. Disruption of this attachment and the continuity it had provided results in identity discontinuity.

Conceptualizations of identity may vary. My use of the term follows Goffman's distinctions among 'social, personal, and felt identities'. According to Goffman, social identity is given to an individual by someone who does not know that individual well, to whom he or she is more or less a "stranger" (02); personal identity is based on knowledge of an individual as a "unique" person, as someone who has specific characteristics and a biographical history (57); and felt identity is an individual's "subjective sense of his own situation and his own continuity and character that an individual comes to obtain as a result of his various social experiences" (105). I focus here primarily on the felt identity. A central feature of felt identity is its tendency toward continuity, or at least perceived continuity, over time (Strauss). Thus change of any sort is generally interpreted as a loss and, consequently, as a disruption in identity (Lofland; Marris). Change results in the loss of taken-for-granted realities and the identities associated with them. In relation to felt identity, that loss may stem from a change in the physical world (Alway, Belgrave, and Smith; Anderson; Belgrave and Smith; Erikson; Fried; Katovich and Hintz 47; Olesen 205-20; Smith and Belgrave 244-69) or a change related to a loss of personal ability (Charmaz 168-95). The loss also affects personal and social identities: others come to define an individual who experiences loss differently as that individual's roles and identities change (Vaughan). In most situations of loss, individuals look for a means to preserve their former identities, or to establish new ones, in order to regain a sense of continuity (Charmaz, Davis). In addition, loss of any sort affects not only the present but also possible future activities and selves and requires a redefinition of activities and selves linked to the past (Davis; Katovich; Lofland; Maines; Sugrue; Katovich). Thus identity continuity is typically desirable, as individuals usually experience identity discontinuity as a loss, as a painful experience reparable through reestablishing the perception of continuity.

Davis argues that identity discontinuity results in the emotion of nostalgia, "that the sources of nostalgic sentiment are to be found in felt threats to the continuity of identity." Rather than an abnormal, undesirable, or overly sentimental response to change, nostalgia is "one of the means ... we employ in the never-ending work of constructing, maintaining, and reconstructing our identities" (31). Any time disruption in spatial continuity occurs; nostalgia may develop in response to a perceived loss. It is

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a sentiment of loss and displacement. Svetlana Boym identifies two types of nostalgia - 'restorative' and 'reflective'. Restorative nostalgia, as Boym describes it, "puts emphasis on *nostos* (returning home) and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps." It views the past with an eye toward recreating it – a desire to relive those special moments.

It is usually thought that by returning, one can recapture home and time. It is that constant wish and hope that can change present turmoil and non-existence into harmony, into something meaningful. Return thus has been a central theme in literature and poetry. "Return" for writers may take on many meanings as they interweave multiple layers of displacement and displacement, expressing the human longing to return both to a homeland and to a sense of self. Whether literal or metaphorical, return lies at the heart of Palestinian identity and existence. Of course, "return" is a term that may have different connotations depending on its context. Palestinian refugees in camps, struggling to survive under atrociously difficult conditions, may view return to their original homes with more pragmatic urgency than do Palestinians in more privileged circumstances: when displacement is mediated by homes, travel documents, and monetary resources, the need to return to a long-denied historical and familial legacy may be experienced largely on an emotional level. Moreover, "return" may take on a multitude of meanings for writers and artists whose works interweave multiple layers of displacement, expressing the human longing to return both to a homeland and to a sense of self. Return, whether literal or metaphorical, lies at the heart of Palestinian identity and existence. And like most realities that challenge the status quo, the issue of return has been persistently pushed to the border, where it lingers: unheard, but not unvoiced.

Return does not necessarily mean to go back; it is also to go forward, creating a new future from the fragments of the reclaimed past. This nature of the return is reflected in the book *I Saw Ramallah* by Mourid Barghouti. Part memoir, part essay, and part prose poem, *I Saw Ramallah* is a poignant account of Barghouti's first return trip to Palestine, after thirty years of enforced absence, a result of the Israeli conquest of the West Bank in 1967. Through his book, Barghouti makes a return to Palestine which collapses the temporal order, and memories of the past resurface like traumatic episodes. By adopting an autobiographical format, the narrator remembers those episodes in his life that continue to dominate his memories as well as his life. The motivating factor which precipitates the narrator's memories is his return to Ramallah from displacement from which thirty years of Palestine's history are evaluated. Throughout this thirty-three page chapter, we, as readers, are stuck with Barghouti in his perspective and in his mind, with him in the hot deserts on the outskirts of Palestine, witness to the performance which is about to take place. Much the same as in the narrative of Marcel Proust (1871-1922), by moving ahead, "one is always at the

same time moving backwards, to a new, almost miraculous understanding of the past" (Fowlie 222).

Barghouti makes clear the extent to which return- to history, to an imagined future, and ultimately, to the self, whether personal or communal- lies at the heart of both memory and transformation. The journey may be difficult, even impossible: the past lies irretrievably behind us; homelands "forbidden bridge" lie unreachable beyond borders marked by barbed wire and guns. But it is through return, Barghouti suggests - to the past, to memory "scattered fragments", to the homelands that exist in reality and the ones we create - that we ground the self and hence providing the means to move forward into the future.

Return is of particularly crucial importance for Palestinians because the denial of their return to the "occupied territory" is enacted both on the physical and cultural levels. Not only are Palestinians forbidden the right to physically go home (prevented from returning through a variety of means, including military force, political collusion, confiscation of identity papers, imprisonment, and worse), they have also been denied the right to a cultural and historical return: in particular, the right to preserve, express, document, and transmit their history.

Palestinians in Israel and in the Occupied Territories were long forbidden to teach their own history in schools and were forced to use textbooks that eradicated any mention of "nationalist" Palestinian history. Such suppression of cultural expression and transmission has significant ramifications; indeed, it is a form of cultural genocide that goes hand in hand with the physical destruction of Palestine that has been enacted since 1948. This history of censorship and cultural suppression makes clear the deep Israeli investment in countering Palestinian narratives of origin in the land of Israel/Palestine. But these narratives of origin are not fantasies; nor are they dispensable. For Barghouti, our sense of self, both on an individual and a communal level, our vision of our place in the world, is based on a sense of origins. We seek to return to our starting point, in person or in memory, in order to reconstitute ourselves, for it is through memory that we understand who we are and that we lay a foundation for who we hope to become. We return in order to remember and remember in order to return. But one of the lessons taught by Palestinian history is that both memory and identity are rooted in the contested ground. And so the personal return cannot be separated from the political return, because whether we wish it or not, Palestinian memory, like Palestinian history, is always already political, "The West Bank and Gaza? The Occupied Territories? The Areas? Judea and Samaria? The Autonomous Government? Israel? Palestine"?

Palestinian return is always literal. Particularly for refugees in camps, living without passports or officially recognized nationalities, unable either to travel to another

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place or to build a future where they are, struggling merely to stay alive under devastating economic and political conditions, subjected to physical and social oppression and to the military assault, "return" most often connotes just that: a physical return to the homes and lands from which they were forced over fifty years ago. This return is a right at once affirmed and denied over decades of suffering. "I look out of the bus window and I see their flags appearing and disappearing the repeated check-posts. Every few meters their flags appear" (24).

For displaced, home is irretrievably absent yet longed for, it must be felt as tangible. The absent presence and the present absence: home, like displacement, share an ambiguous relationship. The immediate reality of displacement is suppressed and denied while the open wound of a lost home is felt and acted as though it were real. Perhaps the most devastating loss of displacement is the realization of home. That which made it home and taken for granted gets lost forever. "Exiles have sudden journeys; hotels weave their way into our lives" (92). Home is all that which displacement is not - security, a sanctuary of those familiar, meaningful - a place where you want to be and remain until the end of your days.

To return is to be poured from one reality into another. "But I do know that the stranger can never go back to what he was. Even if he returns. It is over" (04). Thus return is often an ambiguous and disorienting experience, with joy and relief tempered, even obscured, by other emotions like disappointment, unfulfilled expectations, disillusionment and anger. Displacement serves as endless yet hopelessly inadequate preparation for the reencounter with home. The image of home pushes and lures the displacement home and then abandons the displacement into the reality of something else. The expectation is that something will all of a sudden become clear, unformulated questions would be answered and fragmented memories will cohere in a recognizable pattern. It will have meaning and lead to some kind of understanding. But expectation suddenly becomes an uncomfortable, unexpected reality. "I asked myself, what is so special about it except that we have lost it? It is a land, like any land" (07). Is it possible to have a resolution of expectation and reality, of displacement of people and place, of hopes and disappointments?

The returnee is changed by displacement, some of the essences of the process of change are left as a legacy in the country/countries of displacement and some is brought home. The returnee is anxious to have something to show for the years in displacement, all those years of absence and inevitably "see differently". "Do they look with me out of the window? Do they see what I see?" (37) Just as displacement provides a different perspective and new insight on home, so does return. That which was earlier subconsciously absorbed, transparent, and taken for granted as the home becomes strange and unfamiliar, consciously seen and felt as for the first time.

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There is much, also, that the displacement returns without. Return destroys the exilic communities that have enabled the experience of displacement to be survived. Exiles marry foreigners and/ or raise their children abroad, thereby creating a family that are strangers to one another, divided by different understandings of where and what is home. Return creates a diaspora of its own. One thing which is very important is although that displacement may not realize it, he or she returns without any real appreciation of what he or she is coming home with, without, or to. The displacement expects the home to have been irremediably changed in/by his or her absence; the displacement expects to go home and find it waiting, as before, as remembered, unchanged. There is both continuity and change, but the displacement returning has little or no effect on either, both having logic of their own. "I embraced my aunt, and over her right shoulder I saw the fig tree- solid in my memory-absent from its place…the fig had been cut off at the point where its awesome trunk met the earth. I greeted the neighbours and I recognized none of them" (55).

Return is a transition in time, a violent journey through condensed time. It is an attempt to grasp the tread that spans continuity and change, past and present; to understand the ways they coexist and are superimposed upon one another; to heal the rift created by absence, "they lived their time here, and I lived my time there". What we see here is no hero's welcome, no large cheering crowd to await the displacement's arrival, no ritual slaughtering of the fattened calf. The returnee may, indeed, drawback from such a reception. "What does my return, or the return of any other individual mean?" (16) Can any welcome, anyway make up for all the years of farewells? People have grown up, some have grown old, and some died; lives and relationships have changed, and those long-absent have been forgotten. It seems absence takes away attachments and connections, makes the displacement into a stranger who has no life left in that place called home. Even with close friends and family, the returnee may find himself struggling like strangers.

> What do your people know of you now? What do they know of the things that you have been through, the things that have shaped you, your acquaintances, your choices … You too do not know the times they have been through. Their features that you remember are constant and altered at the same time. Have they not changed also? (85)

Those at home take on unfamiliar and unsettling roles in honour of the returnee: as host, for example, "he swore he would not allow Mounif or me to stay anywhere but at his house if were ever permitted to visit the homeland" (44). The returnee is relegated to unfamiliar and unsettling roles: "A visitor? A refugee? A citizen? A guest" (11)? His return is to a home that has been rebuilt, renamed, removed, that has moved on.

> I used to tell my Egyptian friends at university that Palestine was green and covered with trees and shrubs and wildflowers. What are these hills? Bare and chalky. Had I been lying to people, then? Or has Israel changed the route to the bridge and exchanged it for this dull road that I do not remember ever seeing in my childhood? Did I paint for strangers an ideal picture of Palestine because I had lost it? I said to myself, when Tamim comes here he will think I have been describing another country (29).

To return is to go home, to go back, although there is no going home, no going back. To return is to arrive, to start again, to pick up the thread in a place that in some ways can never be returned to and in other ways was never left. Return can be anything one wants it to be. For Barghouti, his work rises from the return, from the impress of loss and the insistence of memory, from the stories he seeks to transform, the historical narratives he refuses to forget. Weaving together shards of memory and history with his own visions of the future, he seeks to give voice to what Palestinians lost and what is yet to be created. "What does my return, or the return of any other individual mean? It is their return, the return of the millions that is the true return" (38).

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