

**FROM IDENTITY TO SUBJECTIVITY, FROM *SUMUD* TO *POST-SUMUD*: A
PSYCHOANALYTIC READING OF POST-MILLENNIAL PALESTINIAN LITERATURE**

by

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Abstract

Sumud, which loosely translates as steadfastness, steadfast perseverance, stalwartness, or resilience, has long been the dominant cultural, political, and psychological lens through which Palestinian identity, agency, and strategies of endurance have been understood. In this thesis, I argue that today this framework risks overlooking more complex and immediate fractures, ambivalences, and vulnerabilities that accompany life under occupation and total war, obscuring other realities and deeper desires currently intensifying political and psychic estrangement in Palestine.

Employing a critical and decolonial psychoanalytic lens, I demonstrate how post-millennial literature, particularly that which speaks for, by, or about Palestine's younger generations, exposes the psychological burden borne by the younger generations, who are acutely aware of the futility of failed political promises and psychologically exhausted by a trauma that has become their ordinary. Expanding the concept of *sumud* to encompass post-*sumud* sensibilities—complex subjectivities, vulnerabilities, and psychic wounding—integral to the post-millennial political landscape, I offer a new understanding of how contemporary Palestinian literature grapples with the present reality and its profound psychic implications and ambivalences.

To understand the history of the shift to a post-*sumud* era, I examine the diverse, often contradictory, modes of articulation of Palestinian subjectivity and identity formation in the work of three Palestinian writers from across three different geographical locations: exile, Israel, and the West Bank. Beginning with the widely influential work of Jordan/Egypt-based Mourid Barghouti (1944-2021), one of the last of the 1970s generation of Palestinian writers and intellectuals, I track how versions of post-Oslo and post-millennial Palestinian subjectivities are negotiated and contested in the new writing of Israel/Missouri-based Sayed Kashua (b. 1975), and West Bank-based Ahlam Bsharat (b. 1975).

Both psychoanalysis and literature focus on what arises in the everyday lives of individuals. By critically pairing the two, I conclude that a new phase of Palestinian writing now offers a challenge not only to the brutal immorality of occupation, but to nationalist narratives of collective and heroic resilience.

Dedication

To all the innocent souls lost in ugly wars

Acknowledgment

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Note on the Text

All transliteration from Arabic into English are my own, following the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (IJMES) style guidelines. For place names, authors, historic events, and certain words such as *sumud*, I use accepted English spellings.

All translations from Arabic and Hebrew are taken from the published English translations of the primary texts cited. Where necessary, I have included transliterations or clarifications for accuracy and clarity, particularly when phrases hold cultural or linguistic significance that might be lost in translation.

I have used Chicago citation style, 18th edition. I have provided in the bibliography the web links for online sources.

Portions of my analyses in Chapter Five have been accepted for publication in a special issue titled *Wombs and Tombs: Hauntings and Generational Trauma in Arab Women's Writing* in the *Journal of Literature and Trauma Studies*.

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PREFACE

Jericho-West Bank, December 2, 2023

The war on Gaza had been raging for approximately two months when I made the journey back to Palestine to see my family in Bethlehem. I had left the UK, where I was neck deep in the present work on subject formation in Palestinian texts, as a way out of the critical quagmire of identity. I landed at Queen Alia airport in Amman, took the bus to the border between Jordan and Israel—what is called King Hussein Bridge by the Jordanians, the Allenby Bridge by the Israelis, and Al-Karameh Bridge (dignity) by Palestinians, and waited to arrive ‘home.’ It was around Christmas time. The news coming out of Gaza was already unbearable: airstrikes, bombed-out neighbourhoods, wiped-out families, dismembered bodies—a tumultuous ocean of unrestrained hatred and suffering beyond what could be humanely imagined.

When the war started, people were advised not to travel to Palestine or Israel unless it was mandatory. Only travellers returning from Jordan were allowed to cross into Jericho, presenting their crossing pass (handed to them by Israeli employees at the Bridge) to the Israeli soldiers at the checkpoint, who decide who can or cannot enter Jericho, and then from there to our respective destinations in the West Bank. Travel between cities was restricted, amplifying the sense of isolation between communities. Sitting in the shared taxi I was travelling in from the border to Bethlehem, I could not help but think of a passage in Mourid Barghouti’s *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here* where he narrates the unspoken pain and humiliation Palestinians are forced to experience at Israel’s crossing points. As the taxi approached the checkpoint, like Barghouti, I felt the weight of the war and the heaviness of the air settle over everything around us.

To kill time (knowing that our wait at the checkpoint was going to linger), I decided to revisit John Berger's reflections on Palestine in his essay "Undefeated Despair" and his foreword to Mourid Barghouti's memoir. At that time, I was in the process of revising my first chapter on the text—a reading of it through Fanon's notion of 'the zone of nonbeing', and here I was, face to face with the materiality of what is called the 'Holy Land'. The irony was that for me and Barghouti, the Holy Land unfolded as a land where nothing was lacking but holiness and colour. Berger's words stayed with me. He was known for his admiration of Palestinian resistance *sumud* (steadfastness) which to him manifested beautifully in the way Palestinians live their daily life in spite of every reason not to. To him, Palestinians live in a contradictory state of being that seemed to encapsulate the very essence of what it means to keep going when all other choices are foreclosed. I thought of his decision to call this condition "Undefeated despair," and all I was hoping for in that very moment was to get home safe.

Sitting there in the taxi, it was impossible not to think of Barghouti's descriptions of life-threatening journeys into and out of Ramallah in the early years of the second Intifada (uprising) in 2000. I felt all the sentiments he described: the fear, the uncertainty, that dreadful feeling of entering a zone where death ruled supreme. Today it was my own journey during another traumatic rupture. I felt that same quiet 'despair' seep into my bones, and I wished I could tell Berger that today hope had deserted me. All that I could see was their khaki checkpoints, and scattered palm trees in the distance. It was not hope, Berger! In the absence of the certainty of crossing, our despair became too paralysing.

I shared the taxi with strangers—fellow travellers who, like me, were just trying to be with their loved ones. Using the war as the ideal alibi, Israel decided to make life for Palestinians in the West Bank harder than it had already been before the war. Roads were closed off and those that Palestinians were still allowed to use were not safe from the unleashed violence of Israeli settlers.

We sat in the taxi tired, silent, clutching to our crossing passes without which, as we were reminded over and over by the taxi driver, the soldiers at the checkpoint would not allow us in. This small piece of paper marked us as desperate strangers sharing an uneasy silence on an uncertain journey. Who could read our silence, our unspoken thoughts, and our unarticulated frustration? I thought if they could just read it, they might be able to write it, and write our invisibility, our defeating hope, as it should be written.

We reached the checkpoint where four young soldiers were clustered with their rifles clung across their chests. The silence muffled the faint voice of the news reporter on the radio. We collectively knew that it was not any checkpoint on a normal day. It was a grappling hold, a reminder that movement itself was something we had to fervently pray for. Now, I was re-living a scene in Barghouti's memoir, where he crosses Qalandya checkpoint to the city of Ramallah in an ambulance. We were, too, at the entrance into their hell, their purgatory, waiting to be judged for sins they committed against us. When it was our turn, a soldier approached the car. There was something in his face that made me feel uneasy. Not coldness but a face hollowed of any compassion. He leaned down to the window and looked inside before he asked for our passports and passes. His accusing gaze moved slowly and cautiously from one face to the next, as though he was placing us into categories he only knew. It was a look that stripped us of our names, dreams, memories, and identities. To him, we were not individuals with all the differences one can list. We were his other, his enemy.

He carefully checked the documents before handing them back to the driver. He looked back inside the car from where he was standing. His blue eyes locked with mine for a moment. I felt as though he was looking for something he thought we were all hiding. What was it he wanted to see in our eyes? Was it fear, anger, defiance, or maybe hope? I wish I could tell Berger that I fumbled for all the definitions of hope but could find none. With a deliberate provocative grin, the soldier

said in English: “Welcome to Israel.” None of us uttered any word of defiance. I could sense the bitterness of his phrase settle over us. We were in Jericho, after all—an area that was supposed to be under full Palestinian control. That was at least what the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) and Israel agreed on in 1993—an agreement that is ironically called the Oslo peace agreement. Nothing peaceful came out of it for Palestinians. That agreement became the Palestinian second catastrophe after the Nakba of 1948 in which 750,000 Palestinians were driven from their homes and made refugees and 531 towns and villages were destroyed.¹ The soldier’s mocking words made it clear: the two state solution is a joke played on the PLO headed by Yasir Arafat, to officially recognise the State of Israel—a state that neither recognises the rightful existence of a Palestinian state, nor Palestinians as fellow humans. We left the checkpoint, but it did not leave us. The road ahead was unnervingly empty. Soon, we would go our separate ways, each carrying the weight of the encounter, the checkpoint, and the soldier’s words. With vacant eyes, I looked out the window at sandy hills in the distance and the stillness ahead.

¹ See “Nakba 60” in Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics on https://millennial.pcbs.gov.ps/Portals/_pcbs/PressRelease/nakba%2060.pdf

INTRODUCTION

People usually die, O Allah, in their warm beds or as elderly, tired of life and its pleasures. As for us, we die before we live, we die as children, remembering nothing from life but hunger, siege, and panic!

-Dr. Mustafa al-Najjar, Gaza 2024

This thesis uses a critical and decolonial psychoanalytic lens to explore post-millennial Palestinian literature produced after the second Palestinian Intifada (uprising) of 2000. It uses this lens to engage literary representations of Palestinian subjectivity and identity formation—representations that are discrete but entangled. A politically, historically, and culturally attuned psychoanalytic reading reveals that post-millennial writing portrays contemporary Palestinian subjectivity as a product of deeper desires and complex and immediate fractures, ambivalences, and vulnerabilities. This reading shifts critical attention away from dominant representations of an autonomous, psychically intact Palestinian ego and the “psychological coherence of the unbroken Palestinian psyche” (L. Sheehi and S. Sheehi 2022, 76) to reflect an incoherent identity and ruptured psychic reality.

The question this thesis explores and one which I argue to be constitutive of post-millennial literature is: *How does one cope when that which is to be endured has no end?* One cannot think of this question in separation from one of the most important words in Palestinian history and language of resistance—*sumud*. The Arabic word *sumud* (صمود), loosely translated as steadfastness, standing fast, steadfast perseverance, stalwartness, and sometimes resilience, has been the dominant cultural, political, and psychological lens to understand Palestinian resistance, agency, and strategies of endurance (Giacaman 2019, 370). This thesis, however, argues for adopting a ‘post-*sumud*’ framework that complicates and extends (complements rather than contradicts) the traditional understanding of *sumud* to include what remains hidden under the

external layer of steadfastness and resilience and unarticulated by the dominant discourses: a subjectivity worn out by prolonged occupation and total war. Post-*sumud* reading of Palestinian subjectivity does not negate the ethos of *sumud* but builds upon it in order to mirror the harsh political and psychic realities of present-day Palestine.²

In my analysis of selected post-millennial texts, I examine how these narratives foreground individual subjectivities that are often subsumed under nationalist narratives of collective and heroic resilience and lay bare the psychic and social impediments inherent in perennial struggles against occupation and oppression. I argue that post-millennial writings adopt a ‘pessoptimistic’ outlook regarding the current socio-political realities and the future of Palestine’s new generation.³ This ambivalent outlook is best captured by the Palestinian poet Najwan Darwish in a poem titled “The Sea” from his collection *Exhausted on the Cross* (2021; Arabic *ta’aba al-mu’allaqūn* 2018): “hope embroidered with despair/despair distilled from hope” (68, lines 8-9). Darwish compares the faint sense of hope his people uncompromisingly and defiantly maintain in the face of “a darkness that never ends/of a dawn that never comes” (87, lines 1-2) to a “madness” only known to them (75, line 9). The Palestinian suffering is exhausting, as Darwish writes in his title poem, “Exhausted on the Cross.” It is a heavy cross of historical losses Palestinians have been carrying for decades without any foreseeable salvation. While Jesus was delivered from the pain of the cross within a course of a day, Palestinians still raise theirs “with every dawn” (31, line 6). Jesus, as a symbol of salvation, has long been dead and God, as Darwish writes, is distant and “cannot know our pain” (35, line 19). The oppressed are left exhausted, imploring to be given rest:

2 The term ‘post-sumud’ has been first introduced by Layla AlAmmar in her 2022 article titled “‘That hateful limit’: Narrative distancing and Palestinian subjectivity in the post-*sumud* fiction of Adania Shibli.” AlAmmar argues that Adania Shibli’s work introduces post-*sumud* sensibilities, portraying Palestinian subjectivity as fractured, identity as fragmented, and social reality as ruptured.

3 The term “pessoptimism” was coined by the Palestinian writer Emile Habiby in his novel *The Secret Life of Saeed: The Pessoptimist* (1974). The word combines “pessimism” and “optimism” to reflect the complex and paradoxical state of Palestinian existence.

The ones hanging
are tired,
so bring us down
and give us some rest

We drag histories behind us
here
where there's neither land
nor sky. (35, lines 1-8)

Darwish speaks for those Palestinians who are acutely aware of the futility of failed political promises and are psychologically exhausted by a trauma that has become their ordinary. His collection acutely captures the Sisyphean nature of the impasse Palestinians endure being caught between two conflicting sentiments: steadfastness and exhaustion—between the illusion of “[b]elieving, Lord, that suffering/is your gift to us” and demanding that God “[g]ive us back the years of misery [...] even the lies we told ourselves” (“To Abdel” 33, lines 28-9;32-4).

Darwish, who belongs to the younger generation of Palestinian poets and writers, serves as a powerful example of how post-millennial writers navigate this contradictory state of being in both language, stylistic, and thematic choices. Like Darwish, authors writing in the post-millennial period mobilise fragmented structures, layered narratives, magical realism, and other experimental forms to capture complex temporalities and the impossibility of any singular, linear narrative. These elements amplify the sense of alienation and uncertainty, mirroring the psychological and existential struggles of life under a brutal occupation and a future that is perpetually deferred. As Bashir Abu-Manneh (2021) puts it, post-millennial literature, while foregrounding Palestinian identity as human identity rather than national or particular, also expresses “many post-Oslo feelings: anger, disillusionment, betrayal, and despair. Death and destruction bang loudly... Mass suffering... [and] Palestinian betrayal” (1). Palestine features as a place where “everything is

lacking / but injustice’ ... [where] all human oppression, denial, and resistance” are embodied (2). Expanding the concept of *sumud* to encompass these vulnerabilities, complex identities, and psychic woundings as integral to post-millennial political landscape, I offer new understanding of how contemporary Palestinian literature, particularly that which speaks for, by, or about Palestine’s younger generations, grapples with the present reality and its profound psychic implications and uncertainties.

In light of the ambivalent responses to the question of how much and for how long one can endure the ongoing physical and psychological onslaught, my thesis begins from within this contradiction. It responds to a broader shift in scholarship, which seeks to rethink, rewrite, and reread Palestinian literature beyond “conventional categorizations, canonizations, and periodizations” (Abu-Remaileh 2019, 22). To understand the historical shift to a post-*sumud* era, I examine contemporary Palestinian subjectivity and identity formation in the work of three Palestinian writers from across three different geographical locations: exile, Israel, and the West Bank. Beginning with the widely influential work of Jordan/Egypt-based Mourid Barghouti (1944-2021), one of the last of the 1970s generation of Palestinian writers and intellectuals, I track how versions of post-Oslo and post-millennial Palestinian subjectivities are negotiated and contested in the new writing of Israel/Missouri-based Sayed Kashua (b. 1975), and West Bank-based Ahlam Bsharat (b. 1975).

The thesis draws on a number of different theoretical discourses including decolonial/postcolonial theory, feminist criticism, Marxism, and post-structuralism. However, in my close reading of the selected texts, and in tracing the shift to a post-*sumud* era, I mainly employ a psychoanalytic framework that merges between Palestinian decolonial psychoanalysis, or what Lena Meari (2014) calls “Palestinian community psychology” and the works of Sigmund Freud,

Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, and Frantz Fanon among others.⁴ Lacan is used liberally in the analysis even if not as the main framework. Although Lacan's transhistorical theorisation of lack as constitutive to subjectivity may risk, as Nouri Gana (2023) claims, obfuscating historical and context-specific experiences of loss, I still believe that Lacan, like Freud and others, can be turned upside down and applied on the collectives even if their ideas were meant to explain individual pathologies.⁵ Fanon, as an anti-colonial psychiatrist, whose theoretical presence informs the decolonial orientation of the thesis, recognises the significance of Lacan's materialist reading of mental illnesses as formed by dominant discourses and social and familial relationships, not as "neurological disorders in the brain" (Shatz 2024, 75).

Bringing Lacan into the Palestinian context could help elucidate how the psychic and political deadlock Palestinians face today, which the treated texts also explore, is aggravated by their entanglement within a triangulation of the Real (ongoing trauma), the Imaginary (social and cultural mirrors, cohesive identity, and idyllic past), the Symbolic (Palestinian society/community) and the Other (the occupier). Real change –forging new relations with the Symbolic—necessitates separating from the oppressive Other that denies them recognition and justice. However, as Nadia Bou Ali argues: "If you are a Palestinian you must constantly abjure your alienation; you cannot separate from the Other before you have justice" (3). In other words, Palestinians are not allowed to accept their alienation, which is for Lacan a necessary condition of subjectivity. They are denied the ability to negotiate their subjectivity within the Symbolic because their position as subjects is foreclosed by the occupation which remains the main obstacle toward traversing the fantasy of exclusivist identities and constructed narratives. As long as Israeli occupation remains, Palestinian

4 Palestinian community psychology is an approach that is politically informed, culturally embedded and context-specific. It focuses on the collective nature of trauma and emphasizes collective agency and resistance as components of daily survival across generations.

5 For a critique of Lacan and Žižek and their inapplicability to Palestinian melancholia and traumatic experiences, see Nouri Gana in *Melancholy Acts* (2023)

individuals will never be able to pursue more liberating and expansive meanings of the self by acceding to their own subjective desires rather than being run by the desire of the Other (the national discourse and collective demands).⁶

Thus, pairing psychoanalysis with Palestinian writing now offers a challenge not only to the brutal immorality of occupation, but to nationalist narratives of collective and heroic resilience which often highlight resistance *sumud* rather than the psychological consequences of war. I argue that the selected texts portray a subjectivity that is not only robbed of its right to dream of a happy life, but one that has come to think “that a happy life was a kind of social deviation” (Kanafani 1963, 115).

Post-millennial Literature and the Question of *Sumud*

The Nakba (1948) and its aftermath remains a nodal point in Palestinian experience and cultural productions. However, literary texts produced in the aftermath of the Oslo peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) in 1993,⁷ which Edward Said (1993) critically and correctly described as “an instrument of Palestinian surrender” (3), engage with the new Palestinian reality. This reality is characterised by new catastrophes, the latest of which is the ongoing war on Gaza. The post-Oslo period, as Hoda El Shakry (2021) notes, has witnessed a significant shift across the transnational Palestinian art and literary scene with a

6 Other (capitalized) refers to the symbolic order in which the subject is born. It is the realm of language, law, and social norms. The other (lowercase) refers to other people in the subject's life.

7 In September, 1993, the Palestinian Liberation Organisation and representatives of the State of Israel signed an agreement in Washington that came to be officially known as the “Declaration of Principles on Interim Self-Government Arrangements.” These principles were criticised by Edward Said, Mourid Barghouti and many others. Although they offered the PLO and Arafat a foothold in Palestine, the agreement was a desperate, yet tragic political decision by a weary leader like Arafat who sought international recognition and financial aids without considering the tragic repercussions of the PLO's recognition of Israel on the liberation movement and national struggle. To read more about the agreement and its failures, see *Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process: Oslo and the Lessons of Failure --- Perspectives, Predicaments, Prospects*, edited by Robert L. Rothstein et al. (2015)

growing interest in the aesthetics of the everyday and the lived material and intimate dimensions of Palestinian identity (672).

This shift to the minutiae of everyday life functions as a counterstrategy against what Edward Said (1992) calls in *The Question of Palestine* the Zionist “discipline of details” (95). Said underscores the critical need to affirm the tangible existence of Palestine beyond mere rhetoric and abstractions. Paying attention to details is crucial if one is to effectively counter the Zionist vision of Palestine which, as he argues, has never been a general colonial one. It is a discipline of details that has effectively and successfully constructed an imaginary realm in Palestine for which Arabs have failed to provide a counterproposal. “The Palestinian Arabs,” Said argues, “always opposed a general policy on general principles” (95). They focused their political position on the negatives, unaware that it is not enough to just deem such a project unfair to the natives. If one is to counter the Zionist expansion, Palestinians, as Said argues, need to meet the details of the Zionist enterprise and produce a specific counter-narrative that methodically details the material reality of Palestinians, capturing the seemingly trivial feelings. Adopting a view that captures Palestinian exteriority and interiority (psychic and physical) is one of the most effective tools of resistance by which Palestinians and their humanity can stage a revolutionary appearance on the global consciousness. As Judith Butler (2020) writes, “[the] public sphere is constituted in part by *what can appear*, and the regulation of the sphere of appearance is one way to establish what will count as reality, and what will not. It is also a way of establishing whose lives can be marked as lives, and whose deaths will count as deaths” (xxi).

One should not dismiss the psychological function of writing, speaking, and remembering details for Palestinians. Attention to concrete details is a psychic compensation for the lack of control Palestinians have over the details of their life. Therefore, the most trivial becomes valuable. To appear is to exist, to emerge (Gordon, 2007, 7). To appear is to reclaim control over the details

of one's life in order to reveal a version of Palestinian self that defies the reductive representations through which Palestinians have been viewed. One major layer of Palestine's current political dilemma is one of visibility and visuality—how Palestinians are seen and who sees them, including the epistemological knowledge produced about them. In his introduction to *After the Last Sky*, Said (1999) writes about the problematics of visibility in the production of knowledge about Palestine and Palestinians, a description that assumed heightened significance particularly after October 7th, 2023:

To most people Palestinians are visible principally as fighters, terrorists, and lawless pariahs. Say the word 'terror' and a man wearing a *kaffiyah* and mask and carrying a *kalachnikov* immediately leaps before one's eyes. To a degree, the image of a helpless, miserable-looking refugee has been replaced by this menacing one as the veritable icon of 'Palestinian.' (4)

Given the dire political situation in Israel/Palestine, Palestinian literature, especially the one emerging from the West Bank, Gaza, and Israel, gives voices to Palestinians who are reduced to the status of the living dead, deprived of any human substance and symbolic representation within the neoliberal global system. The latter unabashedly paints over the suffering of millions under a settler colonial system that dehumanises them.

Post-millennial Palestinian literature—the body of literary works produced after the second Palestinian Intifada of 2000—builds on and expands this post-Oslo aesthetic shift. It continues to focus on the everyday and the lived material reality but with heightened attention to its paradoxes in the present moment. This literature amplifies the quotidian as a site of both resistance and vulnerability moving away from mere representations of *sumud* as a romanticised ideal and into exploring more closely the daily, sometimes exhausting, ways of survival. The new political and

historical challenges faced by Palestinians in the post-millennial period, beginning with the second Intifada and extending to the on-going war on Gaza, trigger the urgency seen in post-millennial writing, including the texts I examine in this thesis, to re-evaluate conventional tropes of memory, identity, and resistance, while attending to both the present reality and to historical losses (Gregory Fox and Qabaha 2021, 9).

Today, Palestinian society is deeply fractured, and systemic colonial violence is ruthlessly perpetuated at an unprecedented scale. Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank are ruled by authoritative and oppressive regimes (Abu-Manneh 2021, 4) that foster fragmentation and unfreedom rather than a unified vision of liberation.⁸ Geography is splintered and suffocating. Palestinians are trapped in isolated enclaves, divided by checkpoints, Israeli settlements, separation fences, and roadblocks. Gaza has turned from the largest open-air prison into an enclosed slaughterhouse, while the West Bank continues to endure a grim reality of growing Israeli settlements, closures, land annexations, and settler violence. Palestinians in Israel continue to face the state's systemic discrimination and silencing. Occupied Palestinians are left to face repressive mechanisms of control and division that aim to obliterate Palestinian identity and any desire for freedom and equality. Such is the new reality Palestinian writers navigate and grapple with.

This body of literature focuses as well on the “lived experiences” of Palestine’s younger generations. This generation is torn between the collective expectations to inherit the inextinguishable flames of resistance and its desires for normalcy, happiness, and freedom as universal rights for all. Born into wars, the new generations have not experienced pre-loss, undivided Palestine as a tangible entity, but experience that loss as a lived reality. The trauma they endure is ongoing—a lived reality rather than a passed-down collective memory. Hence, this

⁸ For a thorough review of Palestinian literature until the 1990s, see Salma Khadra Jayyusi’s *Anthology of Modern Palestinian Writing* (1992). For contemporary Palestinian literature, see Maurice Ebileeni’s *Being There, Being Here: Palestinian Writing in the World* (2022).

generation is not “the generation of post-memory” (Hirsch 2008), but rather a generation of re-memory, re-trauma, trapped in a nightmare that keeps repeating and rewinding.⁹ The second and third generations of Palestinians do not only relate to the Nakba and the remembered past as a transmitted memory. These generations are intricately entangled within its traumatic details which are continuously being re-witnessed and re-lived in the precarity of the present sociopolitical landscape in Palestine (Gregory Fox and Qabaha 2021, 19).

It is therefore not surprising to see writers increasingly experiment with creative genres and literary techniques, such as magical realism and science fiction. The employment of magical-fantastical occurrences, and other-worldly fantasy, ruptures, as Abu-Manneh (2016) maintains, “the burden of the real” (23), which requires some “redemptive messianic intervention” (23). He adds that “politics requires fantasy, and the weight of history can only be gagged by the imaginative energy required to escape it” (100). Kashua and Bsharat merge in the selected novels fantastical elements, such as spectral imaginings, uncanny doubling, parallel worlds, and imaginative ventures into the future. Not only do these fantastical escapes help ease the destructive psychic consequences of war, but they, as Basma Ghalayini (2019) argues, use it “to reimagine, re-configure, and re-interrogate the present” in order to open up new configurations of the future (xii).

The dystopic world which one encounters in science fiction does not require much effort, neither from Palestinian writers to imagine it, nor from Palestinian readers to understand it, especially those who are based in Palestine. In her discussion of Palestinian science fiction, Ghalayini (2019) writes that everyday life for Palestinians resembles a dystopia:

9 According to Hirsch (2008), the term ‘post-memory’ explains the belated memories experienced by a generation that has not witness the trauma first-hand. Post-memory is “a *structure* of inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience. It is a *consequence* of traumatic recall but (unlike post-traumatic stress disorder) at a generational remove” (106).

A West Bank Palestinian need only record their journey to work, or talk back to an IDF soldier at a checkpoint, or forget to carry their ID card, or simply look out their car window at the walls, weaponry and barbed wire plastering their landscape, to know what a modern, totalitarian occupation is—something people in the West can only begin to understand through their language of dystopia. (xii)

Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza are exposed to a plethora of high-tech and AI-enabled weapon systems. The surreal life conditions, which Barghouti (2012) describes as akin to being engulfed in a “black hole” (39), parallel fictional dystopias, and therefore, such a reality requires, as Bsharat shows, some fantastical elements and imaginary escapes to ease the cruel grip of the present, to disconnect from the traumatic past, and to evade the unviability of the future.

From *Sumud* to Post-*Sumud*

This thesis argues that post-millennial literature marks a shift from a celebration of *sumud* identity to the exploration of post-*sumud* subjectivity—one that grapples with the ambivalences, the fractures, and the uncertainties of the present and the future. *Sumud* has served as a central framework for understanding Palestinian self, identity, and resistance. The conceptual and practical meaning of *sumud* has evolved over time. The term *sumud* first entered Palestinian public discourse in the aftermath of the 1967 war and quickly became institutionalized in the 1970s through the discourse of the PLO and civil resistance movements. It was initially associated with surviving the dire circumstances in refugee camps, the physical act of staying on the land under occupation, the refusal to be displaced, and later evolved into a broader ethical and symbolic framework that equated enduring presence with defiance (Peteet 2009; Khalili 2007). As Lena Meari (2014) argues, the term *sumud* emerged not only as a tactic of physical endurance but as a relational, political-psycho-affective subjectivity, cultivated through collective struggle and grounded in a refusal to

surrender to colonial modes of control (549–550). In the interrogation cell, it became a mode of anti-colonial becoming: a reorganisation of the self as a node within a web of ethical and political relations, sustained by memory, imagination, and will (552–553). She adds that *sumud* came to constitute both a philosophy of confrontation and a lived form of relational resistance. While the term was shaped and mobilised by political organisations such as The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PELP), its force emerged through ordinary practices and revolutionary intimacy between comrades, families, lovers, and imagined communities. This process, as Meari demonstrates, produced a subjectivity that refused to recognise the authority of the coloniser or the rationality of colonial politics, and instead created a form of “revolutionary becoming” that continues to inform contemporary emotional and narrative formations (549–551).

Today, the term *sumud* has expanded to encompass different forms of (non-violent) resistance including education, art, agriculture, cultural practices, or simply to live. The concept includes the covert daily social, material, cultural, ideational, and psychic practices that help maintain a sense of normalcy and coherence in the face of dire and abnormal circumstances (Richter-Devroe 2011, 33; Busse 2022, 597). While it essentially focuses on the present, it is often invested in the future (Rijke and Van Teeffelen 2014, 93) and the inevitability of liberation (Khalili 2007; Richter-Devroe 2011). It is a crucial physical and psychological mechanism of survival that entails a sense of resistant acclimatisation to traumatic circumstances. When the praxis of *sumud* is employed, it is often framed as the sublation of oppression, fear of death, marginalisation, negation of rights and so on into a defiant knowledge of how to live under these circumstances (Peteet 2009; Khalili 2007; L. Sheehi and S. Sheehi 2022; Maeri 2014; El Shakry 2021). Julie Peteet (2009) defines it as “a refusal to acquiesce...in the context of an exceedingly powerful...Other” capable of mass destruction (149), while Laleh Khalili (2007) interprets it as a concept encompassing both “the fear of obliteration” and the potential for resistance against it (99). It stands as what the Palestinian

writer Raja Shehadeh (1983) calls “the third way” between armed resistance and hopeless resignation. In other words, *sumud* turns simple everyday acts performed consciously and unconsciously by Palestinians into political acts orientated toward future becoming, justice, and self-determination. In the Palestinian collective psyche, *sumud*, as a concept coined out of death and displacement, will always stand across generations, whether consciously or unconsciously, as an embodiment of a tenacious belief in the failure of Israel's efforts to erase Palestinian existence.

Sumud also carries profound religious significance, particularly within Islamic faith, where it draws on the spiritual ethic of *ṣabr*, or enduring patience in the face of suffering. In this context, *sumud* becomes not only a political stance but a religious practice. It is viewed as a form of submission that does not entail passivity, but a deeply held belief in divine justice and the moral imperative to persevere. This form of spiritual steadfastness is sustained by a religious orientation that locates meaning in bearing hardship with dignity, trusting in the eventual unfolding of divine justice. Such a framing does not negate the psychic cost of *sumud*, but rather deepens it, as the expectation to remain resilient becomes not only political or cultural, but also religious.

While *sumud* emerged from within Palestine and refugee camps in Lebanon and other Arab countries as a necessary response to existential threat, the ways in which it has been perpetuated and idealised differ considerably across spaces and communities. For Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza, *sumud* is internalised as both a psychological framework and a political burden. It is enacted through the smallest gestures: going to and returning home after school amid military raids and arrests, rebuilding after home demolitions, or caring for bodies and land within systems designed to sever those relations. In the camps and among displaced communities, *sumud* has functioned as an inherited emotional script passed through generations. But outside of Palestine, especially among the diaspora and international solidarity movements, *sumud* often takes on mythic dimensions. It is invoked as symbol for Palestinian dignity, endurance, and symbolic coherence. In

such projections, the image of the unbroken subject standing amidst rubble becomes a potent, but often, at least for those who live in the rubble, flattening, metaphor. These different articulations are not neutral. They reproduce moral, political, and emotional expectations that shape how Palestinians are seen and how they are asked to see themselves. What begins as a strategy of endurance risks becoming an obligation of performance. It is precisely this pressure to remain composed, coherent, and symbolically unbroken which my reading shifts away from. The thesis moves from reading *sumud* as a coherent model of identity to reading post-*sumud* as a psychic condition that emerges when the burden of symbolic resilience collapses inward.

This is not to suggest that my reading of the selected post-millennial Palestinian texts as post-*sumud* narratives dismisses the significance of *sumud* as an integral dimension of Palestinian culture, identity and self-representation (Khalili 2007, 101; Rijke and Van Teeffelen 2014, 87–91), and a long-standing social and psychic mechanism of survival and empowerment. As I argue in Chapter I, Barghouti celebrates it as one of the integral inner mechanisms that allows Palestinians to translate oppression, marginalisation, and abjection into psychically liveable reality. It is, according to him, what constitutes an ethical being and what makes the oppressed more ‘beautiful’ than their oppressor. However, this paradigm has its own risks, and, as the Palestinian psychologist Rita Giacaman (2019) argues, it is often “over-rated” (369). I would also argue that this overemphasis on representing Palestinian *sumud*, especially to global audiences, places tremendous pressure on both Palestinian individuals and Palestinian writers to conform to a specific representational mould that may not accurately reflect their predicament. The demand for steadfastness can impose a collective narrative that may sideline or silence individual suffering and subjective experiences, and “can obfuscate articulations of present entropy and the sense of incoherence and melancholic despair it breeds” (AlAmmar 2022, 553). For not only does this narrative overlook the fractures,

ambivalences, and vulnerabilities that accompany such a burdensome life, it frames and presents Palestinian experience as a single, uniform narrative.

Palestinian narratives and identity are complex, multifaceted, and constantly being re-shaped, and reconfigured to attend to intricate historical, geographical, temporal, ontological, personal, and communal realities.¹⁰ Palestinians, themselves, are diverse, and are not one and the same. Writing about contemporary Palestinian identity, Ghada Karmi (2021) writes that “[t]he Palestinians of today are split into different communities living different lives from one another...Each of these groupings has unavoidably acquired the characteristics of their environment and identities that reflect those differing experiences” (65). This also means that the ways Palestinians respond to the occupation, ongoing trauma, displacement, memory, and resistance are diverse and defy straightforward categorisation. When Tamim, Barghouti’s son, visits Jerusalem for the first time, Barghouti writes: “Tamim’s response may be different from mine in the end. I come burdened with my past. He starts from the white page of the future. I think, this page is his; it’s his to color as he chooses and to narrate as and when he wishes” (88). Not only narrating the Palestinian experience with one colour, that of *sumud* and resistance, denies the Palestinian subject’s right to her own “white page,” it also dismisses the fact that *sumud* is, first and foremost, a forced choice. Faced with only two choices and two colours, surrender or endurance, Palestinians collectively choose the latter. Yet, even Barghouti, who is himself an advocate for the ethics of *sumud*, calls it “costly endurance” (88).

The on-going war on Gaza illustrates my point here. When speaking about Gazans, *sumud* is always evoked. Observing from the outside, we witness human testimonies of endurance, of an

¹⁰ For an overview of diverse perspectives beyond mainstream political and historical narratives, see *Seeking Palestine: New Palestinian Writing on Exile and Home*, edited by Penny Johnson and Raja Shehadeh. The book ‘seeks’ to locate Palestine not in the geographical sense, but through memories, stories, anecdotes, and imaginative endeavours.

unparalleled attachment to life; the true embodiment of an unmatched *sumud*. So as to deflect our helplessness, we project on them a mythical image of heroic perseverance. It has become a common perception, especially among Palestinians outside Gaza, that Gazans possess the capacity to confront anything with unwavering dignity regardless of the severity of the atrocities and suffering Israel inflicts on them. Unaware and unintentionally, we, while standing outside the details, become complicit in imposing an ideal that obscures the psychic realities of existing under genocide, which Ali Abdel-Wahab (2023) captures in “On the Limits of *sumud* in Genocide: A Message from Gaza.” Abdel-Wahab writes:

We understand why [supporters all over the world] must tell themselves and tell us that we, Palestinians in Gaza, personify *sumud*. It's true that we alone know what it means to live and die through this, after 2008, 2012, 2014, and 2021, but we never chose to be the experiment of how much genocide and ethnic cleansing Palestinian *sumud* can endure. Our children certainly didn't.

Abdel-Wahab's words demonstrate how Gazan's *sumud* is not a choice willingly picked among many other alternatives, but an imposed condition beyond their control. Voicing his frustration of the unrealistic expectations to embody *sumud*, Abdel-Wahab sends a candid message to Palestinians everywhere. He writes: “No land, no cause, and no resistance struggle is worth surviving this carnage only to bear witness to it, to the total destruction of every aspect of your life beyond your physical body...*How could sumud overcome all this?*” (my emphasis).

Abdel-Wahab's rhetorical question with which he concludes his op-ed stresses the urgent need for new understanding of the Palestinian experience in the current bleak historical moment. Under ongoing violence, occupation, and a political representation that has failed its people, to survive is to submit to a reality where continuing to exist is framed as resistance itself—a deep-

rooted collective belief that is encapsulated by the now popular phrase among Palestinians: “To exist is to resist.” Yet, in a context of national disillusionment, political failures, and endless dehumanization of Palestinian existence, we must remember that the personal price paid for the struggle to continue (no matter what the projected image may be) can far supersede the significance placed on heroic endurance (Buch Segal 2015; 2023). *Sumud* may constitute the external image, the outer layer of life under occupation, but what lurks under the surface, especially for the younger generations, is as important to unpack and come to terms with.

I like to think of the conventional framing of *sumud* and identity metaphorically—a collage of steadfastness we admire from a distance and the distance we maintain is the selected paradigm and tools we employ in this aesthetic appreciation of the image. From afar, the collage may appear coherent and unified—fragments blending into a seamless whole. This is the conventional paradigm: the Palestinian subject as a symbol of resilience and resistance. But as we move closer, the fragments that compose the whole image become clearer and the picture begins to take another shape and meaning. What our gaze has initially captured as singular and uniform reveals itself to be far more complex and fragmented. Each piece carries its own story, burdened with different weight of trauma, exhaustion, ambivalence, hope, and survival. The pieces are not all the same, and some do not even fit and align perfectly. In that moment, when we see the picture for what it really is, we understand that also the cracks, the spaces between the fragments, have their own unsaid stories to tell. It is this complexity—the contradictions, the fractures, and the tensions—that creates the whole picture of what it means to be Palestinian today. Being Palestinian transcends the binaries that now dominate mainstream political or psychoanalytic discourses such as victim/perpetrator, surrender/*sumud*, life/death, trauma/healing. To be Palestinian is also to be entitled, as Barghouti writes, to express “unimportant feelings the world will never hear” and to have the “right to passing

anxieties, simple sorrows, small desires, and feelings that flare up briefly in the heart and then disappear” (45).

One cannot deny that the adaptation to physical and psychological violence requires a type of agency that persists under all circumstances, one that can incorporate disorder into a quotidian order (Allen 2008, 456). However, being under a constant threat of erasure, symbolically and literally cannot be always championed as heroic endurance. After all, Palestinians are not people with mythical or fantastical powers capable of enduring this existential mayhem to which it seems there is no end. Such a life is psychologically tormenting and demands coping mechanisms that may exacerbate the subject’s alienation, especially when the Symbolic Other (collective identity, society, culture, national and political representations) which should provide meaning and answers to the Palestinian subject’s sense of fragmentation, is itself ruptured and fragmented. It is important here to clarify that I do not conflate foundational alienation and constitutive lack upon which subjectivity is founded in the Lacanian sense with circumstantial lack/loss and alienation ensuing from oppression. While the notion of psychic exile is a core argument in my thesis, I do not particularly use it in the Lacanian sense as a constitutive part of the subject’s formation. However, I would still argue that the two cannot be separated. The circumstantial lack which is caused by oppression, economic deprivation, checkpoint crossing, racial profiling and racial gaze, and all forms of control and segregation revives and exacerbates the subject’s constitutive lack (humans are psychically split between conscious and unconscious). Being hence doubly exiled, Palestinians, as the analysis of the selected texts will demonstrate, resort to imaginary identifications, fantasy scenes, and symbolic substitutions to compensate for this recurring sense of lack and fracturing. Like the language (signifiers) of *sumud*, these mechanisms and fantasy scenarios enable Palestinians to ground a psychic sense of collective/individual self as coherent, autonomous, and in control over the environment it occupies. Yet, the selected texts simultaneously divulge how these

substitutions cannot protect from the painful traumatic reality Palestinians have to ultimately confront.

Focusing on resilience and resistance in the mundane details of life, which are usually structured by or in relation to the occupation, obscures certain realities and deeper desires, intensifying the Palestinian subject's psychological estrangement. As Jacqueline Rose (2007) argues, resistance for Freud "was a psychic reality that blocked the passage of the psyche into freedom. One of the mind's best defences, it cuts subjects off from the pain and mess of the inner life" (29). The madness of life under occupation leaves no space for any semblance of coherence, autonomy, and stability. *Sumud* mirrors to the Palestinian (collective) subject, tormented by fragmentation and loss, a unified image of national subjectivity with which they can identify. Reflecting an image of an undefeatable collective and indestructible spirit regardless of the occupation's permanent assault on the very being of Palestinians becomes undeniably necessary. It helps disavow the tormenting sense of fragmentation and ward off a persecutory anxiety through soothing positive images of the self that endures. However, this may also risk, as Abdel-Wahab's op-ed clearly articulates, subsuming the socio-psychological effects of the occupation and the urgent and ethical demand to constantly expose the direct and indirect existential and ontological crimes committed against Palestinians daily.

The impossibility to separate from the Other (the dominant discourse that defines the subject) in order to develop alternative, more personal, narratives of selfhood and future possibilities, creates, as I argue in the chapters, a subject at an impasse. This impasse is a consequence of an unresolved tension between *sumud* as resistance and *sumud* as a foreclosed choice, between despair and the desire for new beginnings, between a coherent self and fractured one. It is important to clarify that the Other in the Palestinian context, and in the selected texts, is not limited to the occupying force and its settler colonial laws that keep compromising people's

will, and limiting the possibility for forging an identity beyond the frameworks of resistance, *sumud*, trauma and loss. In Abdel-Wahab's piece, it is the unrealistic expectations of *sumud*, while in the narratives of Kashua and Bsharat, it is the masculinist conservative social collectivity, which, while presenting itself as offering a coherent mirror image to the subject, confines individuals within paradigms of being that no longer reflect the complexities of the current reality. By limiting the individual's freedom of thought, it maintains the suffocating psychological walls built by the occupation and its structure of oppression. As a result, this may lead to the reinforcement of toxic and corrosive social practices and behaviours to compensate for the tormenting sense of lack and ego-wounding, such as gender inequalities, honour crimes, social fragmentation, internal fighting and intra-community violence, which plague Palestinian society and Palestinian Israeli communities. Not only do these practices create internal ruptures, but they also lead to the scapegoating of those who are perceived as inferior in society as a way to redeem what I argue in Chapter IV is a masculinity in crisis.¹¹

I would like to briefly discuss a final relevant point but will not dwell on it as it requires a broader scope than this thesis intends to explore: the question of thematic freedom (or lack of it) when it comes to Palestinian literature. In an interview with Adam Shatz (2002), Mahmoud Darwish speaks about how Palestinian writers and poets face the impossible choice between aesthetic demands and collective responsibilities, between the desire to explore love as just love, a woman as just a woman, and a sea as just a sea, without being always interpreted allegorically, "[a]nd this is the whole question of Palestinian literature that we can't free ourselves of the historical moment" (68). This is not to say that Palestinian writers have not been exploring

¹¹ In addition to my analysis of the masculine in Chapters II, III, IV, see Joseph Massad's critique of Palestinian masculine national identity in "Conceiving the Masculine: Gender and Palestinian Nationalism" (1995).

unconventional topics, but what I am trying to say is that Palestinians are constantly under pressure when navigating complex cultural and political landscapes in their storytelling.

Palestinian writers continue to explore new themes and experiment with different genres and styles.¹² However, as producers of what may still be framed as a literature of resistance and a site of struggle (Harlow 1987, 2),¹³ Palestinian writers are often expected by Palestinian cultural gatekeepers and solidarity circles (including publishing industries, scholars, academics, and critics) to reproduce themes and representations that are considered worthy and suitable for global circulations and how Palestinians should ideally appear. I argue that the biggest challenge Palestinian writers continue to face is the ways their work is still received, read, and interpreted. While Sarah Irving (2021) maintains that “the post-Oslo period has opened up a less ambiguously negative space, in which concepts of personal liberation and social critique can co-exist alongside national allegiances” allowing for more diverse reading of Palestinian literature (104), the problem lies in what gets to be celebrated and what does not. The decisions on what is considered “Palestinian enough” for global circulation can obfuscate the complexity of Palestinian experiences and the multiplicity of the Palestinian self. It can also impose a narrative that does not necessarily speak for the Palestinian street.

I will clarify my point with a relevant personal example. In an article I submitted for a journal last year, I quoted the Palestinian poet Fady Joudah (2013) in a preface to his poems where he argues for the need to explore the possibility of a “Palestine that never was...since what has not yet arrived has not yet been lost” (185). He advocates for the freedom to forge new permutations as they emerge in the “mathematics of imagination” (184). I used the quote to suggest that re-

12 See the collection of sci-fi short stories, *Palestine +100* (2019). The collection is comprised of 12 stories (in English and in translation) that re-imagine Palestine in the year 2048, one hundred years after the Nakba.

13 The term was first coined by the Palestinian writer and critic Ghassan Kanafani in his 1968 study *Literature of Resistance in Occupied Palestine: 1948-1966*. See also Barbara Harlow’s *Resistance Literature* (1987); Bashir Abu-Manneh’s *The Palestinian Novel: From 1948 to the Present* (2016)

evaluating our relationship with the past and freeing identity of the fantasies of being that seek a state of wholeness could unlock new possibilities for the future and make room for a more expansive definition of the self. This interpretation, however, was met with criticism from one of the reviewers, who accused me of disregarding the historical and material reality of Palestine, and that “Palestine was and is and will always be real.” My intention was never to deny the history, nor to suggest that Palestine is an imagined place. The article was a way to demonstrate how post-millennial writers are already expressing a desire to explore the Palestinian self in its universal dimension, beyond a constricted adherence to a national identity that is itself structured upon trauma and loss. I argued that writers are establishing a new relationship with the past by spring boarding from the present moment which is fertile enough to sow the seeds of a future archive. This reflects ‘an optical shift’ which, I suggested, materialises in a clear desire to experiment with themes that reveal the Palestinian subject as more complex than just being an individual resisting an occupation. The reviewer’s conditional acceptance of the article involved changing the argument to express what they wanted to read—how writers are regurgitating the same homogenous image of a *sumud* self regardless of whether it encapsulates Palestinian realities or not.

This blurring of boundaries between identity (tied to a traumatic past) and the multiplicity of the self, between fiction and reality, and between novelty and conformity in the context of Palestine, imposes limitations and restrictions on self-expression. Readers/critics often approach Palestinian literature with preconceived ideas and expectations of finding a specific 'authentic' narrative—a tendency that can stifle an author’s creativity as well as force a constricted reading that prioritises certain themes and representations. Sayed Kashua, himself, serves as an excellent example to clarify the same point. Kashua has long been excluded from what is categorised as Palestinian literature fit to be placed on recommended reading lists for readers of Palestinian literature. Personally, I stumbled upon his work while searching for Palestinian-Israeli writers for a

course I was planning to teach. None of my Palestinian colleagues knew who Kashua was, but we all make sure Mahmoud Darwish, Anton Shammas, Emile Habibi, Samih al-Qasim, and other Palestinian-Israeli writers are on our syllabi. This exclusion, and the harsh critique Kashua has received from Palestinian and Arab scholars, is not because he writes in Hebrew.¹⁴ It is rather due to how he writes about the struggle of Palestinians in Israel which is far from being a celebratory image of *sumud*, solidarity, and continuity. Kashua (2010a) expresses his distress that critics approach his work with an assumption that it speaks for the entire Palestinian experience instead of judging him as a novelist, and not as a minority within a colonial context. If Mourid Barghouti, as I will show in the following chapter, celebrates the determination and agency of young Palestinians, Kashua depicts an obverse image of Barghouti's *sumud* portrayal. His characters are weak, fractured, and acutely vulnerable.

Post-millennial Palestinian writers present layered representations of Palestinian-ness that demand a reading beyond conventional approaches and images of *sumud*, resistance, autonomy and coherence. By stepping outside traditional frameworks of memory and identity, and by delving into the unconscious of the narrative itself and what remains publicly unarticulated, scholars and readers alike can gain a deeper understanding of Palestinian reality and a subjectivity that is more complex, and subsequently more fractured than what is publicly acknowledged. This shift, which this thesis seeks to contribute to, should not be conceived outside the broader vision for the struggle for justice and liberation. A truthful representation of Palestinian identity and experience in literature is another way through which, even if as an imaginative endeavour, justice can be served.

¹⁴ Anton Shammas writes in Hebrew, but his work is well-celebrated by Palestinian and Arab readers and critics.

Why a Psychoanalytic Reading

Shifting toward exploring the complex, multifaceted representations of post-millennial Palestinian subjectivity/self and how individuals cope with psychically tormenting realities requires the adoption of a different “parallax view” that cuts through dominant representations of identity, *sumud*, and resistance. A thorough review of scholarly work on Palestinian literature shows an engagement with the literature mainly through frameworks such as post-colonialism, feminism, trauma theory, memory studies, and transnationalism and diaspora studies among others.

Mainstream (Eurocentric) psychoanalysis is rarely applied, and when it is used, it is often merged with postcolonial and decolonial lenses. The question is then, *why is psychoanalysis often avoided?*

A simple answer may be that mainstream psychoanalysis has not yet fully recognised or addressed Palestine and Palestinian suffering. With the increasing attention paid to the Palestinian struggle for survival and liberation in the past few years, more so now than before with the ongoing war on Gaza, the unjustified hesitance of mainstream psychoanalysis to tackle the Palestinian experience is baffling.¹⁵ The willingness and readiness of psychoanalysis to unflinchingly address urgent issues like oppression, gender, class, and hegemony diminishes noticeably when the need to do so for Palestine arises. In such circles, Palestine transforms into a taboo word, “[a]n unspeakable ‘p’ word within a ‘p’ word that transforms the symbolic into the real with one utterance: *Palestine*” (L. Sheehi 2023, 249). It is often avoided for the anxieties and discomfort this taboo word causes within academic and scholarly circles, particularly now that any critique of Israel’s violence and crimes against Palestinians evokes anti-Semitic accusations.

¹⁵ See UK Palestine Mental Health Network’s published letter, “The moral Bankruptcy of Psychoanalysis: The Profession’s Response to Genocide,” which condemns International Psychoanalytic Association (IPA) for framing Hamas’s attack on October 7th, 2023 as an outcome of violence and hatred towards Jewish Israelis and not as a product of a colonizer-colonized relationship; see also Lena Meari’s (2015) critique of trauma discourse for its adoption of a depoliticised and decontextualised framework when approaching Palestinian suffering; see Lara Sheehi’s (2024) critique of psychoanalytic innocence and settler colonial outposts.

Mainstream psychoanalysis has been critiqued for what Lara and Stephen Sheehi (2022) call “psychoanalytic innocence” when addressing Palestine/Israel, which may also explain why scholars of Palestinian studies often employ theories that are more attuned to Palestinian experiences. There is also the risk of de-contextualising and de-historicising suffering and trauma, which psychoanalysis, with its focus on individual pathologies, has been guilty of. Lena Meari (2015), for example, critiques the application of trauma discourse within the Palestinian context for its adoption of a depoliticised and de-contextualised framework when tackling Palestinian suffering. She maintains that trauma discourses—which were first introduced into the Palestinian context after what she calls the post-Oslo liberal turn and the establishment of Western NGOs and human rights organisations with international funding—adopt an individualistic approach that priorities victimhood over resistance and *sumud*. Meari argues that the reductive focus on a victimised subjectivity obscures the political realities of Palestinians and how they continue on living despite the brutality of the occupation (79). Psychoanalytic neutrality, and at times the pathologisation of Palestinian resistance to the occupation, has served and even perpetuated settler-colonialism in Palestine/Israel. By offering a lacking picture of the material and psychic reality of oppression, mainstream psychoanalysis fails to address the root cause of Palestinian trauma, distress, and humiliation.

This is not to suggest that Palestinians and scholars of Palestinian studies have avoided psychoanalysis altogether. On the contrary, Palestinian academics, psychoanalysts, and clinicians have adapted and reshaped psychoanalysis to fit the specific realities of the Palestinian context, moving beyond its Eurocentric focus. Palestinian clinicians are decolonising the field by using it as a tool of disalienation, and a means through which Palestinian ego can be re-built and strengthened (L.Sheehi and S.Sheehi 2022, 41). Fanon remains, as the Palestinian psychiatrist and writer Samah Jabr (2021) argues, an important inspiration for Palestinian clinicians and psychologists for his

understanding that “subjection is not only political, economic or military.” It is “profoundly and inherently psychological,” and therefore, one cannot separate between “the struggle for justice and the struggle for mental health” (quoted in Shatz 2024, 463). Fanon’s anti-colonial thought has played a significant role in shaping Palestinian resistance. Indeed, Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and Yasir Arafat had used Fanon and his revolutionary thoughts on armed struggle as a collective therapy against a wounded (Palestinian) psyche (431). Fanon was not introduced into Israeli academia until the translation of his work in 2004. However, he had long been a prominent thinker for Palestinians and Palestinian fighters (Marton n.d., 1). It was the translation of his work into Arabic in the 60s that helped shape the emerging Palestinian revolutionary thought and resistance to Israel. Unlike his widow Josie Fanon who showed an unwavering support for the Palestinian cause and wrote extensively against Zionism, colonialism, and imperialism (Breakey 2024), Fanon had never addressed the question of Palestine. Regardless of what the reasons for this exclusion were, Fanon remains a key figure for Palestinian critics, clinicians, psychoanalysts.

One of the contributions to the field of Palestinian studies this thesis makes is its pairing of psychoanalysis with post-millennial Palestinian texts that are informed by the new material Palestinian reality and are “loyal to the Palestinian street” (El-Kurd 2023).¹⁶ The correlation between Palestinian narrative and Palestinian psychoanalysis is inextricable as both are deeply rooted in the exploration of “psychological subjective and intersubjective experiences, consequences, and psychic coping...[and] techniques [Palestinians] employ to engage and process the personal, social and political tribulations of life” under military occupation (L. Sheehi and S. Sheehi 2022, 8). Both build on what “arises in the everyday lives of Palestinians as central to the

16 For an overview of some recent readings of post-millennial literature, see *Post-Millennial Palestine: Literature, Memory, Resistance*. Edited by Rachel Gregory Fox and Ahmad Qabaha (2021)

survival of not only a national identity, but also of their individual psyche” (10). Not only can this pairing help us explore the material and immaterial realities of oppression and wounding, represent the unsayable, and critique hegemonic ideologies, but it can also provide powerful transformative tools to imagine new liberating possibilities of being and becoming human.

Pairing psychoanalysis and Palestinian literature allows us, to use Rose’s (2017) words, “to think against the grim orthodoxies of our times” (13). This coupling can be used to challenge and problematise entrenched ideologies and fixed systems of power and identity. Rose rightly observes that psychoanalysis can reveal hidden truths and unsettle rigid identities as they manifest in political life. Literature, too, she adds, has the capacity to challenge the status quo, especially when the clichés and deceptions underpinning statehood reach unprecedented heights (12). Literature can be a form of resistance as it can offer subversive ways of understanding the past, of reading the present, and of imagining the future. It is a gate into society's unconscious, and a rich space where collective and individual traumas, desires, and repressions are played out and symbolized.

This coupling of literature and psychoanalysis, especially when adapted to the intimate realities of the colonised, places my reading within a growing body of scholarship that rethinks psychoanalysis from the ground up. Although my reading is grounded primarily in a Lacanian and Fanonian decolonial psychoanalytic framework, particularly as adapted to the Palestinian context, it can be placed in conversation with a broader body of scholarship that engages with decolonial and anticolonial appropriations of psychoanalysis. While not directly shaping my analytic framework, critics such as Sarah Jilani, Ankhi Mukherjee, and Daniel José Gaztambide, among others, foreground a set of questions that resonate with this thesis: how subjectivity is formed and fractured under conditions of protracted colonial violence, how psychic life is shaped by structural foreclosure, and how the self relates to violence, repetition, and misrecognition. These critics turn to psychoanalysis to ask what might still be offered to those subjects for whom the social world fails

to make space, calling for a psychoanalysis grounded in the lived realities of the racialised and the colonised. In doing so, they also transform psychoanalysis from within, refusing its Western bias and Eurocentric assumptions by reading from the ground up, centring local histories, material conditions, and marginalised knowledge systems. Through such interventions, psychoanalysis is not only decolonised but also expanded in its theoretical and political scope and made capable of speaking to subjectivities shaped by colonial domination and its ongoing structure. My work, like theirs, is concerned with subjectivity not as a fixed site of identity, but as a structure marked by fractures, incoherences, and the collapse of national and psychic scripts.

The analytic work of this thesis offers a contribution to this critical conversation by reading Palestinian literature as a space where the psychic costs of *sumud* and resistance are laid bare. By prioritising indigenous experiences and knowledge systems, and by rethinking what constitutes psychic life within specific socio-political contexts and colonial structures, psychoanalysis here becomes a method for attending to what resists articulation, for understanding the physical and psychological manifestations of oppression, and for elucidating the socio-political landscapes that shape both individual and collective psychic interiorities, such as lack, desire, otherness, and the presence or absence of agency. Decolonial psychoanalysis can uncover the psychological exploitation, and I would add anxiety and aggressivity, inherent in settler colonialism which are often concealed by discourses of “normalisation,” “trauma,” “resilience,” and human rights (L. Sheehi and S. Sheehi 2022, 7).¹⁷ It can as well provide the necessary critical angle from which to understand the “ongoing conscious and unconscious processes of life under and against settler-colonial conditions” (7). As L. Sheehi and S. Sheehi’s (2022) work on Palestinian psychoanalysis under occupation demonstrates, psychoanalysis is not only a site of critique. It is a method for actively dismantling the colonial logic embedded in therapeutic and academic practices.

¹⁷ Aggressivity arises when the other poses a threat to one’s self-image.

However, L. Sheehi and S. Sheehi fail to expand their psychoanalytic approach to Palestinian subjectivity beyond *sumud* identity and resistance. In their analysis of Palestinian self or what they call “Nafs,” they invoke the image of Palestinians as wilful subjects who maintain a sense of unity and agency despite enduring systemic oppression. They argue that the Palestinian ‘Nafs’ is a speaking and a desiring indigenous self that refuses to be silenced, but remains autonomous even when asphyxiated (11; 143). Palestinian ‘Nafs’ continues to relentlessly resist, through the practice of *sumud*, Israel’s “regime of psychological foreclosures” (10). I do not oppose L. Sheehi and S. Sheehi’s invocation of wilfulness, and “the power of liveability” (27) to explain the admirable persistence of the Palestinian people and their insistence on living life to the fullest. However, what is problematic about their employment of Sara Ahmed’s (2014) “wilfulness” which she defines as “a diagnosis of the failure to comply with those whose authority is given [and]...involves persistence in the face of having been brought down” (1-2) is their understanding of this Nafs as unified. An intact, coherent subjectivity contradicts not only the Lacanian analytical framework they adopt but the numerous painful cases of suffering they examine. To conclude that Palestinians and Palestinian clinicians demonstrate psychological coherence, an unbroken psyche, and intact ego, collectively and individually (75) is also to obfuscate the fact that a unified self, or a disalienated ego, which aligns with the same liberal notions they go against, is not necessarily the way to attain liberation and justice for Palestinians (Bou Ali 2024, 95).

Resisting the structural mechanisms of occupation and oppression through the daily acts of *sumud*, or what they call wilful disobedience does not bring Palestinians closer to liberation from both the occupation and the signifier of the (social and national) Other that appropriates and articulates self-identity. On the contrary, as Nadia Bou Ali (2024) argues: “[w]hat the mechanisms of the settler colonial state seem to be aimed at is the deadening of the desire for things to be otherwise” (96). The state of unfreedom and psychic foreclosures are assaults not only on the

Palestinian self but on Palestinians as desiring subjects. As I will show in my analysis of the selected texts, Palestinians are deprived of “the capacity to utter and name any desire beyond that of their identity as it has been fashioned by and in relation to the occupation” (96), which exacerbates their sense of loss and fragmentation, and ultimately leaves them at an impasse. L. Sheehi and S. Sheehi and others who employ *sumud* as resistance tend to dismiss the fact that *sumud*—to be always expected to assume heroic-like strength and defiance—is psychologically taxing and requires a type of psyche that remains intact under tremendous pressure and unending cycle of violence and oppression.

In the following chapters, I employ an attuned psychoanalytic framework to explore how the selected post-millennial literary texts engage with multifaceted Palestinian realities, interrogate complex subjectivities, and navigate unresolved tensions between personal desires and collective (*sumud*) identities. I argue that Barghouti, Kashua, and Bsharat offer important insights into the psychological, social, and political realities of life under occupation, and the varied ways Palestinians respond to these realities. Since Palestinian literature acts as a repository for trauma, identity, memory, and resistance, it can offer a rich space for a critical exploration of the complexities of post-millennial Palestinian subjectivity and Palestinian collective and individual psyche.

Outline of Thesis

In Chapter I, I examine the renowned poet and memoirist Mourid Barghouti’s second memoir, *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here* (2012; Arabic 2011, *ولدت هناك، ولدت هنا*). I argue that Barghouti’s narrative unfolds at the threshold between hope and despair, pre-Oslo liberatory struggle and post-millennial fragmented realities. Drawing on Fanon’s “zone of nonbeing,” as “an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an utterly naked declivity where an authentic upheaval can be born” (1952/1986 xii), I argue that Barghouti’s portrayal of the West Bank reveals a complex interplay

between oppression and necropolitical conditions, and the emergence of a defiant subjectivity, or what I call in the chapter, *sumud*-bound subjectivity, among the younger generations. I will argue that Barghouti's romanticised admiration for this emergent subjectivity, and its ethical commitment to a certain social, political, or moral cause, obscures the psychosocial costs resistance *sumud* and everyday acts of heroism often entails. Being an outsider to the details of life in the homeland—with experiences and perspectives of a different generation—imposes on his narrative certain limitations which Kashua and Bsharat, with an insider familiarity, nuance and expand. Barghouti provides a critical reading of the outside kernel of reality. His observational gaze, while acutely attuned to the material details, is also characterised by long years in exile and a nostalgia for the restoration of what Palestinians had enjoyed before the failures of the Oslo agreement: a liberatory consciousness and a clear unified national vision of the collective struggle for liberation.

Chapters II and III examine Palestinian-Israeli subjectivity in two semi-autobiographical novels by the Palestinian Israeli journalist, novelist, and screenwriter, Sayed Kashua: *Second Person Singular* (2012; Hebrew 2010, *גוף שני יחיד*,) and *Track Changes* (2020; Hebrew 2017, *עקוב* (אחר שינויים)). I argue that Kashua in both novels offers radical insights into the Palestinian and Israeli psyche. The two narratives expose the failure of the system that produces the lost figures of his novels as its symptom. Unlike Barghouti's memoir that celebrates determined and steadfast subjectivities, Kashua's novels evoke psychical disturbances and affect economies of anxiety, desire, fear, obsessions and fantasies from the perspective of the disposable other (Palestinian-Israeli) in a world that is racist, divided and asymmetrical.

In Chapter II, I adopt a Lacanian-Fanonian analytical framework to argue that *Second Person Singular* expounds on the interplay between the Imaginary and the Symbolic (socio-political) realities of Palestinians in Israeli society. I demonstrate how the weak disposable other develops a distorted self-image shaped by a position of inferiority within a socio-political context

that positions the Israeli-Jewish self as superior. In Chapter III, I examine Kashua's most recent novel, *Track Changes*, which can be seen as a bridge between the desperate confusion of his earlier representations of the Palestinian Israeli figure, and his painful realisation that he has, for twenty-five years, believed in a false fantasy of equality and coexistence. I explore the novel as a battlefield between the desire to forget traumatic events (foreclosed by an unattainable mourning process), to find new beginnings, and the collective pressure to repetitively, and compulsively remember as resistance.

Chapters IV and V shed light on the formation of young female subjectivity in two Young Adult novels by the Palestinian writer, poet and creative writing specialist Ahlam Bsharat, *Codename: Butterfly* (2016; Arabic 2008, *اسمي الحركي فراشة*) and *Trees for the Absentees* (2019; Arabic 2013, *أشجار للناس الغائبين*). The two novels target different age groups, which accounts for the tonal shift between them. The first, aimed at a younger audience, introduces a character who is optimistic, imaginative, and inquisitive, still envisioning the possibility of achieving the dream of freedom for herself and Palestinian children. The second, written a few years later and geared towards a young adult readership, adopts a more realistic tone, leaning towards pessimism to reflect a reality that is fractured beyond the hope of any cathartic beginning. If Barghouti warns with a sense of urgency of the occupation's narrowing of ambitions and the trap of simple dreams, Bsharat, like Kashua, critiques it by portraying a society that participates in its own oppression.

In Chapter IV, I explore the interlinks between gender roles (particularly concerning honour and masculinity), (gendered) nationalism, and the Israeli occupation in *Codename: Butterfly*. I examine the detrimental role this triangulation plays in the formation of Palestinian (female) subjectivity. Like Kashua, yet unlike Barghouti, Bsharat problematises the national masculine mirror, which reflects a false coherent and intact image. Bsharat presents it, instead, as fractured, obscuring an unresolved tension between a victimised paternity and a masculinist national narrative.

Through the protagonist's imaginary metamorphosis into a butterfly, Bsharat proposes a being that does not rely upon masculine identity structures of the past, but on a broader, more liberating understanding of the self. In Chapter V, I examine how *Trees for the Absentees* pivots from optimism to pessoptimism, from determination to ambivalence, from hope to despair. I explore how the protagonist's escape into an Imaginary, pre-Symbolic realm of dreams, myths and spectral imaginings suggests that tolerating such a reality necessitates a psychic dissociation from it. While the novel advocates for locating the self within the tapestry of shared human struggles, experiences, and desires, it ultimately fails to actualise it. This failure is part of an unspoken collective acknowledgment that in the face of impending threats of erasure, escaping the confines of the Symbolic (the national and the collective) is an implausible wish to fulfil, existing only within the realm of fantasy.

In the final chapter, I return to the question of *sumud*. I then explore the recurring themes of death and spectral imaginings intricately woven into the narratives. I also offer some personal reflections on my role, and that of the writers in this thesis, as native informants, grappling with the ethical and psychological tensions of visualising new, nonconformist ways of being and becoming Palestinian. I consider whether such imaginings risk a betrayal of the collective struggle, or whether they open pathways to redefine Palestinian-ness in ways that disrupt both colonial narratives and rigid nationalist frameworks.

Limitations and Rationale

The writers selected for this thesis—Mourid Barghouti, Sayed Kashua, and Ahlam Bsharat—are not meant to represent the entirety of post-millennial Palestinian literature, nor does the thesis claim that their work alone can map an entire generational or aesthetic shift. Rather, their selection is guided by the analytical and affective force of their narratives, their distinct positionalities—Mourid Barghouti writing about Palestine from the perspective of exile and displacement, Sayed Kashua

from within the 1948 Palestinian context inside Israel, and Ahlam Bsharat rooted in the realities of the West Bank—and their availability in English translation, which allows for a broader conversation beyond the Arabic-speaking reader. In particular, Kashua and Bsharat are writers who remain rooted in Palestine, writing from within the geography of ongoing colonial violence and fragmentation. Their work emerges from the lived reality of post-Oslo Palestine and refuses to abstract suffering into symbols. They write from different psychic and social coordinates but share an investment in articulating the fractures, contradictions, and ambivalences of a post-*sumud* condition. Each writer foregrounds, in different ways, the emotional, psychological, and social consequences of having to inhabit a political landscape marked by national disillusionment, internalized trauma, and the failure of dominant ideological frameworks to provide meaning or coherence. When read together, their texts open up a space to think about Palestinian subjectivity outside national narratives, and to trace post-*sumud* sensibilities: forms of selfhood that are ambivalent, exhausted, dislocated, and often unable to articulate the burden they carry. This thesis, then, does not attempt to speak for all contemporary Palestinian writing, but to foreground a recurring psychic and aesthetic shift that is clearly visible in post-millennial literature and is echoed in the works of other writers from the same period such as Adania Shibli, Abbad Yahya, Najwan Darwish, Mohammed el-Kurd, and many others. While Mourid Barghouti's work is central to this discussion, his perspective as a writer of an earlier generation living in exile offers a valuable bridge rather than a direct reflection of the current post-millennial lived and psychic realities in Palestine.

Given the limited scope of the thesis and its focus on the experiences of Palestinians in the West Bank and Israel, it is important to acknowledge one limitation that warrants future research: the absence of any literary voice from Gaza, especially at this critical juncture. Gaza's rich literary production undoubtedly offers a unique perspective to both psychoanalysis and scholarly work on

Palestinian literature. Examining the literature produced during the war can offer new perspectives on Palestinian psyche when confronted with the inevitability of a brutal and painful death.

My decision to exclude diasporic Palestinian writers from this study is intentional and emerges from the thesis's central concern with the psychic, material, and political realities experienced by Palestinians who live within the immediate structure of occupation, fragmentation, and colonial violence. While diasporic voices are vital to the broader archive of Palestinian literature, and while they open necessary conversations about memory, identity and home, this thesis is concerned with the daily material pressures, internal contradictions, and psychological impasses that mark the lives of Palestinians who have remained or been confined inside Palestine. I wanted to focus on texts that are shaped from within these geographies, ones that grapple with the texture of everyday survival and what it means to endure not only violence but also the internalisation of its demands. The texts I analyse are produced from within these zones and reflect the psychic fractures and emotional saturation of subjects who are navigating political failure, symbolic foreclosure, and psychological exhaustion. In this sense, the exclusion of diasporic authors is not a dismissal, but a framing decision that enables a sharper focus on how post-*sumud* subjectivity materialises in texts written under what Judith Butler (2006) calls a derealised life, one that is at once hyper-visible and psychically erased.

Thus, I do not read Barghouti's memoir as an example of a Palestinian diasporic journey of return although it is categorized as one. Instead, this thesis shifts focus from diasporic experiences and physical displacement into exile as a psychic dispossession. Barghouti is positioned in the thesis as a bridge between a pre-Oslo outlook and post-Oslo/post-millennial realities in order to capture the evolving tensions and contradictions at the heart of the Palestinian experience across different temporalities yet within the same geographical location—the West Bank. Barghouti's experience and his outsider perspective serve in my analysis as a metonym for the traditional

framing of Palestinian identity and the external lens of *sumud* and resistance. My decision to focus on the West Bank and Israel is informed by my belief that limiting the geographical scope allows me to ensure a depth of engagement with the selected narratives to be able to capture the psychic realities of life under occupation from the different angles, perspectives, styles and techniques of each author. I would also add that the decision is indirectly driven by my personal experiences and lived knowledge of these areas.

The structure of the chapters is also deliberate and so is my decision to use two texts by each author with the exception of Barghouti's chapter. In Chapter I, I use Barghouti's second memoir only—including the analysis of poems he quotes at length in the narrative—as a crucial bridge between two states of being. I frame the chapter and Barghouti's outlook as a link between two generations, between *sumud* narratives and post-*sumud* sensibilities, and between insider and outsider perspectives. Beginning the thesis with Barghouti offers a better understanding of the changes across temporalities of which he is a witness. In my analysis of Kashua and Bsharat, I select two novels by each author. The texts are written few years apart which makes it easier to trace the evolution of each author's perspectives and the significant changes in the socio-political landscape that have influenced tonal and thematic shifts between the two narratives. In the earlier texts, both Kashua and Bsharat present some sense of hope in their portrayal of characters who still believe in the possibility for change, freedom, and equality. However, in the later novels, the tone shifts towards pessoptimism. This sentiment accurately reflects the new generation's ambivalent sentiments towards their reality and the deterioration of the socio-political situation. Kashua, who initially believed in the potential for equality in Israeli society, expresses in *Track Changes*, the failure of this ideal and a deep sense of disillusionment. Similarly, Bsharat's *Butterfly* carries a more optimistic tone, being written for a younger audience; whereas, *Trees*, geared toward young

adults, takes on an ambivalent tone, and succumbs to a deep sense of futility, fragmentation, and despair.

These transformations demonstrate how Palestinian identity is not static, essentialist, or monolithic the way it manifests in both the Zionist imaginary and the reductive representations of Palestinian subjectivity, including those done with good intentions (such as representations of victimhood or heroic steadfastness). Ultimately, writing is a product of its environment and the material changes that take place on the ground. While the Nakba of 1948 will always be framed as the Palestinian master signifier of loss, post-millennial literature responds to the psychosocial implications of more recent setbacks, more brutal colonial violence, debilitating on-going trauma, and rupture beyond any foreseeable repair.

CHAPTER ONE

The Zone of Nonbeing and *Sumud*-bound Subjectivity in Mourid Barghouti's *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here*

This chapter argues that *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here* (2012), the second memoir by the Palestinian poet and memoirist Mourid Barghouti, functions as a link between an insider position that is attentive to the grim hell-like realities of war and its psychological repercussions, and an outsider, pre-Oslo nostalgic outlook that celebrates Palestinian steadfastness and everyday acts of (non-violent) resistance. By drawing on Fanon's (1952/1986) work on "the zone of nonbeing" in *Black Skin, White Masks*, I argue that Barghouti's portrayal of the West Bank reveals a complex interplay between what Zahi Zalloua (2024) describes as "the necropolitical conditions that pushed, and continue to push, targeted bodies into the zone of nonbeing" (2), and the emergence of what I call "*sumud*-bound subjectivity"—a defiant subjectivity that Barghouti observes emerging among the younger generations. *I Was Born There* celebrates this emergent subjectivity for its willingness to risk the possibility of its own death for the sake of pursuing certain social, political, or moral causes to the end.

Barghouti wrote *I Was Born There* approximately a decade after his first award-winning and internationally celebrated memoir, *I Saw Ramallah* (2000; Arabic, *Ra'aytu Rām Allāh* 1997), which chronicles his first visit in 1996 to the city of Ramallah in the West Bank after thirty years in exile. Born in 1944 in the village of Deir Ghassanah near Ramallah, Barghouti's long exile had started following the six-day war in 1967—what came to be known as the Palestinian *Naksa* (setback). At that time, he was studying English literature at Cairo University. When Israel won the war and annexed the West Bank, Gaza, East Jerusalem, Sinai, and the Golan Heights, Barghouti was banned from returning to Ramallah. Not until 1996 could Barghouti temporarily return to Palestine as part

of the cultural attaché of the newly established Palestinian Authority. Since his first visit, Barghouti had made multiple trips to Palestine before his death in 2021 in Jordan.

I Was Born There is often described as *I Saw Ramallah*'s sequel and discussed in its shadow. Barghouti, however, rejected this sequel framing of *I Was Born There*. In a 2011 interview with David Mattin, he offers insightful commentary on it. In response to Mattin's question about the framing, Barghouti replied: "No... I left about 10 years between that first memoir and this one... So much has happened since then, to us, to Palestine, to the region. I just wanted to sit down and think about those days" (quoted in Mattin 2011). It is thus a reflective narrative, born from the urgent thoughts prompted by Barghouti's many later trips to Palestine and the subsequent years marked by intensifying political turmoil. The failure of the Oslo Agreement to deliver the hoped for independent Palestinian state and the return of the refugees resulted in the eruption of the second Palestinian *Intifada* in 2000—a significant historical rupture *I Was Born There* responds to. In Barghouti's two memoirs, he provides an aesthetic reading of the Palestinian scene which allows him, as Anna Bernard (2007) argues, to "envision a Palestinian unity that does not rely on a narrative of shared identity" (666). His work exhibits a detailed knowledge of life, and of the human maturity, the product of his commitment to living reality through his five senses (681).

The memoir comprises eleven chapters which unfold through the years 1998 and 2011. It documents Barghouti's trips to Palestine and his son Tamim's first visit in 1998, and seamlessly weaves in poignant flashbacks and critical reflections on the present and the future. This temporal fluidity goes beyond a mere bridging of the *There* and *Here* denoted by the title. This literary strategy underscores the enduring nature of the Palestinian historical pain and the impossibility of true closure through mourning. Barghouti's engagement with memories transcends individual recollections. It projects the post-Oslo devastating changes witnessed on the ground onto, as Norbert Bugeja (2012) notes, a broader "continuity of historical consciousness" (72). The main

events of the narrative centre on the turbulent years of the second Intifada—an anticipated consequence of accumulating tragedies and a people pushed to its limits. While conjuring memories of the past, Barghouti shifts the attention to the Palestinian present and to the struggles of Palestine’s younger generations in which Barghouti could identify the necessary qualities for revolutionary beginnings, even if political stagnation seems beyond redemption.

In his foreword to the memoir, John Berger (2012) describes it as an “unclassifiable” book (xii). It is a holding space for “heartrending stories,” and, at the same time, it is “a book about poetics, a personal memoir, the history of a family, a journal of confessions, an uncompromising political tract attacking the state of Israel, the corruption of the so-called Palestinian Authority, and the self-serving dictatorships of the surrounding Arab countries” (xii). Berger adds that it is most importantly about “the powerless,” and those who continue to show a life of dignity and courage (xii). In other words, Berger reads it as a testimony of Palestinian *sumud*, and what he calls elsewhere “undefeated despair” (2006).

Palestine features in Barghouti’s narrative as a place of ontological erasure where “death [proclaims] its talent for victory” (182), and where “[e]verything is repeated. Despair is repeated and hope is repeated. Heroism and treachery are repeated” (144). However, like Berger, Barghouti shows that the conditions of ontological and existential deprivation can still fuel an ethical attachment to life, or an ethics of liveability, which transmutes the meaning of death in oppressive contexts from an instrument of fear employed by oppressive regimes, into a mode of beings that breathes alongside the struggle for liberation. In this light, the analysis will unfold in two parts: first, I will demonstrate how the setting—the West Bank—is portrayed in the narrative as a grave-like, constricting space where meaning disintegrates and human fragility is tested. I will concomitantly explore themes of death throughout the narrative which become more prevalent the longer Barghouti’s experience of the place is. In the second half of the analysis, I will examine how,

despite this grim depiction of the material life under occupation, Barghouti maintains an optimistic outlook. He envisions the potential for new beginnings led by young selfless individuals described as heroes who are unaware of their heroism like the protagonist of Barghouti's first chapter, the driver Mahmoud. While Barghouti opposes framing Palestinians as heroes, calling it a representational crime, he is unable to disavow it completely for reasons I will address in the chapter. His first and last chapters present an idealised portrait in which steadfastness and everyday small acts of heroism are shown to outweigh the costs paid for the struggle to continue.

An Entry into “the Heart of Darkness”

Barghouti's portrayal of the West Bank breathes alongside Frantz Fanon's (1959/1980) description of “the zone of nonbeing” as “an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an utterly naked declivity where an authentic upheaval can be born” (xii). Fanon describes a zone in which the oppressed is in “a permanent struggle against an omnipresent death” leading a life that resembles “an incomplete death” (128). In such a place, the wretched of the earth are invisible to the colonial gaze, and when seen, they are viewed as “problematic beings” who should be locked in a zone “of total absence, the place most far from the light that, in a theistic system, radiates reality, which would be hell” (Gordon, 2005, 3). Barghouti portrays the West Bank in a manner similar to Fanon's. The West Bank unfolds before Barghouti's eyes and under his pen as a place of ontological lack and deprivation where Palestinians are metaphorically and literally isolated, trapped in “cans” (130), while enduring an occupation that sees “absolute force” as “the solution to all problems” (129). Far from being the lost paradise, Palestine in the present tense is a sterile land of murdered olive trees, thrown in their collective grave like dishonoured corpses (10). It is a land dressed in military khaki (130), the “heart of darkness” (134), a “singular hell” (212), and a “black hole” (39) where transcendence into the vast skies of freedom and future possibilities is made impossible.

Barghouti's Palestine materializes as ghettoized zones where Palestinians exist but are not seen, locked away behind a "satanic" wall that "has no definition but except in the dictionary of death" and in children's fear (129). Barghouti describes Israel's Separation Wall as a disfiguration of aesthetics and the beautiful (128), and a theft of its victim's desires to the point of paralysis (130).¹⁸ Barghouti contemplates the function of the Israeli Separation Wall at length. He describes it in a way that echoes what Eyal Weizman (2017) calls "the vertical apartheid"—a three dimensional "design" of military control (sky, land, water) that surrounds the lives of Palestinians to the point of asphyxiation (9; L. Sheehi and S. Sheehi 2022, 12). It is a disfigurement of the land and sky, a distortion of time, and the loss of the real in the staged (Barghouti 2012, 128-9). The wall as one of Israel's main tools of control and surveillance works to deny Palestinians access, not only to physical spaces, but to being itself—including humanity and the Palestinian subject's sense of self, agency, and control. It does not only function as a physical barrier to keep the Palestinian other at a distance, separated, and unseen on the other side of the wall. It locks Palestinians, Israel's 'problematic' other, in a zone below otherness which forecloses any possibility for an ethical recognition as the basis for coexistence.

The impossibility of coexistence under these conditions is explained by Barghouti as a conflict not of a religious nature, as Israel likes to claim. It is the subjugating appearance of the Jewish state and the image of the Israeli militarised Jew in the consciousness of the Palestinian. Barghouti writes:

...all three or four generations of Palestinians have seen of [the Jew] is his helmet.

They've seen the Jew only in Khaki, with his fingers on his rifle's trigger, They've

18 The construction of the Wall began in 2002 to prevent, as Israel claimed, the violence that surged during the second Intifada. The 8-metre-high wall surrounds the West Bank and extends approximately 700 Kilometres. While it incorporates many Israeli settlements, it also divides Palestinian communities and illegally annexes what is left of their land. The Wall is considered illegal under international law.

seen him only as a sniper at a window, an officer in a tank, a conscript at a checkpoint, a guard checking his metal heels past the doors to prison cells...or a heavy hand in the interrogation rooms [...]. (32)

When Palestinians are de-humanised, the violence of the occupation is granted an ethical ground; Palestinians become as Barghouti notes “just corpses” (45), emptied of the “life stories of [their] bodies and our senses” (59), and therefore, their lives, to use Judith Butler’s (2016) words “cannot be lost, and cannot be destroyed, because they already inhabit a lost and destroyed zone; they are, ontologically, and from the start, already lost and destroyed, which means that when they are destroyed in war, nothing is destroyed’ (xix). In other words, we did not kill them; they simply did not exist!¹⁹

Barghouti’s memoir invites an existential reading of the Palestinian collective dream as a dream not only of life and living but of an ordinary death. The epigraph by Dr. Mustafa al-Najjar, quoted at the top of the introduction chapter: “People usually die, O Allah, in their warm beds or as elderly, tired of life and its pleasures. As for us, we die before we live, we die as children, remembering nothing from life but hunger, siege, and panic,” encapsulates the themes and atmosphere of a poem titled “It’s Also Fine,” which Barghouti reproduces at length in his memoir.²⁰ Subjected to massacres at intervals, death invariably wins in a race against the dream of an ordinary life for Palestinians (113). Following the 2002 massacre in Jenin refugee camp and the violence that was unleashed during the first few years of the second Intifada, Barghouti speaks of the dream of an “undusty death” with “a graceful farewell”:

19 A statement that recalls the infamous words of the first female Israeli prime minister, Golda Meir, “It was not as if there was a Palestinian people in Palestine and we came and threw them out and took their country away from them. They did not exist” (quoted in Yadid 2015).

20 Dr. al-Najjar posted these words shortly before he was killed in an Israeli airstrike in Gaza in February 2024. To read more about Dr. al-Najjar’s statement, see “‘We die of hunger in a world overflowing with food,’ Al-Najjar shakes the conscience of humanity” in The Palestinian Information Center, 8 February 2024.

It's also fine to die in our beds
On a clean pillow
And among our friends.
It's fine to die, once,
[...]
With no scratches, no chains, no banners,
And no petitions
[...]
hoping that, someday, someone else
will change it. (113-114)

The poem and the epigraph entwine themes of death in life—a life that is “pre-naturally close to death” (Hook 2020, 356). “As for us, we die before we live” implies a sense of entrapment in a zone of the undead—a hollow site between life and death which Barghouti’s narrative becomes a witness to. In describing how death has become part of the Palestinian daily scene, Barghouti writes that “death, like a creature of legend, were both outside and inside, behind the windows and in front of them. It seems impossible to get him out of one’s mind” (121). Getting into the homeland is akin to an entrance to a hellish zone in which the “fragility of the human body” is constantly tested, and where “the customary distance between the moments of birth and death is distorted” (79). To enter such a zone, one is required to cross multiple obstacles, martial scenes and crossing points with “earthworks, rocks, and artificial mounds” (134). It is a torturing process which he equates to a real descent into “the heart of darkness” (134), a “stagnation,” an inhibition “to the point of paralysis,” “a decline into small dreams” (130), and a psychological war where God disappears in what he cynically calls a “muddy divine comedy” (132).

In a chapter titled “The Ambulance,” Barghouti narrates an incident where he and a poet friend smuggle themselves into Ramallah in an ambulance, or as Barghouti writes, “in the company of death” (121). While waiting at Qalandya checkpoint, the main entrance to Ramallah—sarcastically referred to as the “promised Qalandahar” by Palestinians or “Inferno” by Barghouti—an important conversation takes place between him and his friend:

‘We’re lucky, Faisal. Inferno is open today. Prepare for the pleasure of entry, my friend.’

‘We have a long wait ahead of us in Purgatory, Signor Alighieri.’

‘This Comedy is in no way divine. It’s covered in mud, as you can see.’

‘Don’t forget that this is the mud of the Holy Land. We can call it *The Muddy Divine Comedy*.’

‘And this is your crossing point to Paradise, Poet.’

‘Paradise Regained or Paradise Lost, Mr. Milton?’

‘We’re starting to talk nonsense’

‘Yes, we’re talking nonsense.’

‘Are we really?’

‘No , the Holy Land is talking nonsense.’

[...]

‘You’re a man with a cause and a big-shot writer and you’re talking nonsense?’

‘What else do you expect from me when I’m creeping across the border in an ambulance like a mouse? Do you want me to roar? What do you want from me?’

‘I want Godot.’

‘You’re waiting for Godot and what you’ll get is his brother Shlomo.’ (131-2)

The exchange contains references to Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. In the first part of the journey, Barghouti, as Dante, and Faisal, as the Roman poet Vigil in Dante's text, descend into Inferno. Before they can enter Paradise, they must endure a long and gruelling wait at the Purgatory—a metaphor for the security checks where soldiers, not God or his angels, make the decision of who is worthy of entering Paradise. Yet unlike Dante, Barghouti describes an earthly experience of hell, a harsh reality experienced daily by Palestinians crossing from one city to another in the West Bank. It is not divine but muddy, absurd, and confusing. Coherent speech disintegrates into meaningless, nonsensical fragments in a context where, as Ahlam Bsharat similarly writes in *Trees for the Absentees*, “things don't make sense anymore” (67). Like silence, empty speech—the loss of the ability to articulate deep meaningful expressions—reflects the damaging effects of the daily violence of the occupation on the interior world of the Palestinian self. At checkpoints, there is no place for coherent Palestinian speech. Rational thought is lost and any meaningful resolution other than “absolute force” is non-existent (Barghouti 2012, 129). The Holy Land itself becomes “nonsense talk.” Nothing holy remains amidst the bleakness of reality there. God himself, as a universal deity for all, disappears and is replaced by “Shlomo,” a cynical reference to Israel's ultimate control over Palestinian life and destiny. Unlike Vladimir and Estragon, Barghouti knows that Godot will never arrive. The long awaited for redemption and deliverance from the Palestinian chronic predicament now seems to be an impossibility, particularly with what appears to be an unbridgeable gulf between ordinary Palestinians and the Palestinian Authority, which has turned itself into “a huge NGO... implement[ing] Israel's conditions” (154).

In that hellish site Barghouti describes, death becomes an unquestioned permissible consequence of any attempt at appearance. Under the eyes of the occupation, if seen, Palestinians are not perceived as human being worthy of basic human rights, nor are they granted the finality

that comes with death and a proper funeral. Rather, it is a state of perpetual (incomplete) death that haunts the Palestinian scene. It turns Palestine, as Bugeja (2012) argues, into “grave-space” (47) where life itself is buried. Stuck in what Barghouti sees as “transitory eternity,” time for Palestinians ceases to be measured by any wristwatch (134). Palestinian time is not physical for it to be measured. It is a psychological construct that is tested by the level of patience people exhibit, and the length of the waiting they can endure. In a powerful metaphor, Barghouti describes the torturous waiting Palestinians experience at Israeli crossing points:

So long as you have the ability to be patient, time passes; when you lose it, it doesn't. The waiting leaves you rooted to the spot in front of its own dumb stupidity, like someone without eyes gazing at a non-existent picture of a billy goat hung on a non-existent wall. (134)

Palestinians—while waiting for one signal from the soldier's hand to move (130)—are hollowed out, left with no choice but to detach from their bodies and senses to be able to tolerate the uncertainty and duration of waiting “in rows in the open in all weathers... among the tanks and machine guns, which are aimed and ready to fire ...” (116). In such a colonial context, dignity is undermined and one's sense of agency is tainted. The treatment Palestinians receive at crossing points is more demeaning than “managing herds of cows” (116). The absurdity of the image of the eyeless gaze staring at a non-existent picture on an imagined wall reflects a reality that is itself ruptured, uncertain, and meaningless—a reality that turns into an artificial distortion of itself. To be tolerated, it demands a stubborn patience which necessitates dissociating from the self. The use of symbol of the billy goat points to a stubborn, yet absurd, persistence; a coping mechanism, where the mind, in order to be able to endure the meaninglessness and the futility of such situations, learns to fixate stubbornly on imaginary, non-existent, constructs. By comparing Palestinian waiting to

“someone without eyes gazing at a non-existent picture of a billy goat hung on a non-existent wall,” Barghouti subtly questions this stubbornness and the worth of patience and endurance when suffering continues, and no resolution is offered. Situating Barghouti’s observations within the current ongoing war in Gaza, which followed an explosion Barghouti could foresee happening in response to dehumanising oppression and immoral occupation, the question remains: *does the outcome achieved so far outweighs all the suffering that has been endured?*

The scenario Barghouti describes in the previous images gives the word ‘occupation,’ as Berger (2012) notes, new vast and extended meanings so that “[n]one of the historical terms such as colonization, annexation, invasion or elimination are precise enough” (xii). In Barghouti’s lexicon, the occupation is no less than a crime that deindividuates and anonymises. As it surrounds every dimension of life, the occupation seeks to reshape Palestinian consciousness to accept and normalise its colonial imposition in the most intimate spaces of life. Barghouti’s biggest fear, as he reiterates it in different places in the memoir, is for Palestinians to succumb to Israel’s absolute force, whereby “the military always wins” over the ethical and the human (130). The new post-millennial Palestinian reality, particularly for the new generations who are born into war, oppression, and bloodshed, without any previous knowledge of how freedom feels like, can wield a double-edged sword: it can either foster resistance, or lead to exhaustion and surrender to the status quo. Accepting death and cruelty as “the only result that [Palestinians] have to expect from any confrontation” is what scares Barghouti the most (156). Given that death is a defining parameter of Palestinian life, it runs the risk of being normalised. The ever-present risk of internalising oppression and victimhood, coupled with exposure to indefinite aggressions and existential crises, may force Palestinians, as Barghouti puts it, to “delve deep into the earth in search of the living roots, potential shrubs and trees” instead of floating high in the vast skies of ambition and ideal

expectations (130). Rather than aspiring to achieve grand ambitions, the oppressed are forced to descend into a zone of alienation, into the “abyss of small wishes and simple dreams” (130).

Bugeja (2012) interprets the metaphor of decline as a reflection of the memoirist’s awareness of a symbiotic relationship with the land—a connection that has allowed scattered Palestinians to retain, through memory and remembrance, an “inextricable bond with the earth as the archaic space of representation for Palestinian life, thereby strengthening the notion of a relational community” (46). The metaphorical image, in other words, reflects the returnee’s desire to reunite with the soil of a land they are denied. While a symbiotic bond with the land explains the Palestinians’ persistence in the face of their ontological erasure, Bugeja may have overlooked the pessimistic context in which Barghouti’s statement appears. Following an elaborate description of Israel’s Separation Wall, Barghouti argues that forcing the oppressed to turn to small dreams by digging deep into a grave-like spaces is one of the occupation’s unforgivable crimes committed against Palestinians:

The existential crises so long that [Palestinians] turn to boredom, the daily aggressions that expand to fill decades, imprison their victims in simple dreams, such as the dream of crossing a street safely, of a child’s reaching his primary school and returning from it on the school bus and not on the shoulders of his stunned schoolmates, of a safe stroll on the beach... to stay five minutes longer with the beloved, or to get the nod from a gum-chewing teenager in uniform to allow a lady to reach the maternity hospital before she’s forced to deliver her baby at his feet.

(131)

The ability to overcome daily obstacles, to successfully secure the necessities of life, is often evoked as examples of resistance *sumud*. However, Barghouti knows that a life structured around daily survival diverts from a clear vision of liberation, one that necessitates making more profound

choices. At the same time, he acknowledges that this metaphorical descent is not a choice but a consequence of being unfree to choose otherwise. Choice and freedom are intrinsically linked; without freedom, necessity dictates the course of life. Palestinians are left to endure, as Barghouti notes, one of the occupation's cruellest crimes: the narrowing of ambitions and the trap of simple dreams (130). Like the world's repressed and oppressed, Palestinians are denied the option to "float high among the clouds of the sublime or of absolute beauty," but are forced to "dig deep in the earth" (130), in the archives of the past in an attempt to challenge the state of denial with which Israel and the world confront them (58). Instead of looking forward into the future, Palestinians are forced to look backward into the present—to seek in a distant past what their present reality lacks: psychic unity, autonomy, structure and coherence.

In response to his mother's decision to uproot the orange tree to build a family house in Deir Ghassanah, Barghouti questions:

Should I blame myself or my mother or a set of circumstances none of us would have suffered had not the hand of history turned the lives of every individual, family, and household in Palestine upside down? [...] Were we obliged to choose between the tree that lifts the spirits and the roof that shelters? (180)

Focusing one's attention on what is necessary for survival, the beautiful "dissipate[s] as fast as hurrying clouds" (130). While practicing life and navigating the many obstacles set by the occupation, Palestinians, Barghouti emphasizes, must never dismiss the broader vision of the struggle, as a struggle not of survival on a day-to-day basis, but a desire for justice and for freedom from the shackles of all the faces of oppression.

The longer Barghouti stays in Palestine, the more death dominates his narrative. In the chapter titled "Things One Would Never Think Of," Barghouti narrates his return to his apartment in Ramallah following his angry departure to Amman, having resigned from a governmental

position due to institutional corruption. Entering the apartment, he is confronted with the painful scene of the death of his Thai bush. He notices that the dry leaves have formed a “perfect circle” around the huge pot on the red carpet, creating an evocative visual metaphor that entwines themes of life and death. The image of dry leaves separated from the bush as the source of life mirrors the Palestinian predicament: the red carpet becomes a symbol of Palestine, with the blood of Palestinians spilled as they are uprooted. Barghouti evokes a similar image of lifelessness earlier in the narrative. On his way to the bridge from Ramallah to Jericho, he notices huge olive trees uprooted by Israeli bulldozers and thrown over the vast, now barren land. He compares this grim image of dead trees to “dishonored corpses” (10). Both are murdered and left exposed on a land that becomes their collective grave. In a similarly symbolic reference to trees, Barghouti writes:

The Palestinian is forbidden to enter his own country by land, sea, or air, even in a coffin. It is not a matter of romantic attachment to a place but of eternal exclusion from it. The Palestinian stripped of an original identity is a palm tree broken in the middle. My foreign friends have control over the details of their lives but a single Israeli soldier can control the details of the life of any Palestinian. This is the difference. This is the story. (81)

The image of the palm tree cut in half is laden with pessimistic undertones in relation to what it means to be Palestinian today. It evokes a sense of death, division, uprootedness, and powerlessness. The palm tree image appears, albeit with more positive connotations, in *I Saw Ramallah*. On Barghouti’s way to Deir Ghassanah for the first time after thirty years of displacement, Husam, Barghouti’s friend, stops the car on top of a hill and asks Barghouti to look down, pointing at a palm tree growing out of the wall of Husam’s home: “‘Mourid! I burned it

down! But it came back and grew again. Would you believe it?' [...] A palm tree spilling her young fronds into the air over the fields" (77).

The vibrant, life-affirming image of a tree growing in and around the stones of the house invokes resistant continuity, a collectivity that keeps growing despite all the hardships and the stagnant material reality that Barghouti engages with on his return journeys. However, a decade after this episode, Barghouti experiences the homeland differently. The trees are broken, murdered, weak and dying. The war-torn situation he describes in his second memoir differs significantly from that of his first narrative, which depicts fairly calmer years following the signing of the Oslo agreement, and the talks of a Palestinian statehood. The robust images of life and growth are replaced with a profound silence, a paralysis that mirrors the Palestinian present reality under a brutal occupation. If trees as Carol Bardenstein (2007) argues represent the organic bond between Palestinians and the land (150), and if they are, as Barghouti puts it, people's "identity card," the one that requires no "stamps or photos, as well as their "dignity, their news bulletin, the talk of their village guesthouse..." (10), then Palestinian pain is also the land's pain. Both are being murdered and left like corpses in an open-air grave of political and historical grievances and unmourned losses.

In his short essay "Verbicide," where he attacks the alienating abstract language of politics, Barghouti (2003) describes a conflicted psychic condition that Palestinians endure and which the image of the torn palm tree can also be a metaphor of. Barghouti writes: "Death lives normally among us [Palestinians] in a country that requires every one of its citizens to remember everything all the time and to forget everything all the time and, what is more cruel and inhuman, to be heroes all the time" (3). Barghouti critiques the hegemony of such a discourse that imposes cruel and inhumane demands. It restricts Palestinian identity to a narrower framework defined by narcissistic fantasies of heroism. As Barghouti's statement demonstrates, the heroic role Palestinians are

expected to assume holds the Palestinian subject captive of a fantasy frame that limits the articulations of vulnerability, suffering, and exhaustion. The framing of heroism reduces the multifaceted aspects of Palestinian being to the figure of the freedom fighter who desires nothing but to continually resist the occupation. “It would be a lie,” Barghouti (2012) asserts, “to claim that the oppressed do nothing with their lives and in their lives but resist oppression” (8). To think otherwise is to condemn Palestinians to social death and perpetuate alienating fantasies that either other them as mindless perpetrators of violence or unites them around an ideology that promises an end to their predicament. Yet, Barghouti (2003) also acknowledges that the more Palestinians resist the occupation and emphasize their *sumud*, the more brutal the occupation becomes (3). Between this immoral brutality and collective expectations to ‘heroically’ endure the unimaginable, where would Palestinians go?

Barghouti describes the psychic and existential impasse Palestinian are trapped in—a consequence of the tension between the dream of a normal life and boring death as it comes in conflict with socio-political expectations and national demands. While Barghouti is conscious of the devastating effects of the hero identity Palestinians are expected to unquestionably accept, he is unable to break free from the discourse that produces it, which risks an unintended side-lining of personal vulnerabilities and other post-*sumud* affects in favour of a broader narrative of every day heroic steadfastness. Even when the intention for adopting a *sumud* framework is to counter, as Mahmoud Darwish puts it, “[any] trite, routine image [that] ends up reducing and usurping the humanity of the Palestinian and renders him unable to be seen as merely human” (interview with Shehadeh 2002), such a portrayal is insufficient for understanding the complexity of Palestinian subjectivity within the current socio-political landscape.

***Sumud*: Political Subjectivities and Community of Resistance**

While Barghouti critiques the traditional portrayal of heroism and steadfastness, he finds himself unable to completely reject it. As an outsider to the new Palestinian reality, Barghouti could only capture the external layer of Palestinian identity and subjectivity. His adopted view, which he calls elsewhere a “bird’s view,”²¹ is limited by what his senses observe, and influenced by a generational and experiential gap. While Barghouti manages to accurately and poetically portray the inhumanity of life under occupation, he ultimately conforms to the accepted and desired image of how Palestinians should globally appear.²² Unlike the rest of the memoir that is dominated by post-*sumud* sensibilities (fear, pain, exhaustion, fragmentation, abstraction, and ambivalence), the opening and the closing chapters adhere to the themes and conventions of a committed *sumud* narrative in its representation of nostalgic sentiments; everyday heroism; communal bonds, solidarity; hope for the future; indigenous topographical knowledge; unmatched resilience; and subtle resistance.

This narrative structure creates a circle where the outer ring of the narrative—the first and the last chapters—focuses on themes of steadfastness, continuity, and future possibilities. In other words, it mirrors a *sumud* framework through which Palestinian identity is often understood. However, the core—the chapters in between—present reality as fractured where fatigued and fragmented subjects traverse a dead zone, a wasteland. The circular framing where a *sumud* narrative encapsulates the core does not only reflect how Barghouti stands at the crossroad between *sumud*-bound subjectivity and fractured post-*sumud* subjectivity. It mirrors how a resilient exterior often obscures the inner reality of pain and despair. By focusing on *sumud* as a way of “stoking the elements of a hidden strength” (8), and on what he reads as Israel’s failure to suppress the

21 in his poem *Khulūd Ṣaghīr* (2018; *A Small Eternity* 2021)

22 I elaborate on this idea in the introduction where I argue that Palestinian writers bear the weight of representing their cause which can limit them to specific political, social, historical and cultural themes.

Palestinian will, I argue that Barghouti's narrative does not penetrate into the deeper, more vulnerable layers of people's experiences, which are not often publicly articulated.

While Barghouti frames his memoir as a documentation of "unimportant feelings that the world will never hear" (45) or read about in news bulletins, official archives, or history books, his narrative confronts a limit. This limit is due to different factors. First, its form as a memoir inherently imposes certain constraints. As a memoir, the narrative is shaped by Barghouti's subjective reflections. It focuses on his personal experiences and memories of specific events the way he recalls them after the fact. In remembering, Barghouti is not merely linking the past with the present. He joins the different temporalities with the promises of a new Palestinian beginning. The qualities which Barghouti identifies in the driver Mahmoud— his confidence, respectability, patience, and wit— has gained Barghouti's admiration and re-ignited his faith in the possibility of a new Palestinian beginning. It is important to remember that at the time of writing *I Was Born There*, a crucial transformative juncture in the history of the Arab world was taking place: the Arab Spring. Barghouti, his wife, Radwa, and his son, Tamim, were active participants in the Egyptian youth revolution of 2011, which I argue may have influenced the way Mahmoud's story unfolds. It may also explain Barghouti's messianic prophecy of a new beginning at the end of his narrative.

Barghouti could identify in Mahmoud the type of subjectivity required to actualize such revolutionary beginnings which he may have observed in Egyptian youth movements and activists who led what Rusha Latif (2022) calls "leaderless revolution" against tyranny, brutality and corruption. The revolution was the outcome of the youth's dissatisfaction over the years, who, to use Barghouti's words in describing Palestinian patience, had to "tamp down [their] anger" (8) while quietly and systemically "stoking" (8) the necessary qualities and tools for successful revolutions. In the final chapter titled, "An Ending Leading to the Beginning?" Barghouti ends with a prophetic vision of a similar messianic beginning for the Palestinian cause. The chapter's title

connects this vision, and the ending of the narrative, back to the beginning, to the first chapter—“the Driver Mahmoud.” The circularity implied by the title guides Barghouti’s readers back to the beginning of the memoir to know that the seeds of his prophetic beginning have already been planted. The ending leads the reader to a beginning where they can understand how and why such a revolutionary beginning is still conceivable despite the state of deprivation which he carefully details in the memoir.

By identifying in young Palestinians the same revolutionary spirit that had sparked the Egyptian revolution, Barghouti evades the painful reality—the fact that the cause may have reached a dead-end and there may be nothing left to salvage it. The memories of Mahmoud’s demeanour and courage soothe Barghouti’s anxieties about the (im)possibility of a Palestinian future. In fact, Barghouti questions himself and whether what he chooses to remember and represent is a “trick” (41) played on the “soul” (41). In an introspective manner, Barghouti asks: “Am I shifting the focus of my anxiety so I can bear it? Am I changing the direction of my thoughts to drive out my worries? The trick costs the soul nothing but surrender to this stream of consciousness” (41). In other words, Barghouti questions whether all soothing positive memories are a mere coping mechanism that regulates his anxiety and that of the collective when the possibility of losing loss itself (having to acknowledge that Palestine as the object of desire and of the Palestinian libidinal economy is forever lost) emerges. This trick redirects his mental energy from overwhelming anxiety to resistance optimism.

I would also argue that Barghouti’s commitment to a *sumud* identity is a response to a sense of guilt he feels toward his people. Having lived a comparatively privileged life in exile, Barghouti grapples with the moral dimension of his literary work and representations when he compares his fairly comfortable life with the suffering, deprivation, and isolation his people endure. He writes, “I hear a voice inside me proclaiming its revulsion at the lack of backbone of some poets and writers

and their constant whining. I feel that in the end I'm a bad person when compared to these people who make so many sacrifices without complaining" (28). This internal conflict which he describes increases the burden of representation. While Barghouti recognizes the personal costs of living in a zone of ontological erasure, the internal conflict he feels compels him to eventually adhere to representations, e.g. heroism, which may risk reproducing the same abstraction he critiques. Abstraction goes beyond mere omission of "the accuracy of the concrete detail and the truthfulness of the five senses, and the great gift, in particular, of sight" (Barghouti 2000, 62). I argue that it also involves presenting a partial, one-sided view that may unintendedly overshadow the subject's complexity, and myriad responses to circumstances.

This is not to say that Barghouti is oblivious to people's psychic struggles under occupation. In many instances throughout the narrative, he accurately captures the existential crises Palestinians face, the tension between the obligation to be resilient and the painful psychic reality of oppression. Barghouti compares this state of being to a "drunken man [proving] his drunkenness by denying it, so people's denial of their fear proves they are scared" (12). The complex interplay between external appearances of *sumud* and internal psychic realities is further compounded when Barghouti admits that in Palestine "everyone is worrying about arriving safely, without anyone appearing to be worrying about arriving safely" (12). The denial of fear masks people's internal conflicts so as to present an image of coherence and autonomy, especially to their oppressors who desire to see them submissive and broken. Yet, the more this situation continues, the deeper and more tormenting pain gets. "'Painful' is the right word," Barghouti admits. Having to conceal one's anxiety feels to him like "being beaten over and over without a chance to hit back" (34). Addressing his reader, Barghouti asks, "Has anxiety ever made you feel pain? The anxiety is all the more painful because I have to conceal it, have to pretend the opposite and appear supremely confident and at ease..." (34). Barghouti is aware of the psychological repercussions of concealing emotions on individuals.

Upholding a resilient collective image as resistance can be “a kind of medicine, rekindling a sense of power and self-mastery...[overcoming] the passivity and self-hatred induced by colonial confinement” (Shatz 2024, 152). However, it may also intensify the split between the sense of autonomy and agency a *sumud* identity promises (which is also articulated around trauma and lack) and the hostile environment that keeps fracturing the (collective) self-image. Barghouti’s narrative thus remains trapped in the same subjective, temporal, and representational labyrinth Palestinians, and Palestinian writers as such, are forced to repeatedly roam.

The rest of the chapter examines Barghouti’s first chapter, “The Driver Mahmoud”, as a narrative that adheres to the conventional tropes of a *sumud* narrative. I will argue that Barghouti frames the driver Mahmoud’s ethical commitment to his job, his poised calmness, and his unwavering determination as a celebration of what I term “*sumud*-bound subjectivity.” This subjectivity has the “advantage” which Fanon (1952/1986) preconditions for “an authentic upheaval” to be born from within the zone of nonbeing (8), and for the emergence of a new subject (Zalloua 2024, 2). Barghouti observes this subjectivity to be emerging from within the context of omni-present death, especially among the younger generations. It is a subjectivity that undergoes a symbolic death in its readiness to embrace the possibility of physical death for the sake of a certain cause—a readiness that grants a sense of control which is otherwise foreclosed. Such a subject, as Abdul JanMohamed (2016) argues in his seminal analysis of Richard Wright’s depiction of death-bound subjects, “can gain access to the potentiality of his life only via his willingness to risk the actualization of his death” (283). This willingness, as Barghouti shows in the story of Mahmoud and his selfless acts, offers the necessary conditions for salvaging the moral dimension of the Palestinian cause which has been shamefully liquidated in the years following the Oslo agreement when the Palestinian Liberation Organisation was transformed into an Authority serving Israel’s agendas.

***Sumud*-Bound Subjectivity: The Car Journey and the Community of Resistance**

In the closing chapter, Barghouti anticipates “a huge explosion” (38) that will revive and reclaim the legitimacy of the cause and the ethical dimension of popular resistance. He writes that “[t]he Palestinian cause is starting over again from the beginning. Wasn’t the beginning that a land was occupied and has to be reclaimed?” (214). Understanding Barghouti’s final remarks warrants a reading that starts over from the memoir’s beginning—the journey from Ramallah to the bridge during the memorable 2002 invasion of Ramallah and Yasir Arafat’s headquarters. The chapter follows Mahmoud as he drives Barghouti and five other passengers in his old taxi from Ramallah to the borders in Jericho. The journey takes place on a very rainy and foggy morning, approximately a day preceding the invasion of Ramallah. On that day, nature seems to be also conspiring with the Israeli tanks, patrols, and impromptu checkpoints against Mahmoud and his passengers, making the journey more arduous than it already is. The taxi is caught between an angry nature and the violence unleashed by the occupation. Barghouti quips that for an old taxi to reach its destination, miracles should be performed, but this time it is not by a figure of divinity, but by the driver Mahmoud’s confidence in the purposefulness of this dangerous adventure. Barghouti writes that “Mahmoud doesn’t look worried. In fact, he looks as confident and calm as if the Greek gods were his first cousins” (16). Mahmoud is not just a driver. He is described as a mythical hero manoeuvring with ease through obstacles which would otherwise require the intervention of Greek gods to navigate. “[T]his young Palestinian,” Barghouti notes, “is trying to perform a small miracle without realizing it, is being a hero unaware that he’s being a hero” (14).

Unlike Barghouti who admits to being a foreigner to this new landscape, Mahmoud is armed with an indigenous knowledge of the land’s topography. It enables him to navigate his way in a poised and confident manner, while avoiding Israeli tanks in their hideouts in the valley. With every

obstacle Mahmoud and his passengers, collectively, manage to cross, Barghouti becomes more optimistic and his admiration for Mahmoud increases:

[Mahmoud]'s only a hired driver but he wants to do the job that earns him his monthly salary perfectly. Right now, he's the leader of this trip and doesn't want to let us down. We are now his nation—an old man and two women (one of whom doesn't cover her hair and face while the other wears a full veil); a man who's short and another who's fat; a university student; and a poet who is amazed by everything he sees and doesn't want to spoil it by talking. (14)

The car becomes a stateless nation, and Mahmoud its leader—a leader who meticulously ensures his passengers' comfort and satisfaction. On the surface level, this meticulousness, as Barghouti sees it, is an expression of a professional taxi driver eager to do his job perfectly. However, in the lexicon of resistance *sumud*, Mahmoud as an embodiment of this identity—being a *sumud*-bound subject—manages through his preparedness, calmness and confidence to destabilize the mechanisms of oppression which are designed to destroy the psychic relations of Palestinians. This preparedness also reveals an important, yet most basic, dimension of the material expression of Palestinian identity which Barghouti has always advocated in his work: an ethical commitment to life and being. It is the ability, and the obligation towards the self and the other, to maintain respect and respectability as a human being under all circumstances. These little details become, for Barghouti, the true meaning of Palestinian steadfastness and resistance— a young man performing a heroic role just by desiring to do his job right.

Mahmoud's selfless commitment to his job and to getting his passengers safely to their final destination stands in stark contrast with those Barghouti calls 'the Namiqs'— corrupt young Palestinians picked by the Palestinian Authority to be the Palestinian future, but their corruption is

“strong of limb”; their tongue “extols and then betrays”; their mouth “kisses and then bites”; their hand “embraces and then stabs” (138). Barghouti’s deep hatred for the Namiqs’s corruption and selfishness is contrasted with his profound admiration of Mahmoud’s selflessness. Unlike the Namiqs, Mahmoud’s ethical commitment is portrayed as one that is prompted by a strong and pure desire for life and living amidst loss, near-death experiences, and oppression. His commitment is also shown as an unyielding struggle to appear where appearance for the oppressed is deemed illegitimate and dangerous. This appearance—Mahmoud’s defiance of the mechanisms of oppression—is, as Lewis Gordon (2007) remarks in his discussion of Fanon, the basis for “mature existence in a world that militates against one’s humanity” (11). The journey is dangerous, and Barghouti knows that it could be Mahmoud’s last having to make the journey back to Ramallah alone after he performs his job to the end and safely drops his passengers off at the Bridge.

Barghouti writes:

A question now comes into my head that will preoccupy me for many years: how will Mahmoud get back alone to Ramallah under these extraordinary circumstances? Doesn’t he give any thought to the dangers of the ruined, muddy roads that await him as he returns to his family after a day’s work that was supposed to be routine but was anything but routine?

These questions, however, remain unanswered. Several years later, during a visit to al-Am’ari refugee camp in Ramallah—Mahmoud’s birthplace—alongside several other international writers, Barghouti confronts his own uncertainty about Mahmoud’s fate. He reflects, “I thought I’d ask about him at his workplace the following morning, but in fact I didn’t want to ask, so that I wouldn’t hear an answer I didn’t want to hear” (142). This hesitation to inquire about Mahmoud’s fate underscores a truth which Barghouti does not wish to confront. By avoiding the thoughts about the possibility of Mahmoud’s death, Barghouti refuses to submit to the painful reality in which the

new beginning which Mahmoud stands for may be impossible. Maintaining the fantasy image of Mahmoud as a heroic figure who courageously defies death, Barghouti complies with the conventional image of an oppressed who, willingly and fearlessly, embraces death thereby gaining power over oppressive regimes that use death as an instrument of fear and suppression.

The car journey highlights yet another major dimension of *sumud* narrative: a community of resistance. The story climaxes when the car comes upon a chasm created by the storm that has split the road in half—a real physical impasse that requires, as Barghouti says, the intervention of Greek gods to carry the car to the other side. Filled with anxiety, knowing that they have no alternative options to get them to Jericho but this old taxi, Barghouti notices the calmness of Mahmoud who “laughs to encourage” his passengers (18). Mahmoud assures them that he has never taken a passenger back no matter the circumstances (9), and confidently remarks: “They want us paralyzed and terrified. They don’t know we’ve got used to it” (10). Barghouti interprets Mahmoud’s statement as a sign of strength. Getting used to oppression, according to Barghouti, does not necessarily imply submission, but can reflect a commitment to life and ethical being. This commitment becomes more important to Mahmoud than his endangered life, knowing he must make the journey back alone, which Barghouti knows, “under these extraordinary circumstances” (24), could always be Mahmoud’s last.

The scene turns from one of paralysis into a testament of the creativity of everyday resistance. After Mahmoud secures the suitcases with a rope, two young Palestinian men in a giant crane appear from behind the trees on the other side of the trench—a rescue operation in a scenario repeated far too often. In a professional manner that reflects a familiarity with such situations, the crane slowly and carefully lifts the car with its seven passengers high into the air and transfers it to the other edge. For Barghouti, the absurdity of the scene—the car suspended in the air—reflects the absurdity of the Palestinian reality:

The suspended bubble of air in which we seven are swinging is now our place of exile from this earth. It is our disabled will and our attempt, in a mixture of courage and fear, to impose our will through wit and cunning. This bubble of air is the unyielding occupation itself. ... We sink upward... This absurd bubble of air is Mahmoud's way of letting no obstacle defeat him and force him to take us back in failure. Now the wish of those who, like us at this moment, have risen high, is to become low... I want to descend from this regal elevation and touch the mud and dust once more so that I can be an ordinary traveler again... We stare at the abyss and the abyss stares back at us. (19-20)

The “unyielding occupation” is the “absurd bubble” that has forced Palestinians into different kinds of physical and psychological forms of exile while the old taxi becomes a symbol of the Palestinian collectivity with its myriad experiences of internal and external exile. All of its passengers experience life-threatening obstacles on the road, yet manage through solidarity, steadfastness, and extraordinarily creative solutions to avoid falling in the abyss of social death and alienation. Barghouti creates a tension by juxtaposing contradictions, accentuating the existential, political and psychological deadlock Palestinian are locked in. Courage merges with fear, elevation with descension, ordinariness with absurdity, and disabled will with cunning one. In a situation that is anything but ordinary, all what these passengers desire at that moment of exile is to be ordinary again, “to become what they are, that is, a completely ‘normal’ people” (Deleuze and Sanbar 1998 29). Barghouti sees descension as the only way to be ordinary again because transcendence in such a context is dangerous, absurd, a sinking in the abyss of the sky. Barghouti creates a scene in which the harmonious collaboration between Mahmoud, the passengers, and the two men in the crane speaks of what bell hooks (1990) calls “a community of resistance”—the place of solidarity where one knows they are not alone (213). In the scene, Barghouti reimagines Palestine outside the

national framework. His Palestine is not “an oppressive (nationalist) unity” but “a democratically constituted collective struggling against social and political structures of domination” (Abu-Manneh 2016, 71). It becomes a national community and a living structure of a people who resort to creative forms of resistance to untie the knot of oppression no matter how tight it gets.²³

Barghouti reflects on these memories through the gaze of a generation that had experienced the peak of Palestinian resistance and revolutionary life in the 1960s and 1970s. The Palestinian writer and activist Karma Nabulsi (2013) argues that during the golden years of the struggle, Palestinians collectively and unanimously engaged with “the most creative political episodes...what would normally be considered...impossible acts.” These acts were merged with “urgency, purposefulness, seriousness, and hard work, with a near celebratory sense of adventure and overriding optimism” (226). Barghouti, familiar with those times, constructs a scene that mirrors what the new Palestinian political landscape lacks: clear vision, unity, and selfless commitment to liberation. Mahmoud’s resilience, commitment, and the indomitable spirit in the face of danger and obstacles are the same qualities which Barghouti fears are lost after the Palestinian liberation project has been transformed into ‘Palestine Ltd.’ (Haddad 2016). Seeing them in Mahmoud, Barghouti’s optimism is restored and so is his belief in the possibility of a different Palestinian future.

Mahmoud’s determination imbues the narrative with optimistic undertones to counterbalance the pervasive sense of constriction and enclosure evoked by the reality it describes. In his description of Mahmoud, Barghouti writes that he admires “his poise and ability... his conduct, liveliness, youth, and confidence now seduce me into a burst of optimism that sees the Palestinians as the stronger side in this long conflict with the occupation” (24). He then adds that “I’m jealous of his determination and his abilities and I admire him to the point of feeling proud of

23 See Nora Parr’s *Palestine: Nation Through the Works of Ibrahim Nasrallah* (2023)

him” and that the only way to pay him back is not with a tip, nor with empty words like “take care of yourself” or “God be with you” (25) in a country where neither safety, nor any divine intervention is guaranteed. Instead, Barghouti vows to write about him, and put down his words and actions as Mahmoud says them and does them (26).

Humour as a Mechanism of *Sumud*

Mahmoud, however, is not Barghouti’s only source of optimism. Halfway through the car journey, Barghouti expresses his admiration for the passengers’ lack of fear, and their unflinching attitude toward the violence of the occupation. Barghouti questions whether such an ability to laugh in the face of death is a sign of familiarity or stoicism, or whether it signifies a type of confidence that is built by a culture deeply ingrained in living within the details, a resistance embodied by simply remaining in place (3). Barghouti quotes one of the passengers’ sarcastic comments about Israel’s invasion of Ramallah:

As if the film needed more action! Every day they kill us retail and once in a while they get the urge to kill us wholesale. Big deal! They’ve launched a hundred attacks before and it’s done them no good. They’re really stuck. Like they say, ‘Stupidity’ is trying what’s already been tried and expecting different results’ ...go bam-bam-bam, drop bombs from airplanes, and leave. What’s the point? (2-3)

The rhetorical nature of the questions points at a subjectivity that possesses a double vision—the ability to acknowledge the reality of oppression and death, or what Barghouti calls “death’s victories” while retaining a defiant commitment to liveability, and to always see “the magnificence of life” (157). For Barghouti, these subjects never forget that they were “created for joy” (192), and therefore, they cannot simply disappear. Barghouti is startled by the passengers’ calm demeanour and their composed attitude amidst life-threatening and terrifying circumstances. He admits his

inability, as an outsider, to comprehend the hidden source from which these passengers draw their strength. He writes:

I, who for long years have been away from these people, from my countrymen and the details of their daily lives, cannot make light of the plans of a terrifying individual such as Sharon to invade our cities and our villages. To them, though—the inhabitants of these same cities and villages, who haven't been distanced by successive exiles— everything has become food for jokes. (3)

In Barghouti's words, Palestinians, as *sumud*-bound subjects, "let no opportunity for love, good cheer, or the pleasures of the body or soul escape them...[but] strive to fulfil desires both obscure and obvious...no matter how difficult they are to realize" (8). Unarmed Palestinians, he remarks, resist by turning repeated tragedies and the precariousness of their life into food for jokes. This observation follows a joke told by one of the passengers from the city of al-Khalil (Hebron in English).²⁴ The strategy of turning death into a joke, and lamentation into laughter, helps create a culture of resistance, a unified community that laughs in the face of tragedies and psychologically crippling conditions. It is a mechanism that helps create ontological security by normalising the abnormal that it ceases to be anxiety-inducing. In admiration of people's resilience and high spirits, Barghouti writes:

In this uneven conflict with the occupation, which bears the most modern weapons of the age, the unarmed Palestinian hates to be an object of pity. He arms himself with laughter and irony, even at his own expense, and by making fun of his repeated

24 People from al-Khalil are known for their hard-headedness which has made them a perfect target for most of the jokes told by Palestinians. The joke is inspired by the massacre of the Sanctuary of Ibrahim in 1994: "When the settler Baruch Goldstein opened fire on the worshipers in the Sanctuary of Ibrahim in al-Khalil and killed twenty-nine of them, someone said a few days after the massacre. 'There would have been more casualties if Baruch hadn't fired at their heads'" (Barghouti 2021, 7).

tragedies under this seemingly endless occupation. People no longer complain to one another about the prisons, the curfews, the repeated closures and invasions... One sign of strength in the oppressed is the ability to mock the powerful, and an unspoken readiness to respond in time, however distant that time may be. While waiting, the oppressed exercise their senses to the full in their lust for life. (8)

Barghouti presents humour as one of the ways Palestinians practise *sumud* and create what he depicts as a community that subverts the violence of the occupation and challenges its dehumanising stereotypes. It is a sign of collective strength that allows for an ethical persistence of the cause beyond the particularities of their experiences. If suffering as Zalloua (2024) argues becomes an occasion for celebration, meaning if it is taken as an excuse to celebrate an exceptional identity or to elevate Palestinian suffering over the suffering of many other marginalised communities globally, “Palestinians risk compromising their own cause” (19). Barghouti’s rejection of the stereotype of the Palestinian as victim shifts the focus to the lively and light-hearted mood among the passengers. He portrays their attitude and love for life as the hidden secret that “essentially” makes them “more beautiful than [their] oppressor” (213). The attachment to life is described by Barghouti, not as only passion or joy. It is a lustful attachment (شهوة), a strong driving force that involves a disobedience to a higher power (the occupation) and a subversive commitment to the fulfilment of what is deemed by the occupation as sinful and deadly. It is the refusal to succumb and disappear. It is crucial to make it clear that Barghouti’s portrayal of this readiness to celebrate life is not the same as the normalisation of the illegal presence of the occupation in the most intimate spaces of their life, nor does it imply an acceptance of repeated tragedies. Instead, it is a necessary state of mind, the drive that repetitively sustains the dream of liberation, and the unwavering certainty that one day it will be achieved.

This outlook, this mode of living, is also an example, as Berger remarks, of a people who “although powerless, somehow continue to live with dignity. With courage, too. Yet dignity offers not only an example, but also a shelter” (xii). In his analysis of jokes, Freud (1920/1966) regarded humour as “the highest of [the] defenses processes” against the distressing and disagreeable, adding that humour “brings this about by finding a means of withdrawing the energy from the release of unpleasure that is already in preparation and of transforming it, by discharge, into pleasure” (200). Humour turns the energy that would otherwise generate pain into pleasure. Laughter is a shelter, a necessary mechanism in the absence of all stabilising anchors. It prevents Palestinians from falling into the alienating abyss of victimhood and oppression, and from ever becoming like the monsters they are fighting (Barghouti 2000, 83). The loss of the human and ethical side of the struggle is for Barghouti the real end of the cause.

Trees, Resilience and Barghouti’s Foreseen Beginning

The defiant spirit which Barghouti locates in Mahmoud and the passengers inspires Barghouti’s prophetic statement of an impending revolution which he reiterates in the poem سلة فواكه (“salat fawākih”; Eng. “Fruit Basket”), quoted in the narrative at length. In the poem, Barghouti evokes the theme of temporariness and rebirth that he associates with trees, as discussed earlier. He writes leading up to the poem: “Trees fascinate me...a symbol of resistance without bluster or bragging. It fascinates me too that the unarmed tree knows that everything that is permanent is temporary” (168). Barghouti learns from the trees how to resist in “the silent war front” against the destructive winter wind (168). Revolution does not have to erupt violently and be destructive in that it consumes both the oppressor and the oppressed in the process. To maintain the legitimacy of their cause throughout the struggle, Palestinians should be like the trees in winter. They survive with dignity and courage the repeated historical setbacks, the brutality of the occupation, and

international (political) apathy to their suffering, or as Barghouti puts it in the poem, the trees stand and fight in the face of:

...an alliance of the snows of the north,
The fog of the gods,
And the lack of a helping hand,
And because all probabilities are open,
Come now. Come and see:
Teach your heart to trust their silence,
Which resembles ours. (169)

Barghouti invites his readers to learn from the “mystery” of the naked trees, and “to trust their silence” in the same way he learns from Mahmoud’s poised and determined demeanour. The trees that “appeared to you, like us, dead” have been fighting a silent battle—a reference to the small daily acts of resistance Palestinians under a brutal occupation perform which nobody hears about. Like the unarmed trees, unarmed Palestinians in the uneven conflict with the occupation (8) persist and quietly fight “an alliance of the snows of the north/The fog of the gods, /And the lack of a helping hand” (169). Barghouti asks the reader to “come and see” and be a witness to how that silence of “the enduring, patient branches” (169) is the beginning of an end which will culminate when “a clever branch” proclaims the time for “our spring” (169). In a direct reference to the Arab Spring, Barghouti anticipates a similar Palestinian revolution to be led by a clever branch, a leader who can, as he writes in the final chapter of the memoir, “repossess the moral significance of resistance, cling to its legitimacy, and rid it of the bane of constant improvisation, chaos, and ugliness” (213).

Being equipped with the right knowledge, the calculated waiting the poem emphasises, as well as a firm commitment to the moral dimension of their cause, points to a path toward liberation where Palestine will become once again a universal signifier for the struggle against all kinds of oppression—a signifier of identification evacuated from its identitarian substance. Everyone will then see the outcome of the silent battle: “The fruit basket/ at the center of the domestic scene/flaring up/ like victory” (170). This image embodies a desire for life and continuity—fruits being the most visible sign of life in a tree. The fruit basket in the centre brimming with colours would be itself the answer to Zionism’s most fundamental fantasy in regards to the enigma of the Palestinian Other: “What does the Palestinian want?” In Barghouti’s words, the answer would be: Palestinians desire a liberated life where they appear for who they are: fruits with different vibrant colours and tastes. The visible outcome of the long struggle for life flares up with the potential for transformation as it also marks the beginning of another beginning.

Barghouti presents Mahmoud as one example of many different colourful fruits that wait to flare up. He is Barghouti’s real-life example of the genuine collective Palestinian aspiration “to bring life itself back from its hiding place” (161) and to live it with dignity despite the ever-present threat that “complete annihilation – not only of political institutions, but of every person – is a real possibility” (Khalili 2007, 99). Barghouti’s narrative suggests that the capacity to gaze upon life from the perspective of death lays the groundwork for a new political subjectivity emerging from the abyss of the West Bank and Gaza. Such a subjectivity, Barghouti hopes, can reclaim, not the affective and ideological (phantasmatic) meaning of the struggle, but its ethical human core.

While Barghouti chooses to focus on Mahmoud’s seeming resilience (neither the reader nor Barghouti gains access to Mahmoud’s psyche) as an example of the new generation’s daily resistance to mark the beginning of the restoration of the cause and the fulfilment of the liberation dream, Kashua and Bsharat adopt a different, rather ‘pessoptimist’ approach that mirrors the

oxymoronic and ambivalent conditions of life in post-millennial Palestine. Barghouti's optimistic future outlook and the certainty of beginnings dissipate in the novels I examine in the following chapters. I argue that this shift from *sumud* to post-*sumud* sensibilities reflects how the bleak conditions these novels respond to leave no space, neither for hope, nor for locating a beginning for Barghouti's anticipated revolution. While Barghouti holds onto hope that liberation is inevitable, Kashua concludes his narratives at an impasse, marked by a melancholic question that remains unanswered: *Where does the beginning begin?*

CHAPTER TWO

Navigating Identities, Fragmented Subjectivities, and the (Im)possibility of Passing in Sayed Kashua's *Second Person Singular*

While Barghouti chooses to focus on Mahmoud's seeming resilience as an example of the new generation's daily resistance, Kashua adopts an ambivalent approach that mirrors the fragmentation and oxymoronic conditions of life in post-millennial Palestine/Israel. This chapter examines how Kashua's *Second Person Singular* (2012) articulates a post-*sumud* sensibility by exposing the psychic toll and deep internal fractures that persist behind any image of Palestinian coherence within 1948 Palestine. His novel presents a subjectivity that is fragmented, paranoid, and internally divided, shaped by an impossible desire for assimilation into a system that continues to deny its legitimacy and humanity.

Employing a Lacanian-Fanonian psychoanalytic framework, this chapter argues that Kashua's presents Palestinian Israeli subjectivity as fractured and narcissistically wounded, a product of a colonial context governed by racial hierarchies. The novel portrays psychological disturbances and affect economies of anxiety, desire, fear, obsessions and fantasies from the perspective of the disposable other in a world that is radically racist, divided and asymmetrical. If Barghouti sees in Mahmoud's inexplicable strength the driving force for ethical upheavals and new beginnings, Kashua's characters are weak, fragmented, and lost, seeking beginnings their socio-symbolic reality does not offer. The novel, hence, becomes a literary articulation of post-*sumud* sensibilities, where the mirror of identity has shattered and what is left is the anxiety of misrecognition. Through the stories of two characters—Amir and the lawyer—who attempt in different ways to escape the Arab identity that marks them as disposable, Kashua's novel reveals

the psychic costs of mimicry, the collapse of idealised images, and the violence embedded in the gaze of the Other.

The analysis is structured in the following way: I begin with an overview of the novel's narrative structure and its doubling motif, reading the dual protagonists as split subjects caught in a closed system of failed symbolic substitutions. I then trace how the first protagonist, the lawyer's narrative, unfolds through obsessive attempts to build an idealised self-image in the gaze of the Jewish Other, only to be undone by his own unconscious projections. Next, I turn to the second protagonist, Amir's story and examine how his disavowal of the Arab identity and eventual symbolic death mirror the impossibility of passing and the desire for invisibility in a system that relies on rigid ethnic legibility. Finally, I read the novel's ending as a melancholic impasse, that, unlike Barghouti's optimism, exposes the collapse of narrative and the foreclosure of the Palestinian Israeli subject's place in the Symbolic.

Sayed Kashua is an acclaimed Palestinian-Israeli journalist, novelist, and screenwriter who was born in Tira, a Palestinian city in the Central District of Israel.²⁵ Kashua's early exposure to Hebrew literature and his "nearly perfect" Hebrew introduced him not only to Israeli authors such as Agnon, Amos Oz and Meir Shalev, but, most importantly, it enabled him to read about "Zionism, about Judaism, and the building of the homeland" (Kashua 2014). Kashua maintains that his immersion in Jewish Israeli life has made him more determined to use Hebrew, the language of the Other, to write an authentic human story of a figure that has, deliberately and systemically, been absented from Hebrew literature, and lost to Jewish Israelis, who are also Kashua's target audience. Writing exclusively in Hebrew is a fulfilment of Kashua's wish to put forth stories the way he heard

25 Kashua has gained international recognition with the publications and the translation of his four novels from Hebrew into many different languages except Arabic: *Dancing Arab* (2002), *Let it Be Morning* (2004), *Second Person Singular* (2012), and the final of the quartet *Track Changes* (2020). He is also best known for his Israeli audience as the former writer of the weekly provocative and satirical columns in *Haartez*, a prominent Israeli left-wing newspaper.

them from his grandmother as a child. He thought that when “they read it they will understand, when they read it they will change, all I have to do is write and the Occupation will end. I just have to be a good writer and I will free my people from the ghettos they live in” (Kashua 2014).

However, Kashua’s belief in a democratic Israel was shattered when violence erupted in Jerusalem following the war on Gaza in 2014. Experiencing what it means to be “all of a sudden...turned into the enemy” (Kashua and Keret 2014), Kashua left Israel for the United States where he still resides. His decision is the point at which the illusory semblance of liberalism and freedom which Israel promotes, and Kashua believed in, disintegrated.

Kashua’s oeuvre, as Gil Hochberg (2010) argues, has been commended by many Jewish Israeli critics, such as Yochai Oppenheimer, Sarah Otsaki Lezer and Ghayuta Doytsh among others, for Kashua’s choice to avoid blaming others for the poor conditions of Palestinian Arab communities in Israel. They read his work as primarily dedicated to the criticism of the backwardness of Palestinian Israeli society and its misogynistic violence (69). Many other critics focus on the psychological and intersubjective aspects of the suffering of his characters, choosing to explain it as a consequence of the absence of paternal figures or as a result of paternal violence (69). They tend to overlook the political background against which Kashua’s characters are defined. Internationally, Kashua’s work has been received with praise. Iddo Tavory, for example, highlights the universality of the topics Kashua addresses and “the core of neuroticism in his writing” which stems, he believes, from Kashua’s knowledge that he can become an outsider anytime, a feeling that anyone regardless of their context can experience (quoted in Aziza 2016). Similarly, Iris Bruce (2019) contends that Kashua’s representation of the suffering of the disfranchised Palestinians becomes a mirror image of the suffering of Jews in the past. She maintains that he “consciously echoes the themes that informed earlier Jewish-Zionist narratives to point out this ironic reversal to Jewish readers” (120).

However, Palestinian and Arab critics have accused Kashua of treachery and of internalising and perpetrating Jewish Israeli derogatory stereotypes, instead of showing how racism in Israeli society is “institutionalized, sanctioned, deep, and systemic” (Margalit 2015).²⁶ Muhammad Ghanayim (2002), for example, argues that Kashua ridicules Israeli Arabs in the language of the other positing himself as someone who is “tragically schizophrenic.” He maintains that irrespective of how powerful the representation of pain in his novels is, he will always be a “prisoner of the ego-Other which doesn’t leave his distorted mirror” (quoted in Kayyal 2008, 47). In the same context, Ṣāliḥ Dhābāḥ (2014) claims that Kashua presents a narrative that does not reflect the Palestinian national movement in Israel but adopts one that is embedded in an Oslo narrative, and in being the “good Arab,” the dream of every “Israeli Master”. Similarly, the Palestinian Israeli novelist and journalist Ibtisām ‘Āzim (2011) contends that writing in Hebrew about Arab characters only consolidates Israeli Jewish stereotypes which Kashua’s assumed target audience (Israeli Jews) finds humorous and worth repeating. She maintains that critiquing the negative aspects of Arab communities is a right any writer should have, but under the condition that the writing itself is produced in a language different from the language of the coloniser.

Diverting from these one-sided readings of Kashua’s work, my analysis will focus on how Kashua’s paranoiac representation of the Palestinian Israeli figure in his novel *Second Person Singular* opens a space for the disposable—those who do not count, the symptoms of the unjust political, social and cultural ideologies—to disturb and disrupt the façade of a coherent reality. These marginalised narratives are the remainder of what is excluded from the system to maintain its fantasy of wholeness. The insider/outsider position that Kashua and his characters occupy within both the Jewish Israeli and Palestinian Israeli Symbolic nexus enables Kashua to subtly critique and disrupt both societies from within and turn the narrative into a mirror where both communities are

²⁶ This could be one of the main reasons why his novels have not been translated into Arabic.

placed at the same level of representation.

Second Person Singular: Ideological Mirrors and Fractured Subjectivities

Second Person Singular explores the psychological implications of exclusivist identities and national logic on a subjectivity that is born, as Karen Grumberg (2018) argues, “of and against minority subject positions” (3). The novel comprises seven parts and an epilogue, alternating between the narratives of two young Palestinian Israeli men who leave their Palestinian villages in central Israel to pursue a new life in Jerusalem. The novel begins with the story of its first protagonist, an unnamed lawyer, who is wealthy and successful, and driven by a desperate and obsessive desire to be assimilated into Israeli society. He successfully plays by the rules of society, defying what he believes are the stereotypical representations of Palestinian Arabs in Israel, such as religious extremism, cultural backwardness, low socio-economic status, poor education, cheap labour, to name a few. The lawyer manages to make a name for himself; yet, his world becomes merely a neurotic façade against an internalised anxiety of being stopped and humiliated by soldiers just for looking Arab (20). He knows that “he was no hero” (20), and therefore, he decides to change his life based on his belief that Israeli society valorises one’s socioeconomic status over “the way a person looked, his accent or his moustache” (21). He figures out that “the border police, the security guards, and the police officers, all of whom generally hail from the lower socioeconomic classes of Israeli society, will never stop anyone dressed in clothes that seem more expensive than their own” (21). What emerges in this novel is not a continuation of the *sumud*-bound subject who carries collective burdens with resilience and determination, but rather a depiction of the collapse of that very subjectivity and the structure that sustains it. The lawyer is not driven by commitment to a cause, but to paranoid self-fashioning and performances revealing how survival requires endurance and, above all, disavowal.

The lawyer's seemingly perfect life begins to collapse when he comes across a note written in Arabic inserted between the pages of a second-hand book he buys from an Israeli bookshop he often goes to for books he admits he barely reads. The note, which the lawyer believes is written by his wife Layla, turns his life upside down, setting in motion his search for the truth about the wife's infidelity. The search for the book's previous owner, Yonatan, whose name is written in a "soft and feminine" (47) handwriting in the upper left corner of the book, unveils the lawyer's own repressed anxieties and insecurities. The paranoia the note causes reveals a split subject battling two contradictory identities: the progressive 'good' Arab against the backward, misogynistic, and conservative one.²⁷ The lawyer's story shows that "under the cover of our 'optimism' you can easily detect the hopeless sadness of assimilationists" (Arendt 2007, 272).

The second story is a first-person account of Amir Lahab, a twenty-eight-year-old man whose life is defined by escapes from the moment his mother flees an arranged marriage after the death of his father from Tira to the nearby Jaljulia, taking him with her when he was barely one month old. In Jaljulia, Amir is always reminded of his status as a stranger, ridiculed and often accused of being the son of a collaborator, the "trash" of society.²⁸ Growing up and leaving the town, he immigrates to Jerusalem to study social work at the Hebrew University. After earning his degree, Amir secures a job at a welfare office in east Jerusalem where he meets Layla (before she becomes the lawyer's wife), but he soon quits to flee his colleagues' ridicule and exploitation. He ends up becoming the caretaker for Yonatan—a young Jewish man, whose failed suicide attempt, as

27 To understand the history of Arab minority in Israel, see Dan Rabinowitz and Khawla Abu Baker's brilliant book *Coffins on Our Shoulders* (2005). In their book, the authors discuss three generations of Arab citizens of Israel in order to show the shift in the minority's relationship with the Jewish state. The first they call "the generation of Survivors," those who found themselves under the control of a state they did not want to be part of. The second they call "The Worn-out Generation," those who tried to elicit equal rights by leading political and civil struggle to challenge the Jewish hegemony but soon to realise that their attempts were almost futile against a settler colonial entity that excluded them from centres of power. The last generation the authors focus on is "The Stand-Tall Generation," those "disillusioned with the prospect of ever becoming equal citizens in Israel, members of the Stand-Tall Generation are no longer interested in being marginal hangers-on of the Zionist project. They tend to see citizenship as a collective entitlement, not just a personal affair" (3).

28 Collaborators are those Palestinians who work for Israeli intelligence to gather sensitive information, especially about Palestinian resistance.

Amir later finds out, has left him in a vegetative state. Gradually, and with the consent of Yonatan's mother, Ruchaleh, and the encouragement of the other nurse Osnat, who believes that Amir and Yonatan "are practically identical" (122), Amir begins to assume Yonatan's identity. He begins to mimic and reproduce all the details of Yonatan's life—hobbies, music, books—into a narrative that later becomes wholly his. In the process of putting the pieces of Yonatan's life together, one also gets to delve deeper into the causes of Amir's 'vegetative life.' After Yonatan's death, Amir decides to fully usurp his identity. He fakes his own death and buries Yonatan under his name in the cemetery for Palestinian Arab strangers in east Jerusalem. With Yonatan's burial, Amir also buries his past Arab self and becomes "Yonatan Forschmidt: Israeli, white, Ashkenazi, a consumer of Western culture. [He] was not Sephardic and [He] was not the token Arab" (283). Feeling like "an extension of Yonatan or the continuation of what he had been" (214), Amir continues what Yonatan has left hanging. Using Yonatan's ID, he enrolls at Bezalel Academy for Arts and Design to fulfil Yonatan's dream of pursuing photography. The novel ends at Amir/Yonatan's photography exhibition where the lawyer, having been invited by Amir, is seen browsing people's faces in the photos, trying unsuccessfully to discern their identity.

Between parts one and six, the two stories unfold in parallel, moving between the present and the past through flashbacks. It is not until part seven, when the lawyer finally tracks down Amir—now Yonatan—that the two stories begin to intersect. The confrontation between the lawyer and Amir becomes a moment of confession. Amir reveals to the lawyer the secret of his metamorphosis from Amir to Yonatan knowing that the lawyer would understand. The failure of both characters at passing and assimilation reveals that in such a deeply divided society the desire to be perceived outside ethno-national identities or, as Ruchaleh puts it, to be "judged for who you are and what you've done and not your nationality or your ethnicity" (215) is just a fantasy hiding behind it subjects who are fractured and paranoid.

Dana Olmert (2018) correctly argues that Amir/Yonatan's identification with the lawyer at the end of the novel and his feeling that the latter would understand is a result of not only a common desire to assimilate or a matter of shared experiences of belonging to the same minority group, but "the unsettling presence of their heterosexual-yet-weak masculine self-image [which] creates the ground for their communication and bonding" (69). Even though both characters approach their predicament differently, what really bonds them together is the fantasy that sustains a desire to be invisible and unmarked, to evade the scope of the derogatory gaze of the Other. Both the lawyer and Amir/Yonatan are victims of the demands and pressures imposed by the Other of ideology, their socio-symbolic networks, and intersubjective relations, triggering destructive desires to rid the self—by means of disavowal or annihilation—of that which is deemed undesirable.

The novel ingeniously captures the colonial discourse and ambivalent identifications inherent in the system which shows not a relationship of difference as much as it is of likeness. In Kashua's novel, both Palestinian Israeli and Jewish Israeli subjects become "the split or divided self, the two sides within the same figure" (Hall 1996, 18), the product of institutionalised and systemic racism. The novel portrays Palestinian Israeli subjectivity as fractured, fashioned by narcissistic wounds. Amir and the lawyer grapple with a fragmented sense of self, which drives a defensive doubling of the ego. This doubling, aimed at preserving a semblance of mastery and coherence, relies on validation that comes from the outside, in the gaze of the mirroring other. In Lacan's Imaginary order, the mirror stage is a turning point in the formation of subjectivity, whereby one encounters an external "totalizing image" reflected from the outside (Gallop 1982 120).²⁹ This image, which is itself an illusion, creates a fictive sense of completeness and coherence

29 Lacan identifies three orders: the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic. The Real represents what is outside language and resists symbolization; the Imaginary is a fantasy-laden realm that is associated with images, illusions, and (mis)recognitions, and often linked to the mirror stage; and the Symbolic is the realm of language, laws, and social structures.

which Lacan calls “Ideal I.” This idealised image of the self can only be sustained through fantasies that become necessary to veil the subjective lack. Lacan argues that lack arises because language, as constitutive of identity, can never fully satisfy the subject’s desire for wholeness. Yet in a context where, as Amir remarks, “no one in this country wants to be an Arab” (293), and where Palestinian Arabs are made to feel a “sharp twinge of inferiority” (172), the inferior other is not allowed to construct their own fantasies of being. Even when they do, e.g. through *sumud* identity, these fantasies are repeatedly undermined, forcing the Palestinian subject to always confront a double lack: the ontological and the circumstantial.

Therefore, the mirror reflection which the two characters seek is that of the white Ashkenazi Jew, which is established in Israeli society as a master signifier of supremacy and coherence. The Palestinian Arab mirror-image, on the other hand, becomes the “anti-image” (Maitra 2017, 117) of that ideal, which Kashua’s characters reject. In a deeply divided society, Amir and the lawyer remain fixated on an image and fantasies of being which they are never fully permitted to embody or attain. They, instead, remain stuck in a “fragmented version of the imaginary register” (Ibid), left searching, in vain, for the signifiers that will satisfy their fantasy of wholeness within a dominant Symbolic discourse that refuses to recognise them as equal. The following section develops the lawyer’s story as a narrative of multiple failures—failure to integrate, failure to be recognised, and ultimately, failure to sustain the fantasy of a coherent self. His attempts to craft a progressive identity mirror Barghouti’s hope for ethical renewal, but here they collapse under the weight of internalised oppression and fantasy collapse.

The Lawyer: My Desire is That of the Other, But What Other?

Living in Jerusalem, the lawyer, with his Israeli citizenship, his perfect Hebrew, and his expensive lifestyle, recognises that he, and Palestinian Israelis like him, “will always be seen [by the local Palestinians] as strangers” (10), and “half-Jewish” (11), “suspicious, but wholly indispensable”

(10). He is, after all, their necessary link with the Israeli authorities, and his services will always be sought.³⁰ Soon after the lawyer immigrates from Tira to study law at the Hebrew University, he begins to fashion a fantasy life based on wealth and career accomplishments, which he identifies as signifiers of power and desirability. He becomes alienated in a cobweb of those symbolic signifiers (the illusions of progressiveness, liberalism, wealth and intellectuality) and of a life that “was a mirage, that all of it could suddenly melt away” (24-5). The lawyer’s oscillation between Imaginary (Ideal I) and Symbolic (speaking subject and the man of the law) identifications unfolds through the voice of an omniscient third person narrator. This narrative voice mirrors an alienated subject, and a life deprived of agency and control. He does not speak but instead is posited as a passive site where conflicting forces materialise. The voice that speaks through him is not his. It is external and only comes from the outside. Like his self-image which relies on external validation, the absence of the lawyer’s own voice exposes how external forces—the Other’s dominant discourse—shape his identity and sense of self-worth.

The lawyer’s schizophrenic existence appears in the contradictory life he leads. On the one hand, he looks down on Palestinians from the West Bank and calls them uneducated “car thieves” (15), and at the same time, he hires his secretary Samah simply on account of her father’s position as a prominent senior Fatah official,³¹ believing that it is crucial for him to obtain the “seal of approval” from other Palestinians (16). He is also portrayed as lost in the new ‘upgraded’ lifestyle he adopts: he orders sushi from the most expensive sushi restaurant in Jerusalem to impress his Palestinian Israeli friends, but at the same time admits that “no matter what his mother made, even if it was only scrambled eggs with green onions, it would be better than what he was about to order” (25). He becomes a very familiar face at the bookshop because he “wanted to read the great works,

30 Palestinian Israelis differ from other Palestinians in Israel, e.g. Jerusalemites. The former carry an Israeli passport and are allowed to vote. They are thus perceived by Palestinians as “half-Jewish”.

31 a Political and military organisation and faction founded by Yassir Arafat

the ones that all his Jewish peers had read” (29). While the lawyer never gets past the first thirty pages of any book he buys, he pretends to be an avid reader to earn the saleslady’s praise and to hear his employee, Tarek, confess that he is “really jealous that [the lawyer] can find time to read” (37). His desire to be in a position of admiration and likeability requires that he structure a fantasy life that will not be seen “as a retreat” by “his competitors” nor “in the eyes of the public [as] the number one Arab criminal defense lawyer in the city” (14).

From the outset of the lawyer’s story, we are introduced to his everyday social reality that is built on negations and illusions. He negates his relations to his Palestinian Arab roots and the conservative village life he comes from in favour of another constructed one. The image of himself as a progressive, open-minded, affluent subject becomes a form of identification with the very place from where the lawyer believes he is being observed. It is the position “from where we look at ourselves so that we appear to ourselves likeable, worthy of love” (Žižek 1989, 116). Since imaginary identification always occurs in response to a perceived gaze from the other (117), the gaze which the lawyer considers when he stages his life and his external self-image is that of the Jewish Israeli Other upon the Palestinian Israeli figure. It is not the gaze of that figure himself upon his life. The shame of his roots and of his cultural and social ties with his Palestinian side, as well as his constant feeling of inferiority and impotence, become all justifiable if one considers the gaze for which the lawyer is enacting the role.

The gaze of the Other/others becomes central to the lawyer’s question of “what I look like...as he examined his skewed reflection on the polish chrome coffee machine” (19), of whether or not he looks Arab; with what other people imagine him to be; his great skills at distinguishing between Jews and Arabs; his top of the line clothes, his economic status; his most expensive car; his successful career; and the books he buys. The lawyer’s illusory sense of selfhood is defined by what Lacan (1975) describes as “the gaze of someone whose eyes [one does] not see, not even discern.

All that is necessary is for something to signify to [one] that there may be others there” (215).

Throughout the novel, he is seen chasing a likeable and worthy image of himself and deriving “the feeling of elation” (Kashua 2012, 29) from people’s laudatory remarks, like those of Meirav, the Jewish saleslady at the bookstore whose remark that she “wished all [their] customers to be like him” made him feel good (28); Oved, the Café owner, who admires the lawyer’s expensive clothes; the other Palestinian Israeli couples during their monthly meetings who he always tries to impress; his employees Tarek and Samah; and his Palestinian clients.

However, when people do not return a laudatory gaze, the feeling of elation turns into “disgust” and “humiliation” (228). After suspecting his wife of cheating, the lawyer goes to a bar where he sits staring at women and comparing them to his wife. However, he soon realises that “[his] stares were not being well-received” (228). When the women do not entertain his stares, nor admire his expensive look, “he felt his way to the bathroom to vomit his guts out” (228-9). The lawyer is objectified in the condescending gaze that the other returns. The vomit is a reaction against the breakdown of the line between the constructed ideal image of himself and the rejected one. The lawyer’s response to his collapsing fantasy reflects not just personal insecurity, but a broader psychic impasse. It marks the moment where the illusions of self-mastery demanded by *sumud* collapse into a post-*sumud* affective field structured by shame, failure, and disorientation. The chain of signifiers delineating the lawyer’s subjectivity, which separates him as a subject from aspects of his identity he wishes to distance himself from, collapses. Hence, the lawyer’s behaviour underpins an anxiety of this sudden, abrupt fall of the fantasy that sustains his ego. He does not wish to be associated with the Arab men he “pitied” (154), or the Arab lovers who are “a disgrace” (162). The gazes of the women at the bar force the lawyer to confront the fragility of his constructed identity, and that behind the fantasy of open-mindedness and progressiveness, there still is a conservative, narrow-minded, Arab-looking man.

The Real of the Lawyer's Desire and the Screen of Social Fantasy

The threatening breakdown of the distinction between what is abjected, or repressed, and the lawyer's fantasy life appears in the lawyer's narrative on multiple occasions. At the beginning of the novel, the lawyer sees himself in a dream "as a surfer upon [waves], gliding toward shore and then suddenly, violently, being tossed into the water, waking up with a terror he did not fully understand" (3). The image that the lawyer does not fully understand evokes a terror beyond symbolisation, one that threatens the dissolution of his socio-symbolic constellation. Like the waves in his dream, the lawyer's mirage-life, moves and vacillates, creating gaps in his Symbolic reality through which the repressed—the disavowed aspects of his identity and unacknowledged desires—can return.

The lawyer's fantasy of attaining full control over his life, especially his sense of economic superiority, is a mechanism to undermine an internalised inferiority.³² The lawyer separates himself from that distorted image the familial and collective mirror reflects back at him. The image of likeness which he negates and alienates himself from is a reminder of his difference from the ideal image he desires to be, of the wish that "he was a bit lighter-skinned, and he would have been happy to have blond hair, or at least chestnut-colored" (144). Thus, the object cause of the lawyer's desires is subsumed under his fierce negation of one's own past, one's need for any roots, "the catchphrases like, *He who has no past, has no future*" (40), of his assumed belief that "a tree is a tree and a man is a man" (42). This same negation is what keeps intruding into the lawyer's reality. Yet, his adoption of an assumed Jewish Israeli subjectivity and the negation of his cultural ties cannot be fully achieved because the lawyer finds himself in situations where these two desires

32 To read about how Israel maintains the inferiority of the Palestinian-Israeli citizens politically, legally, constitutionally, and economically, see *Israel and the Palestinian Citizens* (2017), edited by Nadim N. Rouhana. Rouhana argues that Israel maintains Jewish superiority and ethnic privilege by using a single ethnic criterion, to be Jewish or not. He writes that the Arab's citizenship in Israel "suffers from continuing settler-colonial practices. See also As'ad Ghanem and Mohamad Mustafa's *Palestinians in Israel: The Politics of Faith after Oslo* (2018)

clash. At times he is seen associating Arab-ness with repulsiveness, idleness, backwardness, and abhorrence, and other times, he recognises that “he was not willing to be different” (243). The ambiguity that characterises the lawyer’s subjective position could be described as a neurotic situation, to borrow Fanon’s (1952/1986) words in his discussion of Black neurosis, “in which [one is] compelled to choose an unhealthy, conflictual situation fed on fantasies [that are] hostile and inhuman” (197).

Upon meeting Layla as a university student and as his sister’s roommate, the lawyer falls for her, and for the idealised image he imposes on her, which is ultimately driven by her difference. When the lawyer confesses to his ‘religious’ veiled sister his desire to marry her roommate Layla, she warns him of Layla’s difference, of the fact that “this girl wore short sleeves and tight jeans, that she went to parties and cafes” (144). Little does his sister know that “that was exactly what he was looking for, someone *not like us*” (144). The phantasmatic image of the life he creates for himself requires having “a woman that in no way reminded him of his sister or his mother or the rest of his highly conservative family” (141). This exact otherness that the lawyer identifies in Layla becomes the reason for placing her in the position of the object of his desires. The more she rejects his advances, the more mysterious and intriguing she is, the deeper his desires for her become. The lawyer’s idealisation of Layla is a narcissistic projection which renders possible his desire to difference and otherness; it sustains the social mask (fantasy) that makes the lawyer’s reality appear meaningful and consistent, confirming his image of himself as better and “smarter than everyone else” (141).

Being with Layla secures the desired social image which can guarantee the lawyer’s likeability and assimilation into Israeli society and among the highly educated, upper class Palestinian Israelis. It confirms his image of himself as someone “whom they deemed worthy of inclusion” (23). This means that it is not Layla that he loves but his “own ego that one loves in love,

one's own ego made real on the imaginary level" (Lacan 1975, 142). When the situation between him and Layla is disrupted by the love note, the fantasy sustaining his Symbolic realm weakens, producing holes and gaps for the abjected to intrude into his immediate reality. The lawyer finds himself falling back into the same identity trap, reproducing the same stereotypical image of Palestinian men as perceived in the Jewish Israeli psyche.³³

It becomes clear how the ideal image mirrored upon Layla is deeply shaken after marriage when he realises that she "did not complete him" (248). Her family is not the "Galilean family of his dreams, educated and rich," but "far more modest in wealth and education...Her father was a construction worker, her mother a housewife, and she was the only member of the family to have gone to college" (150). She becomes "the miserable little Arab woman," and "a functioning airhead" (294) who "did not attract him the way he would have liked, and this he attributed to the shape of her body, her stout thighs, and the stretch marks" (48). Her unconditional love for him becomes intolerable as it reminds him of "where he came from," of the part where only "the poor, the uneducated and unenlightened, could fall helplessly in love" (250). Like religion, it is easy for "the down and out, to embrace it" (250). By reciprocating Layla's love, the lawyer risks exposing the theatricality of his life and that which he tries to deny. To avoid any occasion that would lead to the collapse of the reality he is invested in, the lawyer starts to sleep in his daughter's bedroom, to overwhelm himself with work, and to burden Layla with the kids and house chores.

Satisfying his wife sexually becomes a challenge for him. Countering his fear of sexual impotence requires him to remember "sad images from his youth" (44), and his dead grandfather's "wrinkled, flaccid penis" (45) while giving his wife her first orgasm. The fantasy of the grandfather, a symbol of masculinity and power, and the image of his flaccid penis, as the imaginary phallus,

33 See Daniel Bar-Tal and Yona Teichman's *Stereotypes and Prejudice in Conflict: Representations of Arabs in Jewish Israeli Society* (2005); see also Amalia Sa'ar and Taghreed Yahia-Younis's "Masculinity in Crisis: The Case of Palestinians in Israel" (2008).

becomes crucial for the lawyer to identify with in order to nourish the illusion of empowerment and vitality, and to defend himself against an intruding sense of castration. It offers him, instead, the illusion of “bodily unity, wholeness, perfect autonomy” (Luepnitz 226)—an illusion that disintegrates when the lawyer comes across the note in Tolstoy’s *The Kreutzer Sonata*. This turning point marks the moment where the Lawyer’s Symbolic order begins to disintegrate.

The Fall of the Lawyer’s Fantasy

As Lacan (1957/2006) writes famously of the *Purloined Letter* that “a letter always arrives at its destination” (30), the role of the letter in the lawyer’s narrative is central.³⁴ First, it can be read as the obstacle necessary for the restoration of the relationship between the lawyer and his wife, reigniting the lawyer’s desires for her on account of her dark, mysterious side which the lawyer embarks on solving. After coming across the letter, the lawyer never stops questioning Layla’s desires again; she becomes enigmatic, impenetrable, caught again in the lawyer’s “Che vuoi?” or as he puts it, “what did she lack anyway?” (248).³⁵ This enigma, the mysterious object that Layla desires and another man has and is able to offer it to her, renews the lawyer’s jealous desires for her. This reversal enables him to realise, at the end of the novel, when Amir/Yonatan confirms her innocence, that “the feeling was wonderful: he desired his wife, fell back in love with her” (343).

It can be also said, and in reference to Lacan’s reading of the Oedipus Complex, that the letter introduces a third into the relationship of the lawyer and his wife (another lover).³⁶ The lawyer, consequently, experiences a sense of impotence and inadequacy induced by the anxiety of his powerlessness and the repressed fears of his inability to satisfy his wife’s desires. For his jealous

34 See Slavoj Žižek, “Why Does a Letter Always Arrive at Its Destination?” (2013).

35 In Lacanian psychoanalysis, this question, which translates from Italian as “What do you want?” is tied to the concept of desire and the enigmatic nature of the other’s desire. It is the question of what the other wants that catalyses one’s engagement with their own desires in relation to the other.

36 See Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book V, The Formations of the Unconscious*, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated by Russell Grigg (2017).

ego, it is the ‘other’ man who is retaining the imaginary phallus, or what his wife lacks and desires to have. He admits that the feelings of jealousy “begin[s] to bubble” from the fact that his wife “might have had a relationship with a talented, perhaps successful artist” (342). This third other forces the lawyer to question his own desires and his whole being which he constructs around an obsessive wish to possess all sorts of phallic signifiers to fill in the lack, and deal with an internalised sense of inferiority. He has thought that adopting the accent and the life of the more “refined,” “less threatening” Galileans, who seem to the lawyer “more enlightened, more educated, better dressed, better off, the products of superior schools” (143) would bring him closer to the desired image of the Ashkenazi Jew, or would enable him to attain the same level of humanity and entitlement accorded to Jews in Israel. The thought that he no longer possesses Layla as another phallic signifier, disrupts the lawyer’s equilibrium and the idyllic images of his everyday Symbolic reality.

Most importantly, the letter becomes the symbolic object that collapses the fantasy of stability. In post-*sumud* terms, it marks the intrusion of the Real—the unspeakable loss and lack that disrupts all symbolic orderings of self, identity, and coherence. In other words, the letter annuls the difference between the ‘reality’ of being a Palestinian Arab minority in a racist/colonial context and the fantasy space. The lawyer is forced to confront the traumatic truth of his immediate reality outside the symbolic title of the progressive, open-minded Jewish-like lawyer. He is overwhelmed by an urge to redeem his tarnished honour by “kill[ing] his wife. He’d stab the bitch, cut her throat, gouge out her eyes, butcher her body” (49). The lawyer finds himself gazing from a straight-on angle on what is excluded for his constructed life to take shape and meaning—the conservative village life and the disavowed aspects of his Palestinian identity, such as the idea of honour and the misogynistic views about women (154-5). The (R)real view he is getting now is one that is unfiltered by the screen of fantasy. Therefore, he manages to see how his desires to be like the Jewish Israeli

other and his mimicry of Jewish Israeli gaze have led to the distortion of his reality and the excluded object itself.

It is not surprising that after the fall of his fantasies, the lawyer is seen yearning for his past idyllic life, his home back in the village, his childhood and school years, and the way it was before it becomes distorted by his desires. These desires circulate around his feeling of castration and worthlessness by the Jewish Israeli Other, and the latter's entitlement, in the eyes of the lawyer, to a phallic enjoyment (or what Lacan calls *jouissance*) which explains in the lawyer's eyes their happiness, their ability to love, and live.³⁷ He regretfully admits that:

He wanted to go back to his old room, the cold room he had shared with his three brothers, the thin mattress and the sheepskin that his mother would put under it for insulation during winter. He missed the crispness of morning, the walk to school bursting with confidence, the knowledge that his homework was perfect and that it had been written out in elegant handwriting, the kind that made his parents proud.

Too bad he hadn't gone back to the village after school, too bad he hadn't listened to his father, who begged him to return home. (223-4)

In the process of mimicking the white Ashkenazi Jew, the lawyer internalises the other's hatred of the Arab minority. He projects his feeling of inferiority on those who are like him, and who remind him of his inevitable failure at accomplishing and fulfilling the desire to be different. He turns Palestinian Arabs into phobic objects: "A Jew, especially an Ashkenazi Jew... seemed like his

37 *Jouissance* is the pleasure/enjoyment that a subject derives from discourse. This pleasure stems from the subject's capacity to employ language and fantasy mechanisms to establish a psychic self-identity that is coherent, autonomous, and self-controlled. In *Trauma and Race*, Sheldon George (2016) argues that otherness is articulated around *jouissance*, establishing racial difference and hatred. Racial identity is the discourse that serves to ground one in the *jouissance* of language and fantasy, hence veiling the gap at the core of individual subjectivity (2-5). Being denied control over discourse and the environment one lives in re-introduces this gap forcing one to confront the fractured/split self-image which should have been veiled when one is allowed to have control over the hegemony of discourse.

wife's problem; an Arab lover was a disgrace" (162). Consequently, the lawyer does not only fail to see the Other as lacking, and Jewish Israeli identity as equally a failed one only maintaining a façade of entitlement and power by excluding others. By rendering the Jewish Israeli other the object of his desires, he obscures the ethnocratic apartheid structure of the State of Israel which is the catalyst for his desire to occupy their privileged position in the first place. This structure guarantees Jewish supremacy and hegemony through the institutionalisation of racial laws (Khader 2018). He simply fails to acknowledge what Faten, the wife of his accountant friend, frames as "the intentional blurring of identity and the cultural, social, and moral crisis...rooted in the tireless attempts to strip the Arab citizens of Israel of their true sense of national belonging" (38).

Toward the end of the novel, the lawyer is seen at the exhibition browsing "the faces along the wall" trying to "discern between Arab and Jew" but eventually realises that it is almost impossible to determine "the ethnicity of these people" (345). By fixating on differences and particularities, the lawyer shuts his eyes to the universal dimension of his doubt, the common humanity. Beyond race and identity politics, and outside the discourse of a master society of "facile discourses of victim and oppressor, minority and majority" (Grumberg 2018, 22), identities do not pre-exist. They are created for the purpose of excluding those who are not worthy of inclusion—like Kashua's lawyer, whose impossible dream of equality will always be undermined by a regressive ideology of exclusion.

The lawyer's fragmentation mirrors the broader symbolic disintegration at the heart of post-*sumud* Palestinian literature. The lawyer's inability to sustain the fantasy of coherence is symptomatic of a generation trapped between internalised colonial violence and the failure of inherited discourses of heroism. If *sumud* once pre-supposed a subject who resists through rootedness and endurance, Kashua offers a vision of psychic exile where belonging, desire, and appearance are governed by fear, guilt, and unrecoverable loss.

Amir and the (Im)possibility of ‘Escaping One’s DNA’

This section builds on the previous one by showing the internalisation of colonial logic within the Palestinian Israeli community. Amir’s story extends the novel’s exploration of fractured subjectivity but from a different angle. While the lawyer desires assimilation through status and performance, Amir opts for erasure through mimicry. Kashua ends Amir’s narrative in a full circle as the last sentence of the last part in his narrative, “Yonatan is dead [...] I buried him a week ago” (339) is the same as the opening sentence of the first part of his narrative. This circularity signifies Amir/Yonatan’s inability to escape the entrapment of the past, nor the authoritative gaze of the Other, which the lawyer in this case symbolises. This failure, and the disruption of Amir’s perfect passing, is further discussed by the critic D. Olmert (2018) who proposes that Amir’s failure is brought about by the demands to answer to the lawyer’s paranoid anxieties. Amir’s cooperation with the lawyer stems from an intuitive feeling that the lawyer would understand his imposturous identity. She adds that the failure at passing, a theme featuring in Kashua’s earlier novels as well, shows the fragility of the Jewish Israeli identity which requires the Palestinian Arab “other” to demarcate its boundaries. Hence, when Kashua’s characters are forcefully returned to their natural place, Kashua raises “a mirror to Israeli hegemony by exposing the gap between the neoliberal self-image of the Jewish-Israeli political left, which considers itself open and pluralistic, and its basic requisite of exclusiveness” (66).

In the same context, Maurice Ebileeni (2017) reads Amir’s obsession with photography and “the lens previously available to Israeli-Jewish eyes only” as a metaphorical invasion of the other, and a way to “conquer Palestinian anxieties toward this particular other” (234). Ebileeni argues that Yonatan becomes a window through which Amir, the underprivileged Arab, is granted access into the reality of an Israeli Ashkenazi Jew. In the Palestinian imagining, this figure stands for the European colonial infiltrator who has disrupted the idyllic unity that had characterised the

relationship between Muslims, Christians and Jews prior to the Nakba (233). Infiltrating the other's identity is a way to "reinvent the self" to alleviate the anxieties caused by the Palestinians' sense of a widening gap between how they imagine themselves to have been in the past and how they have become following the Nakba (235).

Ebileeni reads Amir's metamorphosis as a way to conquer Palestinian anxieties, yet he fails to acknowledge that Kashua's target audience is obviously not the Palestinian reader. The fact that the novel is written in Hebrew without ever being translated into Arabic should make of Kashua's narrative a way to conquer Israeli anxieties. It does so by opening a space for the disposable—those who do not count, the symptoms of the unjust political, social and cultural ideologies—to disturb and disrupt the façade of a coherent reality. I would also argue here that these marginalised narratives when perceived as the remainder of what is excluded from the system to maintain its fantasy of wholeness can stand for the Real which invades the social and political structures to reveal the fractures and gaps at the core of all exclusivist and particular identities.

The power of Amir's narrative is established from the insider/outsider position he occupies: the-not-Arab-yet not-Jew position. This position serves as a mediation between society's unquestionable presuppositions and the unspoken fears of the intrusion of the abjected which is hidden and kept at a distance by means of "the logic of coloniality implicit in the state form, along with its rhetoric of salvation and democracy" (Mignolo 2013, 60). This logic is nowhere clearer than when Amir, now Yonatan, is accepted at Bezalel Academy of Art and Design to study photography. The scene begins at the left-wing liberal Bezalel college when Amir/Yonatan with a group of Jewish leftists sarcastically discuss their views of Arabs. Amir/Yonatan observes that "the token Arab was always welcomed with open arms at Bezalel, with happiness even, and it never seemed artificial. Nor did the Arabs suffer. It seemed [they] enjoyed the whole thing" (286). The use of the verb 'seem' creates a discord between the façade of democracy and equality and the

unarticulated fear of the other. Through Amir's position, Kashua delves deeper into the Jewish Israeli imagination that manifests in the students' comments and gossip about the Palestinian Arab cleaner at the college who has become a success story after his photography skills have been discovered by the Jewish Israeli head of the department. Amir/Yonatan describes Zionist images that do not only make of Arabs objects of disgust, abhorrence, and deprecation, but also of sexual curiosity and desirability. When the Jewish Israeli female students at Bezalel "threw themselves at [the Arabs]," Amir remarks, "the Arab Phallus" (286) becomes an object of both fear and desirability. It is turned into an object of a racist phobia charged with libidinal affects, an excess of *jouissance* that Palestinians should not be entitled to. Therefore, to maintain the coherence of the Jewish Israeli self, the Arab who (excessively) enjoys what ought to be ours must be exteriorised, kept at a distance. This fear can also be exemplified in the racist comments made by the Jewish Israeli restaurant owner, where Amir/Yonatan works. The Arab workers relegated to the 'unseen' space of the kitchen must always be reminded of their submissive position because "If you let your guard down even the littlest bit, they'll eat you alive" (211).

The Question of Loyalty and Betrayal

Grumberg (2018) argues that Amir's claim of Yonatan's identity reflects a desire to escape an identity that "usurps" and "hijacks" subjectivity (9) and adopt a "nonidentity" that would render him invisible, hence avoiding identity politics altogether (11). While it is true that Amir/Yonatan admits his desire "to be like them" (Kashua 2012, 301), mimicry in Amir's case goes beyond merely the Manichean dichotomy of coloniser/colonised, majority/minority, or privileged/underprivileged. Through Amir's journey, Kashua offers a painstaking critique of the complicity of the Palestinian Israeli community in creating traumatised passive subjects who are posited as the screen on which such a society projects its own anxieties and the overwhelming feelings of impotence and passivity.

Amir is a victim of a society that is blind and insensitive to the struggles of the weak. His choice to become Yonatan should not be reduced to a mere obsession with an entitled Jewish identity. It grants him a sense of self-worth his Arab community has deprived him of. The metaphorical burial of Amir in the process of fully assuming Yonatan's identity and the prospect of a new life is a symbol of the burial of the burdens of his unwanted past self. Towards the end of Amir's narrative, he finds himself gazing at the Jewish students in the pub and thinking to himself:

Today I want to be like them. Free, loose, full of dreams, able to think about love.
Like them...they who felt no need to apologize for their existence, no need to hide their identity...those who never looked for suspicious glances...whose acceptance was always taken for granted...To feel I belong, without feeling guilty or disloyal.
And what exactly was I being disloyal to? "(304)

The excerpt demonstrates a desire that exceeds politics and ideology. It is a desire at the existential level—a wish to be gazed at from a likeable position, or as he declares elsewhere, "I just wanted to be told that I was good" (207), and "I liked hearing that I looked good" (122). Yonatan/Amir recognises in the pub the disappearance of the Other who could be looking and judging: the mocking gaze which drives Amir to flee and begin the process of his dissolution into his double other. This eclipse of the mocking gaze, which has for long contributed to Amir's objectification, allows him to re-gain the position of the subject who does the looking. This non-judgmental gaze also appears at a much earlier stage in Amir's school life when his mother decides to "sneak" him away into a Jewish school because he is being bullied in his school in Jaljulia (129). Amir admits that among Jewish students he has felt much better. It is not because his classmates avoid him altogether or because he outsmarts them but because in that school "no one told [him] that [his] father had murdered anybody or that [he] was the son of a collaborator" (129). For the first time,

Amir is not judged based on his family name or his place of origin, or the fact that he is the victim of his mother's desire to flee and cut him off from his roots. Therefore, when his mother decides to bring him back to Jaljulia for junior high—to the school where she is a teacher—Amir starts to develop intense aversive behaviour toward her to the extent that after this incident he can no longer recall how it feels to hug or kiss her (100). All what he remembers about her is her “unchanging,” “forever apologizing” look (104).

Amir is a victim of a community's “suspicious glances” (304). He is a victim of honour preservation—a sacrifice that must be expelled so the community can “be regenerated or redeemed and attain higher unity” (LaCapra 2001, 52). In both narratives, Kashua points at Palestinian Arab obsession with honour—“personal honor, national honor, religious honor, family honor” (Kashua 2012, 285). The fear of being dishonoured invites projective anxieties of castration, which, to be avoided, needs sacrificial figures or scapegoats such as Amir, his mother, and Layla. Societal scapegoating is the mechanism through which an emasculated community can assume “some original unity, wholeness, security, or identity” that has been usurped by others (LaCapra 2001, 58). Amir and his mother become those sinful others to be cast out and “trashed” with the “foreigners” (Kashua 2012, 318), “the strangers” and “the collaborators” (99).

Impersonating Yonatan's identity could be seen, on the one hand, as Amir's unconscious attempt at working through a traumatic childhood and upbringing that is mostly defined by multiple escapes: escaping the beatings by moving to a Jewish school; escaping the village by staying in Jerusalem after getting his degree; running away from a party he goes to with Layla after his co-workers mock him while he is dancing with her; quitting his job “knowing that no one would come looking for him” (130). Added to that Amir's masochistic desire to offer himself up as the object of ridicule, exploitation, and shaming. His constant attempts at pleasing others are forms of escape which he resorts to in order to be looked at as “a different kind of stranger” (99). In other words,

being good—silently accepting ridicule, shaming, and other self-deprecating tendencies—is how Amir redeems himself. It compensates for the fault of being the stranger with “a weird last name” (99). It also makes up for the loss of wholeness, unity, belonging, and security he might have enjoyed had his mother stayed in Tira. Assuming the presence of a perfect, redemptive state prior to the mother’s elopement has given way to a sort of melancholic yearning for the lost object, which eventually leads to Amir’s later symbolic death and rebirth into Yonatan. In the quest to retrieve what has been lost, Amir decides to eliminate and revoke that to which blame is imputed, notably himself as Amir, and all what connects him with his Palestinian Israeli identity and community including his mother.

Escapism, especially in confrontational situations, becomes a repetitive compulsive acting out of the mother’s first escape from the village. Right before his decision to disappear, and in a moment of rage, images of a “revolution played in [his] head” (129). He starts to imagine himself confronting and fighting back those who have turned him into an object of ridicule. However, these fantasy images are soon deflected when the past invades the present moment until the “images of the revolution started to fade away” (129):

I never fought back. I just tried to deflect the blows as best as I could and then run away. Just like my mother, who ran away, too, years before I ever had to, and who explained that she had done it because of me, for me, because she didn’t want me to suffer, to feel unwanted and alienated. (129)

Entrapped in the past, Amir is incapable of separating between the traumatic event of the mother’s escape and his current situation. Neither can he be exculpated of the responsibility for her escape. Acting out the trauma in the form of melancholic escapes hinders the possibility of engaging with its traumatic kernel. His escapes are an acted-out message directed at the Symbolic Other which

fails to read. When the Symbolic order fails to give the subject an answer, the subject subtracts himself “from the symbolic order through an operation of real separation. [The subject] respond[s] by causing [his] real lack to be juxtaposed to the lack—in the symbolic—of the Other” (Julien 1996, 145). This subtraction is attained by means of one’s own disappearance. Amir’s final escape (symbolic death) implies an act of surrender to any further attempts to answer to the demands of the hegemonic Other.

Growing up in Jaljulia, Amir has always been reminded of his status as a foreigner, a polluter, “the son of [a] whore” (274). He is unable to escape the social mirror which returns pejorative and degrading gazes that Amir and his mother must endure. He recalls how his “mother’s honor...was free for the taking,” and how he learns at school that “[his]mother used to show her tits to all the kids in the class, that [she] wore red bras and short skirts; that [she] was ousted from her village for whoring...” (272). He also remembers his paternal grandmother accusing his mother of being a whore when she comes in a police car to get him back to Jaljulia after his father’s family decides to keep him. Assuming the responsibility for defending his mother’s honour and reversing the villager’s accusing gazes, he resorts to religion. He has desperately sought a sublimated image of himself and of his mother which others may find desirable and kids like his classmate Nabil would stop laughing at. He wants to be “the proof” that his mother was after all “a good mother” (273).

Amir’s narrative and the real cause of the desire to escape his Arab identity invite one to partially read it outside the sociohistorical context of the Palestinian/Israeli conflict or majority/minority complex. Yet, this reading has its limits. Ultimately, the society Amir desires to escape is a product of a hegemonic ideology that maintains systemic violence and injustices which lead such communities to sublimate religious conservatism and patriarchal ideology to compensate for their perceived inferiority. Being sacrificed to maintain the coherence of a fragmented

community, Amir centres on the wish to belong: the need for a nurturing environment to accept him for who he is. This need appears clearly in his attachment to his “honorary grandmother” in Jaljulia, um-Bassam, who becomes Amir’s only social mirror to reflect back an image of himself that is loveable and accepted—an image that, in the words of um-Bassam, “lack[s] for nothing” (107). Um-Bassam becomes a substitute for Amir’s absent ties with his mother, the family, and his community. She stands as a symbolic representation of the Palestinian Israeli communities in the past before Israel has managed to fragment them from the inside.

His imaginary identification with um-Bassem appears in his insistence on replacing his family name with um-Bassam’s whenever the kids at school ask. Following her death, Amir decides to disappear, to actualise his real subtraction. With her death, Amir loses the only link left with his past and his Palestinian identity. Her death creates the absence required for his symbolic death and re-birth in a new Symbolic holding womb. This absence materialises in Amir’s question, “And what exactly was I being disloyal to?” (304). It is reified in his final radical escape and complete dissociation from the unbearable reality in order to come back “like a new man, strong, proud, unafraid, marching toward a revolution with a spade in one hand and a rifle in the other” (128).

Doubling and the Disintegrating Self

In her discussion of Amir’s metamorphosis, Grumberg (2018) explores the use of the doppelgänger and doubles in both *Second Person Singular* and Philip Roth’s *Operation Shylock: A Confession*. She demonstrates how both authors are preoccupied with putting forth “the struggle with and against identity” (2). She argues that this doubling shows “a damaged corporeality” that corresponds to a “disintegrating self” both protagonists try to desperately escape (3). Kashua and Roth, she argues, present a different mode of being by revoking the familiar and conventional categories of identities, the collective and the national, which only aggravate the psychological struggle by “promising an impossible wholeness” (13). Presenting doubles who are physically

damaged signifies “the fear of self-annihilation and a symbolic displacement of the desire to murder the self” (13). Grumberg evokes Kristeva’s abjection in her reading of Amir to show how his encounter with Yonatan’s bodily fluids and defecation demonstrates how subjectivity is distinctive and demarcated by the borders of the ‘I’; yet, it is one that “relies on proximity to death to maintain itself” (14). When Amir learns how to accept this vegetative body of Yonatan, he slowly begins to feel like his extension until he becomes him at the end. Grumberg sees this as Amir’s opportunity to destroy his unstable life and to adopt an identity that enables him to perform stability and to accommodate, like Roth’s protagonist, fragmentation without collapsing. She points out that Amir’s decision to merge with Yonatan as his double means “discarding his own self...a replacement of one subjectivity with another and therefore entails a sacrifice, but it is one he is willing to make” (10).

Amir’s full identification with Yonatan is indeed facilitated by virtue of an uncanny resemblance between them. Freud (1919/2003) argues that the double “possesses knowledge, feeling and experience in common with another person, so that his self becomes confounded, or the foreign self is substituted for his own—in other words, by doubling, dividing and interchanging the self” (387). He also maintains that the double is “something long known to us, once very familiar” (370). This familiarity of the self, nevertheless, “comes to light” while it “ought to have remained hidden and secret” (376). Upon the encounter with Yonatan, Amir describes him as “a thing,” an object, a radical other, “a poisonous snake” (86) and “a limp creature” (110) that threatens to “open his mouth and clamp down” Amir’s fingers (110). Amir comments on multiple occasions on Yonatan’s “incomprehensible look staring [him] in the face” as well on his efforts to “avoid his gaze” (88). He says: “The thing I tried to avoid most was Yonatan’s stare. I like it better when his eyes were shut. There was something scary about them when they were open” (110). The uncanny feeling—the “something scary”—which Amir experiences when he encounters Yonatan’s body and

gaze emerges when Yonatan reflects Amir's own distorted self-image: “a hollowed-out frame of a man” who “refused to live and refused to die” (282). Amir finds in the fully paralyzed and powerless Yonatan a figure of his own helplessness. Like himself, Yonatan occupies the same status of present/absent, relegated to a marginal position—the attic of societies. Yonatan becomes “the specular image” in which Amir (mis)recognises himself. On the one hand, he looks at Yonatan and sees the body of a “healthy” “good looking guy” (110) who mirrors an image of “just what [Amir] always wanted to be” (122). On the other hand, Yonatan’s vegetative “irresponsive body” (275) parallels Amir’s social paralysis and damaged subjectivity, as well as “the disintegrating self from which [he] tries, in vain, to flee” (Grumberg 2018, 3). Amir’s identification with the image of himself in Yonatan becomes an alienating image to the extent that the thought of losing Yonatan, the fact that “he might just disappear right in the middle of things,” frightens him (Kashua 2012, 282).

Because Amir (mis)recognises himself as Yonatan’s extension, the act of suicide, the ultimate self-punishment performed by Yonatan can as well be seen as Amir’s vicarious fulfilment of the wish to annul the social bond, to exist reality altogether. Amir has been acting the scene out, but it is Yonatan who performs the *passage à l'acte* on his behalf. Freud (1920/1955) proposes that nobody would have the “mental energy required to kill himself unless, in the first place, in doing so he is at the same time killing an object with whom he has identified himself, and, in the second place, is turning against himself a death-wish which had been directed against someone else” (162). Amir is convinced that “Yonatan’s actions were a form of revenge” and that his refusal to live nor die is his way of hurting his mother by forcing her to remember (Kashua 2012, 281-2). By being Amir’s double other, Yonatan actualises Amir’s wish to take revenge against his mother, and his Symbolic order.

Amir soon realises that to maintain integrity and clear borders of the ‘I’, the other needs to be annihilated, to be buried and exteriorised. When Yonatan dies and is buried under Amir’s name, he becomes the abjected image of Amir, the one that has haunted him since childhood, the ‘trash’ image. Yonatan’s death absolves Amir of the stigma of the infiltrator, ‘the foreigner’ status that Yonatan assumes when he is buried in the cemetery which the ambulance driver calls “a garbage dump for foreigners” (318). When Amir finds himself telling Ruchaleh that “it’s just beginning,” it signifies this recognition that Yonatan’s death, which is also his symbolic death, will open a space for Amir to confidently say: “I was Yonatan Forschmidt,” and not the foreigner or the son of the whore (274). The burial of Yonatan along with Amir’s past life enables Amir to re-invent himself in a new Symbolic reality as “a real talent” (345). It grants him a ‘temporary’ sense of autonomy before he is later obliged to re-confront the Symbolic and respond to the lawyer’s paranoid accusations.

The Stranger’s World on the Other Side

Amir’s obsession with photography and his “insistence on doing things [his] own way, shooting only in black and white” (287) is a fulfilment of Kashua’s desire to acclaim a universality that exceeds politics and race, a wish to open up other possibilities on the borderlands of the either/or.³⁸ Olmert (2018) points out the redemptive role the world of art plays in Amir’s life. It enables him to deal with reality from an unmarked stance. She notes that Amir’s insistence on black-and-white photos, and on having his own distinct style, can be only fathomed when considering Amir’s double identity. Thus, she maintains that this style creates a third space of shared communication, conversations, and multiple possibilities (71). In a context where one’s race and identity decide

³⁸ I am here referring to Gloria Anzaldúa’s definition of borderlands as “a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants” (3).

their level of humanity, Yonatan/Amir's exhibition at the end of the novel becomes the site where faces of Arabs and Jews merge and become unidentifiable and unmarked. The lawyer admits that he finds it hard to distinguish between Jew and Arabs despite it being his most notable skill. Black-and-white photography eliminates colour distinctions and racial difference in a society that categorises individuals by identity, socioeconomic status, and colour. Ending the novel with the lawyer's failure to identify people's racial identities fulfils the wish (of both Kashua and his protagonists) for a universal human identity free from racial division and difference.

On the other hand, the unidentifiability of the faces reflects an elusive reality that is best captured in Amir's words when attempting to use Yonatan's camera for the first time: "[I] looked through the viewfinder, and saw nothing but blackness...then I looked back through the viewfinder and saw before me a blurry, out-of-focus world" (186). 'The viewfinder' is our own subjective view which distorts reality: reality is 'blackness,' 'nothingness' which only takes a blurry, distorted shape when we look at it, as suggests, from an 'awry' angle, "with a gaze puzzled by our desires and anxieties" (Žižek 1991, 14). By looking awry, the lawyer "could have sworn" the photograph of a naked back was Layla's (Kashua 2012, 346). The lawyer seems to be aware of the anamorphic gaze and the angle from which we perceive an object, others, and ourselves. He "always felt that different mirrors, on different days, provided different perspectives. Photographs didn't help either. Like the mirrors, they showed something different each time" (144).

Following the symbolic death of Amir, the lens of the camera becomes his protective screen. It helps him maintain the necessary "distance from events" and to hide (317) in the subjective angle which makes capturing "the entire world of the stranger on the other end of the lens" (197) hardly possible. Indeed, the paranoia that Kashua's narrative creates, for both sides of the binary—Palestinian Arabs and Jewish Israelis—stems from the fact that the lens he uses reaches an uncomfortable proximity to one's most intimate domain, one of which is one's identity. The close-

up shot which Kashua's novel uses exposes the reality of exclusivist identities: they are nothing but emptiness taken a definite shape and meaning by means of looking awry. By keeping a distance from that objective shot of reality, Kashua creates within that which is symbolisable, representable, and seen, a realm that is beyond, unseen and exteriorised. Through Amir's position of the insider/outsider, sliding between two incompatible ideologies, this paradox of the seen/unseen is best captured, and the performative mechanism of reality and identities is disclosed as such. Whereas Olmert (2018) correctly notes that Kashua is raising "a mirror to Israeli hegemony" to show the gap between irreconcilable images, Amir/Yonatan articulates what remains unseen, unrecognised, or misrecognised for reality to maintain itself intact.

The reality which the lawyer and Amir desire to escape is one that is created and maintained by discriminatory laws and racist stereotypes. Fragmented Palestinian Israeli subjectivities, weakened social fabrics, and increasing violence in Palestinian Israeli communities are all direct symptoms of a discriminatory society that is built on imaginary aggression and fear of being annihilated by the other. Although Amir succeeds 'externally' at metamorphosing into Yonatan, he could not escape the ideology of identities which establishes the real paranoia of Kashua's text. The desire of both the lawyer and Amir to be like the other "free, loose, full of dreams, able to think about love," (304) collides with the question of (dis)loyalty. It is the Big Other of ideology, national/cultural belonging and master-signifiers of identity that fasten Amir, the lawyer and Kashua himself, to fetishistic images of Palestinians and Jews, and the pursuit of wholeness. Kashua's alternative futuristic vision of the third space, which Amir epitomises, is crushed by the growing, seemingly unamendable, gap between Palestinians and Jewish Israelis and the mounting hatred and fear of the other. This impossibility reflects the condition of post-*sumud*, in which the subject can no longer negotiate belonging without being bound to rigid identity signifiers or symbolic demands. In this context, subjectivity is no longer structured by endurance or coherence,

but by anxiety, ambivalence, and the slow disintegration of the symbolic frameworks that once promised stability.

While *Second Person Singular* explores the impossibility of symbolic passing and the fragmentation of the self under conditions of internalised colonisation, *Track Changes* pushes this fragmentation further. The novel does not merely depict wounded subjectivity; it foregrounds the impossibility of narrating the self altogether. In this sense, the move from *Second Person Singular* to *Track Changes* is a continuation of the post-*sumud* trajectory: from the desire to pass and be recognised, to the despair that even narration might be an act of erasure. *Track Changes* deepens the thesis's exploration of post-*sumud* affect by presenting memory, narration, and authorship as compromised, fragile, and haunted by what must remain unsaid.

CHAPTER THREE

Ghost-writing, Screen Memories and the Politics of Forgetting in Sayed Kashua's *Track Changes*

This chapter explores the problematics of memory and the politics of forgetting for both dominant and dominated collectives in Kashua's fourth novel *Track Changes* (2020). The chapter continues the thesis's overarching argument: that the dominant paradigm of *sumud*, while long central to Palestinian cultural and political life, risks masking the deeper psychic wounds, fractures, and contradictions experienced under prolonged and intensified conditions of loss. Kashua's *Track Changes* is emblematic of a post-millennial literature that moves away from celebratory portrayals of resilience, and instead foregrounds the impossible desires and dissociative strategies of subjects caught in a state of symbolic foreclosure. If *sumud* insists on appearance, coherence, and resistance, *Track Changes* exposes the cost of such demands. It presents a figure of ghosted subjectivity who is unable to mourn, to remember, or to narrate.

In *Track Changes*, Kashua continues to navigate the terrain of exclusivist identities revealing how they are products of exclusions, fabrications, repressions, and screened memories. The novel shows how certain isolated memories can become an integral part of individual/collective identity, even if the vividly remembered details have never taken place. Kashua shows how for Palestinians in Israel the fixation on certain memories and mental images functions as a projection of a much-desired mirror image of the Palestinian Israeli self/community. The projected image is one that may be completely incongruent with a reality in which their national and ethnic identity is perceived as a threat to be eliminated or subsumed. Kashua, however, fails in *Track Changes* to relinquish the pursuit of wholeness now sought in his failed regression to a fantasied point of an idyllic beginning. This failed return encapsulates the post-*sumud* condition that can be traced

throughout Kashua's work: a psychic landscape marked not by the persistence of resistance, but by fragmentation, ambivalence, and the exhaustion of all coherent narratives of belonging.

Track Changes narrates the journey of Saeed, an Israeli Palestinian ghost-writer as he attempts to liberate himself from the weight of the past while grappling with his fragmented cultural identity and guilt-ridden psyche. The novel opens with a frame narrative: the overarching story of a memoirist, initially nameless, sitting at his computer in a grad school in Chicago, ready to begin the transcription of a recorded story that turns out to be his own memoir. Like the slow brewing of the American coffee he is not yet used to, the events of the memoirist's life gradually unfold, revealing complex internal and external struggles, pain and regret beyond redemption. The embedded narrative—the memoir that is being transcribed—begins at the airport in Chicago. Saeed is sitting at the bar sipping on a shot of Whiskey, while trying to discern the ethnicity of the pretty bartender. Slowly, he reveals his destination and the reason for his trip: having received an unexpected phone call from his mother regarding his father's deteriorating health, Saeed leaves Chicago, where he is living with his wife, Palestine, and their three children, to return to Israel, to his hometown in Tira. After a fallout with his family fourteen years ago, he decides to face the past and to return, physically and metaphorically, to the site of the traumatic rupture, in the hope of mending what he has done wrong.

The younger Saeed's banishment from Tira is due to a fictional story he writes in Hebrew to impress his Jewish Israeli colleagues and to seek their false recognition. The events of the fictional story are inspired by memories Saeed's father shares with him when Saeed was a little boy on one of their trips to the fields. The real story which the father remembers as one of love and defiance is distorted by Saeed. He decides to be its protagonist and to show defiance by making love to a girl he names Palestine—a reference to the homeland as woman—on the rooftop of their school on Israel's Independence Day and under the Israeli flag. Little does Saeed know that Palestine is

indeed a real woman, happily married in Tira. It becomes evident to Saeed then that in certain contexts, the line between what is fictitious and what is real is blurred—an invented story, a fantasied scenario that speaks of his desperate desire for recognition, has the power to destroy and rupture his reality and that of others.

The story falls into the hands of the residents in Tira, and Saeed and Palestine are then forced to marry and leave for Jerusalem. There, he becomes a columnist and a ghost-writer lending his most precious childhood memories to his Jewish Israeli clients to offer them the satisfactory closure, which he desperately seeks for himself. Severed from his Palestinian Arab roots, Saeed immerses himself and his three children culturally, politically, and linguistically in Jewish Israeli society in search for an identity and sense of belonging. However, Saeed's masquerade—the screen of fantasy upon which his life in Jerusalem is constructed—falls when violence is unleashed against Palestinians in Israel following the war on Gaza in 2014, the murder of three Jewish teenagers near Jerusalem, and the retaliatory incineration of a Palestinian child. The tragic events shatter Saeed's belief in a democratic Israel, where he has hoped equality, regardless of race and religion, could be achieved. Working for an Israeli newspaper in Jerusalem, Saeed understands that no questions can be asked, or holes poked about what “was being written up by all of the police reporters, and it was the version the unified public believed in” (132-3). All that Saeed can see is their antagonising, “identity-probing stares, as they tried to figure out whether or not [he] was one of them or the enemy” (134). Left with no identity and no roots, Saeed eventually decides to leave Israel when his wife Palestine accepts an offer for a teaching position at the university in Chicago. He hopes for a better environment for his children, where they will not be reminded of their ostensible worthlessness as Palestinians. A few years pass, yet Chicago could never relieve Saeed of his traumatic past, nor offer him the beginning he wholeheartedly wishes for. Chicago becomes one of his many escapes, never seen by him as an opportunity to move forward. Saeed, after many years of

internal and external exile, finally decides to return to face and fix the past. He returns in hopes to answer one of the fundamental questions in the novel, and my thesis as a whole: “Where does a beginning begin” (182)?

Reading the novel as a diasporic narrative of return falls outside the thesis's scope. However, as will become clearer throughout the analysis, the novel shares many of the common tropes of Palestinian return accounts and fictional and non-fictional exilic narrative: the urgency to make the journey; the anxiety upon return; the waiting; the first encounter with a changed homeland; the deluge of memories as home materialises to the eye; the feeling of an incomplete joy; and the open ending that reflects the ongoing trauma and the impossibility of a satisfactory closure. Kashua's novel, to borrow Ahmad Sa'di's (2008) words, “is neither triumphalist nor redemptive; rather, it embodies a search for a point of beginning” (390). This chapter, however, will analyse Saeed's narrative as a metonymy of the arduous, psychically taxing journey of return into the Palestinian “pleasant memory”—the one which as Saeed says, “is written down, stolen, borrowed, or loaned to others” (212). At the same time, it becomes a journey into the depth of a guilt-ridden consciousness that desperately seeks, as he writes, “to edit [the] past from the beginning” (226). Saeed desires a cathartic closure for a life characterised by vulnerability, weakness, and naive complicity with Israel's “conscious political policy to erase Palestine from historical memory” and “[to write] it out of history while simultaneously assuming its place” (Sheety 2014). By misusing his writing skills while seeking a false fantasy, Saeed becomes more estranged from himself and from his Palestinian past. Tira, as he has once known it, grows emptier and darker.

The first part of the chapter will examine how *Track Changes* exposes the interplay between the construction of identity and the framing of memories by using various narrative and editing techniques, such as narrative framing, strikethroughs, and language shifts, among others. The complexity of the plot and the perplexing temporal shifts all speak of the ambivalent state of being

the Palestinian Israeli, as a figure of loss and a lost figure, occupies.³⁹ It recalls the contradictory being implied by Mahmoud Darwish's title to his 1987 prose poem *Memory for Forgetfulness*. The paradoxical juxtaposition of remembering and forgetting reflects the Palestinian individual's psychic battle. It is a battle between the desire to forget traumatic events, foreclosed by an unattainable mourning process, and the collective pressure to repetitively, and compulsively remember as resistance. This tension between disavowal and repetition, between erasure and archive, lies at the heart of post-*sumud* sensibility where the demand to appear coherent and resistant collapses under the weight of contradictory psychic and political realities. Forgetfulness and the integration into Israeli society is viewed as a sort of betrayal, and the second killing of Palestine as the object of loss, and of desire. Saeed admits his desire to forget, to "throw away that copy of the story." However, "the fierce desire to forget, as though it never were, clashed with the fear that its words would fall out of order and be forgotten until my only recollection of them would be hazy" (222). Saeed loses the ability to tap into the smell of his childhood after inserting his memories and those of his father into the life narratives of Jewish Israeli individuals. This forces him to sorrowfully ask: "Was this a betrayal?"—a question that transforms into self-blame and self-loathing. The question also exposes, at a collective level, the ambivalence felt by the new generation, who find themselves caught between the desire for normalcy and the fears of betrayal.

The second half of the chapter will focus on how Palestinian survival within Israel necessitates the acceptance of invisibility and the suppression of Palestinian national memory, a coping mechanism I term as *conscious amnesia*. This coping strategy reflects, as Manar Makhoul (2020) observes, a state of "perplexity" and confusion. It may lead to the development of a guilt-ridden consciousness if the coerced silence is to be viewed as a national betrayal of the Palestinian memory and the Nakba narrative. Here, too, the post-*sumud* subject is not a heroic figure of

39 See Hochberg 2010, 71-73

resistance, but one struggling to endure through dissociation, repression, and guilt. The post-*sumud* self appears only through the traces that cannot be spoken. Conscious amnesia functions in a comparable manner to screen memories, without necessarily involving any screen reconstructions. Drawing on Freud's concept of "screen memory," the analysis will show how certain memories are screened as part of the mechanisms of survival that provide the necessary balance between defiance and defeat.⁴⁰ Freud (1899/1962) defines this isolated memory as that which "owes its value as a memory not to its own content, but to the relation existing between that content and some other, that has been suppressed" (320). However, given the precarious nature of the Palestinian trauma, and the fact that it is impossible to detangle the past from the present, a traumatic memory is never fully repressed. As for Palestinians in Israel, commemorating the Nakba memory is censored by the state's policies and laws which guarantee the Palestinian Israeli silence and domination, and eventually the disappearance of the Palestinian historical memory with the passing away of the older (Nakba) generation and the Israelisation of the new.

Embedded Memories, Layered Meanings, and Narrative Techniques

The framing of memory in *Track Changes* mirrors the thematic concerns of *Second Person Singular* but uses a different narrative technique. Where the latter uses doubling and mirroring to foreground psychic fracture, *Track Changes* layers time, narrative framing, meaning, and voice to dramatise the impossibility of authentic self-narration and show that even memory becomes a contested and fragile terrain. One of the novel's most symbolically charged techniques is its complexly layered framing. *Track Changes* opens and ends with scenes set in the present. These

40 See Tamir Sorek, "The Quest for Victory: Collective Memory and National Identification among the Arab-Palestinian Citizens of Israel" (2011); Sorek discusses the importance of achieving a "semiotic balance" between memories of victory and victimhood, arguing that this balance is crucial for maintaining and consolidating national identification.

scenes serve as the overarching framing for an embedded narrative. This narrative delineates multiple events and mnemonic fragments from the distant and recent past. It divulges individual and collective traumas, as well as internal and external conflicts. The story opens with Saeed at his computer, ready to transcribe the story he has recorded on a new cassette. The story is soon revealed to be his own, a fulfilment of his wish to write a story “about the first-person protagonist that is the me character” (42). He becomes the author, the narrator, and the protagonist, who returns physically to “the old country” (9), hoping to edit his past and to locate what is left of the hazy earliest memories before they are eternally lost. Saeed returns looking for a point of beginning from which he can start his new story. His belief in the certainty of finding his beginning by returning to the site of trauma raises an important question—one that will become clearer as the chapter progresses: What happens when one is forced to look backward to the future in a time of colonial amnesia that denies certain historical losses?

The embedded narrative begins at a bar in Chicago’s O’Hare International Airport; Saeed is sipping on a shot of Jameson and contemplating the pretty bartender’s background, who, based on her skin tone, could “check multiple boxes on the ethnicity forms” (4). Speaking to her, Saeed fails to detect any foreign accent. To justify his own accent, which he will always carry like “an expression on his face” (7), he decides to masquerade as a foreign academic “whose unique services had been sought by the university” (8). This fake self-fantasy image that he presents to the bartender contrasts starkly with the internal monologue that exposes the reality of his financial dependence on his wife—and the fact that he has not done any writing since the day he quit ghost-writing when they left Israel. Saeed’s fake identity establishes him as an unreliable narrator and sets the stage for the exploration of the narrative’s major themes explored also in *Second Person Singular*: the theatricality of identities, authenticity and myths, disguised secrets, and betrayal of truth.

The various levels of diegesis establish not only a temporal distance between the process of transcription and the recording of the story, but a chasm between the authorial self and the narrating voice. The framing parallels Saeed's sense of entrapment in the traumatic past that he is desperate to re-write. It consolidates the estrangement of the authorial self in the present from the narrative persona, signalling the fragmentation of self and the desire to dissociate from the traumatic events of his narrative. The framing also functions as a protective defence—a barrier—that creates a safe distance and a detached perspective through which Saeed can explore and understand the trauma of the past and engage more critically with the retrieved memories. By looking at himself from an outside position, and by safely going back to where the beginning of the suppressed story begins, Saeed can reflect on his experiences and those of others. This means the possibility of working through the trauma, or as Saeed puts it, “edit[ing] our past from the beginning” so Palestine and himself, could “start anew,” and “compassion [could replace] the terrible anger and the fathomless hatred” (226). The framing offers Saeed, the author, an authority and sense of control over his life events, and the power to track changes and reject the edits he has made to the Palestinian memory.

Most importantly, the framing mirrors a painful truth about the nature of Palestinian memory: that “[r]emembering always involves a limit” (Lacan 1981, 40). Most Palestinian memories have become inaccessible, embedded in, and concealed beneath a dominant overarching narrative that controls, edits, and shapes what is allowed to emerge and what must remain hidden. The sites of Saeed's Palestinian memories, like the hills with the za'atar growing between the rocks, have now been subsumed within the collective Jewish Israeli memory, to which Palestinians are denied access.⁴¹ All what Saeed and other Palestinian Israeli individuals are left with is a memory

41 See Ilan Pappé in *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (2007). Pappé argues that many newly established settlements and national parks were designed to replace Palestinian sites of trauma and memory, erasing local history predating the establishment of the state. He contends that these initiatives aimed to annihilate memories of Palestinian villages from the Jewish collective memory and make the historical Arab landscape appear more European (248–249).

that defies transcription and a piercing silence that can never be articulated. With a melancholic tone bearing the brunt of guilt and pain, Saeed writes:

And with every pleasant memory that I relinquished, Tira was emptied of its good people. The warmth was replaced with violence, the smiles with threatening grimaces. The love stories that I used to hear in my youth were erased, and in their place stood only memories of the murder of women. The neighbors' willingness to help was swapped for bitter feuds, the blessings and salutations for pistols and rifles, the family ties for inheritance, and the games of hide-and-seek for land quarrels. The pride that Dad tried to instill in us is something I can no longer feel. (205)

This quote vividly juxtaposes the blissful past with the grim present reality of Palestinian Israeli communities. The dark transformation is caused by sociopolitical pressure to integrate which has led to the loss and the destruction of good memories necessary to nourish and sustain social cohesion and communal unity. Saeed critiques his complacency and that of the residents in the erosion of the old ways of life by giving up the memories of the past to the dictates of the new reality. Instead of striving to preserve the memory, they let their past and their memories be engulfed by the newly crafted narrative and the laws—such as the 2011 “Nakba law”—which criminalise the commemoration of the Palestinian memory.⁴²

Saeed continues to reflect on the grim reality upon his arrival in the “old country” (9), where he finds himself inundated by his old fears. He is terrified his masquerade as anything but a Palestinian Arab, may be exposed by the Jewish Russian driver who picks him up from Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv. Since he fears that he would trigger the Jewish driver’s “anger, suspicion, and

⁴² See Tamir Sorek, “The Changing Patterns of Disciplining Palestinian National Memory in Israel” (2010).

discomfort” (12), he decides to hide his identity and dissociate himself from Tira, the place he wishes to be in to “remove the yoke of foreignness” and be himself again. (13). He requests that the taxi driver drop him off in the Jewish city of Kfar Saba, where Saeed’s father is hospitalised. There, Saeed rents a room in the home of a Jewish woman a few kilometres away from Tira.

Saeed’s hesitation to return, his inability to articulate himself in Tira, and his retreat to the safety of editing others’ memories rather than his own, all mark a post-*sumud* sensibility: an attunement to the impossibility of beginning again. Rather than clinging to a coherent *sumud*-bound identity, Kashua’s protagonist navigates a psychic terrain structured by symbolic rupture, unarticulated guilt, and a pervasive melancholia. These are not failures of resistance, but symptoms of its psychic exhaustion.

Nowhere is this exhaustion more evident than in Saeed’s mediated relationship to place. The closest Saeed can get to his former hometown is through a satellite image on Google Earth. “I zoom in on Tira,” he says, “infiltrating, from above, the streets, and, from the spot where I touch down, I navigate my way home” (51). He becomes an infiltrator to a still image of home, empty of the knowledge—the intimate and detailed—that is only acquired by experiencing the daily material reality of Tira (50). Engaging with an artificial image of the place mirrors Saeed’s stagnant recollections, memories that remain frozen in time and incompatible with the present reality. The few memories that he had left of his childhood, he has already inserted into his clients’ stories, and they are no longer his. They are now written memories in somebody else’s story, devoid of the warmth and tranquillity these memories could once evoke in him. The frozen image of Tira also works as a metaphor for the current socio-political paralysis experienced by Palestinian communities in Israel, whose details may not be comprehensible if viewed from the outside. “The only way of knowing what’s happening in Tira is to live in Tira” (50) suggests that to understand the experience and reality of a community, one must assume an insider position. What one may see

as being real and authentic from the outside may reveal itself to be a deceptive facade, obscuring the traces of the truth. This deceptive façade marks not only the image of the place, but also the failure of return to deliver the coherence once promised by *sumud* narratives.

Saeed's return to Tira does not mirror the symbolic homecoming that traditional *sumud* narratives evoke. Unlike the returnee in Barghouti's memoir (both Barghouti and his son Tamim) whose reappearance in the land affirms a continuous national narrative, Saeed returns as a stranger. The homeland unfolds as a spectral site, emptied of its once-felt warmth. In this moment, Kashua offers a critical post-*sumud* perspective, one that reveals how the once-coherent image of return as redemption disintegrates into fragmented perception and psychic detachment. The return, rather than restoring a sense of self, confirms its dissolution.

Strikethroughs and the Desired narrative

Referring to his profession as a ghost-writer, Saeed remarks that "the power to shape a story was scary to me, nearly paralysing. From the moment the client decided that I would write his story, I felt like his fate was in my hands; his legacy dependent on my imagination and memory" (165). Indeed, the fate of all Palestinians has been shaped by the Zionist imagination, the manipulation of historical facts and the employment of myths in crafting a coherent narrative of an exclusively Jewish state—a marked-up narrative in which Palestinians have been edited out. This is metaphorically mirrored in a technique Saeed uses extensively throughout the narrative: strikethroughs. Saeed believes in the necessity to produce a narrative that appeals to the reader. As an editor of people's stories, he gives himself the permission to cross out memories and events when they obstruct the narrative flow, to invent others, and to fill in the gaps with vividly imagined details. When Saeed's clients read the final un-marked copy, they see it as a truthful rendition of their own accounts. Saeed employs strikethroughs extensively throughout the narrative, crossing out original memories, conversations, and thoughts that disrupt the coherence of the story or diverge

from what Saeed deems appealing and worthy to be transcribed and remembered. This editing tool is employed to hint at a memory or thought that Saeed suppresses due to its painful content. The technique highlights the contentious nature of narratives and storytelling, serving as a visual cue that denotes the existence of remnants of the original content beneath the horizontal line, while also implying the layering of meanings and interpretations above it.

This stylistic choice is not merely aesthetic; it reflects a deeper psychic strategy, one that reveals how memory, under erasure, becomes both visible and ungrievable. The act of striking through memories, inventing scenarios, and editing the narrative to suit the reader parallels how post-*sumud* subjectivities cope with the political and psychic impossibility of appearing. What emerges is not resistance in the conventional sense, but a survival strategy that relies on narrative evasion and dissociation. Saeed's editorial work is not an act of betrayal per se, but an attempt to navigate a socio-symbolic reality that no longer makes space for complexity, ambivalence, or vulnerability. The very idea of memory becomes something to ghost-write, something to displace.

This becomes immediately evident in one of the earliest editorial choices Saeed makes in the narrative. The first event Saeed decides should not go into the final printed version of his story is his brother's anger upon finding him at the hospital. Saeed crosses out his brother's accusations, which suggest that Saeed "~~smelled death and came to take some of the remains~~" (27). Adamant on maintaining a smooth flow of events and a coherent narrative structure, he decides to leave out this painful incident between him and his brother. He does not want it to disrupt his mother's sobbing and her happiness upon seeing Saeed at the hospital, nor to distract him from recollecting the moment he sees his father's "shrunk body" on the hospital bed (27). The second event is Saeed's conversation with his mother about his father's grim prognosis. The mother reveals that his father's chances of survival are slim as his cancer has metastasised to his bones and liver. Saeed, unprepared for his father's death, chooses to erase the thought—to repress it into the unconscious of his final

version of the story. This technique functions in the same way fantasy is employed to structure a coherent life narrative concealing beneath it a deadlock, a lack. Fantasy is “a way for the subject to cover up the lack by creating a scenario, a story that gives him or her consistency” (Renata Salecl 2004, 23).

Another significant example of Saeed’s utilization of this technique occurs during the transcription of the last conversation with his father on his death bed. Saeed decides not to translate the conversation into Hebrew. However, at the end of the Arabic-written conversation, Saeed switches back to Hebrew to communicate a thought regarding the transcription and the urgent need to be truthful to the original conversation. However, when he notices that the thought should not intercept a conversation spoken in a Palestinian dialect, he decides to cross it out:

~~I have to find a way to translate the last conversation with Dad...I have to transcribe it all, before I start to write. Word for word. If there’s a word I can’t make out I’ll go back and listen again. I’ll press Stop, I’ll rewind the tape, and I’ll do it again.~~ (209)

Beneath the horizontal lines in the quote above, lurks Saeed’s desire to reverse the mistake of tampering with the content of his father’s childhood memory of Catastrophe Day, translating it into a language that does not recognise its significance, nor its authenticity. To reverse his betrayal of the language, Saeed uses the same technique when transcribing the conversation with his daughter. He writes, “I begged of her in ~~Hebrew~~ Arabic” (220). The original conversation between Saeed and his daughter unfolds in Hebrew. Traumatized by the destructive repercussions of his Hebraised Palestinian stories, Saeed, seeking redemption, opts to portray the written account of this interaction as if it had occurred in Arabic. In doing so, he moulds the memory to conform to a preferred narrative.

By leaving the traces of one language in the other—the words still readable underneath the lines—Saeed, or one could say Kashua, casts doubts on what is usually taken at face value: the emphasis on authenticity, and the exclusion of difference within the national and ideological narrative and the “logic of essentialism, closure, victimhood, and exclusivity” (Masrawi 2021, 257). Leaving the crossed-out traces undermines the extent to which the new reality successfully obliterates the deleted memory, the one that is excluded, censored, and forcibly abjected from official Israeli archives. The act of striking through a text presents an intriguing paradox: while it is typically employed to signify deletion or insignificance, it often achieves the opposite effect. It functions in a similar way to a Freudian slip, what is said/written, and then retracted still carries the traces of the truth. Crossing something out, while still visually highlighting it, ironically amplifies its content and renders it more visible. It serves as a reminder of the presence of something else, a concealed layer to the story whose meaning is yet to be explored and symbolised.

A Cathartic Language Shift?

A third technique employed by Saeed is the language shift—Saeed’s decision not to translate the last memory his father shares before he passes away. In fact, language plays a crucial role throughout the novel. Saeed’s fixation on languages appears from the outset of the narrative when he questions what language he will choose to write the story of his new beginning. While in Jerusalem and for the sake of integration, Saeed and his wife adopt Hebrew as the language for their children. In America, Saeed decides to give up on the Hebrew language and prioritise Arabic instead. He notes that his children have slowly abandoned Hebrew as their English has become more fluent. He also notes that for his new beginning to be achieved, he is obliged to give up writing in Hebrew and to choose between either Arabic or English.

In a departure from Kashua’s earlier novels, *Track Changes* includes a whole chapter written exclusively in Arabic in a Hebrew-written novel. On the one hand, writing in Arabic is the

beginning of the fulfilment of Kashua's wish to find an alternative language to free himself of the limitations Hebrew puts on him. In "Kashua's Complaint," a column inspired by Philip Roth's book *Portnoy's Complaint*, Kashua (2010a) writes: "I want to write about Arabs. But it's hard, and writing about them this way, in the language of the enemy, is basically impossible".⁴³ On the other hand, placing Arabic and Hebrew side by side in the same text undermines the ethnolinguistic hierarchy that characterises the Jewish Israeli state. Instead, it creates a symbolic common culture that does not erase the other's language but acknowledges it as part of a people's being. The Arabic-written part is a symbolic act of intrusion in the otherwise Hebrew narrative, a transgressive appearance like that of Mahmoud in Barghouti's narrative. The deployment of Arabic foregrounds silenced Palestinian stories, memories, and fears. Saeed switches to Arabic to express sentiments that elude any translation, and are only communicable in a Palestinian dialect. Leading up to that last conversation with his father Saeed rightly notes:

There are memories that are feelings, which cannot be expressed in any way but through body language or in the mother tongue, in the dialect and the accent and the cadence that cannot be re-created in a foreign language and perhaps not in the original, either. And therefore I shall write the following chapter in Arabic. (79)

Only after losing most of his memories, and the inability to create new ones, Saeed learns that memories of a place that is ruined and deleted from any map must become the most cherished collective secret—a secret and an answer to the aches of a self that suffers the cruelty of history. The Palestinian secret—embedded in the most intimate memories of a cohesive Palestinian past,

43 Grumberg (2018) identifies several similarities between Kashua and Phillip Roth. Both highlight the ambiguity inherent in subjectivity, critiquing ideological frameworks and nationalist ideologies and the stability they promise. Kashua and Roth, moreover, face criticism from their communities for reinforcing stereotypes.

and an uncontested identity—should only be revealed, Saeed admits, in one’s mother tongue. He writes that “when [memories] come off the tongue in a different language they take on a different significance, sometimes the opposite. And what happens if you give the right answers in the wrong language...? Are you then also considered an infidel...or...a believer?” (143)

Arabic is positioned in the narrative as a language that houses untranslatable memories of a father’s and son’s favourite Palestinian winter soup, شوربة عدس (lentil soup). In Arabic, the father, laughing a laughter of “distress” (230), shares a funny memory of his two-week hunger strike in Damon prison with other Palestinian prisoners from his hometown which forced the Israeli authorities to give in to their demands—of which lentil soup was one. Arabic nurtures and nourishes those intimate memories. It shelters and shields them from a cruel reality, and from the language of power that appropriates and distorts. Arabic is also established as a language of defiance that safeguards memories of the national and political struggle against the Israeli authority before it is crushed under criminalising laws and racial policies.

Saeed’s usage of Arabic to express human affects is a counter-response to Israel’s racialized framing of Palestinian Israelis and Arabic as the language of the enemy that should be erased. As Lindsey Pullum (2023) argues, Israel adopts an ethnolinguistic hierarchy that perceives Arabic as “‘their language’, the language of Palestinian nationalism, the language of anti-Zionists, the language of the enemy. In this way, Arabic is symbolic of what makes ‘them’ separate from ‘us’ (Jewish-Israelis)” (73). This linguistic shift in *Track Changes* relocates Palestinian Israeli subjects from the marginal spaces, to which they have historically been relegated, and positions them at the centre of the narrative. This deliberate act confronts the pervasiveness of colonial amnesia, challenges and disrupts it by collapsing the segregated linguistic space between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Interpreted symbolically as a challenge to the state’s stance on Arabic and Arabs, it becomes a subversive act that undermines the linguistic segregation that privileges Hebrew as the national

language of Israel and disregards the Arab minority, their status, and the place of Arabic in the identity politics and sense of nationalism. As Arabic seeps into Hebrew, the latter ceases to be a language solely for Jews. The Arabic passages, like the crossed-out memories throughout, remind Kashua's Hebrew-speaking readers of the presence of the other as subjects with intimate memories that are probably similar to their own—an inextricable part of the Israeli society and of the self as such. If language as Heidegger (1946/1998) asserts is a "house of being" (239), then to deny someone's language is to deny their being, and to relegate them to the status of the alien, unwelcome other.

Language, Editing, and Manipulation of Facts

Saeed has not always been aware of the political ramifications of his chosen writing language and editing choices. While working as a ghost-writer in Jerusalem, Saeed develops an obsession with fabricating the unpleasant memories of his clients, the majority of whom are Jewish Israelis. Believing that the memories "must be made beautiful" (25), he begins to fill in the gaps and silences in his clients' life stories by lending them his own cherished childhood memories and integrating them into their life narratives, which they then claim unquestioningly. This tinkering begins after the third memoir he has worked on when a Jewish woman hires him to write the story of her son, who had fallen during the war. She wants to remember him while alive because "she was terrified that if she forgot everything, her son would truly and terminally be dead" (65). Saeed remarks that the woman, who thinks that she remembers every day spent with her son, fails to fill the cassette he uses to record her memories. With the help of pictures of the son, Saeed manages to reconstruct the woman's "memories and, for the first time, those that [he] invented" (66). He gives her son a childhood love; he describes his smile in a poem, his first fall from the swing in kindergarten, and "the exact smile when he fell in the battle" (66). When the mother reads the book,

she knows “in truth” that her son died “peacefully, fearlessly with the same smile on his face” even though she “hadn’t been allowed to see the body” (66).

The invented memories which Saeed adds reflect to the woman a deceptive reality that is much desired. Borrowed memories stand for the denial of a fixed meaning, “of presence, truth, signified, identity and an opening onto difference, displacement, deferral” (Rapaport 1976, 57). They provide an angle for her from which she can perceive the memory of her son as complete. The traumatic death of the woman’s son, her inability to see his body after his death, and most importantly, her anxiety about her current inability to recall her son as she remembers him, all terrify her. It is not until Saeed finishes her son’s memoir, in which he invents all the events that occurred from the moment the son is drafted until the last smile “he flashed when he fell in battle,” that the process of mourning his loss is achieved. The melancholic fear of losing loss itself (her son’s vivid memory) is successfully transformed into a mournful knowledge that her son has died “with the smile she remembered, just as in the book” (66). Re-symbolising this traumatic loss and bringing it into her Symbolic reality makes mourning possible. Her son’s past needs to be articulated for it to become a memory; hence, forgetfulness and ‘the second death’ of her son are defeated.

Saeed’s editing and re-writing of his Jewish clients’ biographies corresponds with two crucial ideas. Firstly, it aligns with the same concern Kashua replicates in his four novels and which I thoroughly discuss in relation to *Second Person Singular*: the shift from identity to identification by showing how one’s definition of ‘I’ is shaped in relation to the other as one’s mirror. This indicates a Palestinian presence within the Jewish Israeli psyche, indivisible and inseparable from it. It is the ‘I’ in the other, an intimate exteriority, which can challenge the homogeneity of the Jewish Israeli state. It is a state that maintains its superiority by bringing, to invoke Freud (1930/2014) here, the other’s “minor differences” (90) to the fore, as a means of instigating hatred and racist

attitudes towards the other and creating rifts that are unbridgeable. Kashua challenges Jewish Israeli superiority and unquestioned entitlement by juxtaposing, and even merging, Jewish and Palestinian memories. In Kashua's two novels, Palestinian and Jewish Israeli figures become entangled, inseparable even in their differences.

Track Changes presents the recollection of Jewish Israeli individuals—often saturated with narratives of valour, desire, and triumph—as part of what Carol Bardenstein (1998) terms as “collective and selective forgetting” (9). The reaction of Saeed's clients to the final version of their memoirs shows identity as fantasy—constructed rather than fixed. Saeed comments on his clients' happiness and gratitude upon receiving the edited version, particularly the Jewish Israelis, for this version presents them in an image that is likeable; it is made beautiful to be memorable after their deaths “in the eyes of his or her readers” (25). When the final edited version of their memoir is printed to become the authorised narrative, the usual moment of jubilation confirms and ratifies a fabricated image that Saeed's clients assume. The altered stories become their ‘Ideal I’, the totalized, whole imago in which they (mis)recognise themselves. Saeed writes that his clients always “liked the reflections they saw and were convinced the words were faithful renditions of the truth as they had experienced it” although this reflection is a fantasy— “invented,” “edited,” “erased and added,” inserted,” and “never recalled” (25). His rendition of the way the clients perceive the “I” as an “other” shows how “the experience of subjective identity is fundamentally alienated, inevitably constituted by alien elements derived from the other” (Vanheule & Verhaeghe 2009, 399). Unlike his previous novels in which the protagonists equate superiority with white Ashkenazi Jews, Kashua here posits Palestinian cultural memories, and the organic relationship Palestinians have with the land, as the desirable additions that render the narrative of Saeed's clients complete.

That the clients claim the Palestinian memories of Saeed's childhood as their own becomes a symbol of the on-going Nakba, the memoricidal practices, and the appropriation of Palestinian culture and history. This appropriation is part of Israeli's deliberate and systematic attempts "to secure a sense of Jewish national homeliness [which] involves an endless process of covering over, removing, or managing a stubbornly persistent Palestinian presence" (Makdisi 2010, 527). The novel, moreover, demonstrates how any Jewish Israeli subjectivisation, national consciousness and collective memory are made possible by a structural colonial amnesia. This entails the exclusion of the Palestinian Arab other, and the erasure of Palestinian history "in order to write that of another people's over it" (Pappe 2006, 225; 231).

Ghost-writing: A Fantasized Space of Redemption

Saeed's obsession with ghost-writing reflects a desire to author a self that might survive within a narrative that others will accept. Nearly halfway into the narrative, Saeed remorsefully reveals what underpins his obsession with "the deletions, comments, and additions [he] made to the original story" (67). The editing process replicates a desperate desire to erase painful and traumatic events in his own life that have led to his banishment from his Palestinian community and to his estrangement from his family—labelling him a traitor of his Palestinian cause. Offering his clients the desired closure and the possibility to mourn their losses helps Saeed to vicariously edit the story of his own life. By swapping bad memories for beautiful ones, he offers himself the closure he compulsively searches for in the act of editing and tracking his clients' memoirs. It is a fantasy fulfilment of an impossible wish to track changes the story that has destroyed his life and that of his wife Palestine. Saeed's ghost-writing, editing, and eventual narrative collapse stage a deeply post-*sumud* condition: a subject no longer able to inhabit resistance or endurance, but instead negotiating survival through symbolic displacement, performative authorship, and a haunted search for recognition from an Other that cannot reciprocate.

In the Hebraised version of the story, Saeed edits and modifies one of his father's earliest memories of love and defiance. It is a memory the father shares with Saeed while they are wandering the fields of Tira. The father, while sitting on top of the fig tree, shares his intimate memory with his son to teach him the meaning of national pride and to remind him that defying oppression is a right and a duty that should be embraced fearlessly (123). This original story takes place on Israel's Independence Day on the rooftop of Tira's only school. The father and the prettiest girl in the village climb up to the rooftop to plant a hand-drawn Palestinian flag in place of the Israeli flag. Knowing that they are defying the law and could be arrested, the father confesses to Saeed that the two felt "happier than ever before, on this night, the night that marks the destruction" (214). The father's memory of love, agency, and pride stands as a counter-memory to the unexpected and unstoppable destruction. His is a memory to pass on, to archive, to narrate as an embodiment of resistance and survival amidst fear, hopelessness, destruction and melancholy. When the father tells Saeed "not to tell a soul" (123), it transforms the memory into a secret to be protected, cherished, and nourished—not to be lent to others, distorted, modified, and eventually lost.

In the edited version of the Hebrew story, the protagonist "winds up fucking the homeland in broken Hebrew beneath the blue-and-white flag" (126). Saeed's story intertwines national depictions of the homeland as a woman with European Jewish sexual freedom, diverting from permissible societal norms within Palestinian Arab communities. Saeed remarks regretfully: "It was a wretched little piece...full of clichés and description of sex that I thought, because written by a conservative Arab, would be considered audacious by my [Jewish Israeli] friends" (125). Saeed, seeking their recognition, becomes an Arab writer in a Jewish tradition, integrating Jewishness into the Palestinian Arab identity in a context where both compete for authenticity and exclusivity, and

the third space that Saeed creates by merging both cultures prove to be not only impossible and unimaginable, but destructive.

Saeed explains that the main reason behind crafting the story is his desire to prove his worth to his Jewish Israeli colleagues, who “expected less of me, and that, perhaps, the simple fact of my being able to string together a few sentences in their language was perceived a feat worthy of wonder” (126). Unfortunately for Saeed, the story falls into the hands of the residents of Tira, who believe that “the story was no work of fiction,” but a true rendition of reality (189). The people who “loved hearing about women who were caught” and who “were happy to slaughter a sacrificial lamb” to reinforce “their sense of virtue” (189) decide that exile and estrangement should be the fate of both innocent individuals. The residents react based on their interpretation of Saeed’s fictitious story, blurring the line between the real and the imagined, and aligning with their version of the story. Their unwillingness to believe Saeed’s justifications shows how narrative, although rooted in falsehood, myths, and imagination, can be manipulated and misused to consolidate power dynamics. In the process, the manipulated narrative attains, as LaCapra (1999) maintains, “some original unity, wholeness, security, or identity that others have ruined, polluted or contaminated and thus made “us” lose. (707). Despite the fact that those same residents, as Saeed notes, have turned their towns into a cheap Sabbath market, where Jews can shop and at the same time confirm the stereotypical belief that “all things Arab are by definition cheap” (13), they still deem the story an act of national treason.

Saeed’s fictional portrayal of the father's Palestinian memory mirrors Israel’s appropriation of Palestinian cultural elements—particularly his omission of the protagonists’ demonstration of defiance to the state and their pride in their Palestinian identity, which Saeed replaces with an explicit sexual act, transforming national resistance into rebellion against perceived cultural backwardness. The story fulfils Saeed’s aspiration for recognition from his Jewish Israeli peers

since it is their version of the story, written for them, and in their own language. “The story I wrote,” Saeed remarks, “was not for the residents of Tira, not in their language, not on their behalf, not in their names” (127). The euphoric feeling he gets from this conditional recognition soon vanishes when Saeed is confronted with the repercussions of his fabrications.

Invisible Shadows: On Being the “Good Arab” and Conditional Integration

While gradually exposing Saeed’s unspoken trauma which revolves around memory, identity, and inventions, the novel simultaneously offers critical insights into the existential conditions of Palestinian Arab citizens of Israel—alienation, forced (conscious) amnesia, fragmented identity, and lack of a clear future. The image of the Jew as a vigorous warrior is sharply contrasted with the new reality of the figure of “the good Arab,” which Saeed embodies and becomes a victim of. The label “good Arab” is a self-deceptive mode of living which Kashua repeatedly explores in his novels. It is a social and psychological space enforced upon Palestinians in Israel as a means of survival in the Israeli society, and one of the mechanisms through which Israel can fragment Palestinian collective identity and national affiliation and weaken the social fabrics of these communities. Good Arabs, like Saeed, are products of the state’s control over the educational system of Palestinian Arab communities and their political awareness—subjects who present an image of submissiveness and depoliticisation (Rabinowitz and Abu-Baker 2005, 13). Those docile subjects might be able to gain access to better socioeconomic opportunities, but they will never be recognized as fully equal citizens. Their presence and inclusion will always be conditional upon their silence, the suppression of their political identity, and their coerced complicity in the ongoing dispossession of the land. This conditional inclusion, structured around suppression and survival rather than resistance or agency, exemplifies the post-*sumud* subjectivity at the heart of this thesis. It mirrors a psychic and political condition in which appearing requires erasure, and survival demands the disavowal of national coherence and historical continuity. While this enforced mode of

being guarantees their survival in Israeli society, it weakens Palestinian national unity and consolidates the chasm Israel has created between Palestinians inside and outside Israel. It also maintains the state's hierarchal structure that reinforces Jewish superiority and Palestinian subordination, hence, the perpetuation of the colonial project and the on-going Palestinian trauma.

In Jerusalem, Saeed tries to recreate himself in an impostor identity modelled after the Jewish Israeli one. To grant his new life narrative credibility and coherence, he immerses himself completely in Jewish Israeli life. Not only does he become a columnist in an Israeli newspaper and a ghost-writer, but he also moves to a Jewish neighbourhood, makes Hebrew the only spoken language at home, and enrolls his children in a Jewish school, opting to keep them oblivious of their Palestinian roots. It is not until his oldest daughter grows up that she becomes aware of her difference as a Palestinian in a Jewish community. When she is still young, she only hears bedtime stories in Hebrew and learns that "not every question has an answer and that the past is sometimes best forgotten in the service of the future" (143). Having no knowledge of her roots and the bloodline she keeps asking about, she begins as a child to weave imaginative stories about her grandparents being killed in the Holocaust: "And on Memorial Day, a short while later, she asked if her grandparents were killed in a war" (143). She does not then understand the difference between Arabs and Jews, the Arabic spoken at home and the Hebrew in public, believing that "this was the way of the world" (143). When she becomes older, she hears on the news about war and about Palestine, and only then does she understand that "she had no choice but to choose a side, like everyone else" (143).

The pressure to integrate into Israeli society, which Saeed falls victim to, requires the abandonment of his cultural identity in a process of Israelisation of identity. However, in a context that bestows national rights on Jews only, Israelised Palestinians find themselves trapped between an identity they choose to abandon to integrate and a conditional and fictive integration. A return to

the original is foreclosed and embracing the other is inconceivable. Being alienated from both Jewish and Palestinian Arab collectivities, those individuals, the novel shows, are left with only one option: to live with no identity and lead a life on the margins of Israeli society. They become social pariahs, living in the shadows of two competing exclusivist identities.

This inflamed socio-political reality produces subjects like Saeed—defeatist, cowardly, vulnerable, fragmented and alienated. He knows that he “will never be a warrior” and “can no longer find in [him] the strength... cannot understand the significance of pride, cannot internalize the meaning of honor...Only the power of flight and defeat...” (181). Kashua’s portrayal of Saeed, characterised by a clear defeatist perspective, diverts significantly from Barghouti’s depiction of Mahmoud and his generation spearheading the struggle for liberation. Saeed does not know how to “struggle for the sake of struggle” (181), the way his father did, but accepts “a shameful surrender” (181). Saeed confesses to his father his embarrassment and shame of his weakness and vulnerability. Instead of fighting for equality and genuine recognition, he surrenders. He chooses to wear “a white flag on [his] lapel—a flag that [he has] pinned to the sleeves of [his] children, too, as soon as they were swaddled, at birth, in hospital blankets” (181).

Saeed’s identity crisis and the depth of his existential loss becomes more acute as he continues to misuse his writing skills and his repertoire of memories in the service of the Jewish Israeli narratives. The state of loss and ambivalence is captured in recurring metaphors of warfare: Saeed desires to be a warrior but knows well he will only ever embody this role in a fantasy dream. In his conversation with his father, Saeed, admitting his defeat, says:

What could I have done with no weapon at my disposal? Even if there was, I no longer know in which direction to point its muzzle, and for some reason every time I imagine a battle before sleep, it ends with my rifle pressed up against my temple. I don’t know the identity of the enemy or which flag the allies are flying. The war

games that I conjure always end in my death. Yet every night I am prepared to sacrifice myself anew, even though I no longer know for what or for whom. Yes, it's a shameful surrender. (181)

Saeed's fantasy expresses the internal conflict of a self that is caught between two opposites, unable to discern which side to take. A feeling of loss, non-belonging, and lack of direction is captured in Saeed's final imaginative scenario where he and Palestine return home to Tira on a horse. As soon as they reach their house, Palestine dismounts the horse, walks into the house and locks the door, leaving him on the horse unable to discern which direction to take. Unlike his father, who, as Saeed says, knows who his enemies are, Saeed from the very beginning chooses to escape and surrender over struggle. As implied by the rifle pointed towards his own head, and his preparedness to make the necessary sacrifice to obtain his new beginning, Saeed's sense of reality is blurred by an ardent desire for self-annihilation and disappearance. The imagery encapsulates the crisis experienced by "good Arabs" like Saeed who are deprived of agency and control over the circumstances of their life; they lack the weapon that is necessary to continue the fight. Even if they do have a weapon, as he says, they either point it inwards or misuse it, exasperating their sense of alienation, and ultimately their shameful acceptance of defeat.

A deeper layer of meaning underpins Saeed's confession, which links it back to his writing career. The metaphorical weapon could be interpreted as a reference to how Saeed Hebraises Palestinian stories and memories in pursuit of (ultimately imaginary) recognition. His uncertainty about where to point his weapon's muzzle leads to poor choices and grievous repercussions in his life and others.' When Saeed realises that he has misplaced his childhood memories, he experiences what may feel like a partial erosion of the self and the fracturing of a clear sense of identity. He says: "something in me faded. I knew that the comfort that I derived from raising the memory up from the depth would never again be as it had been" (201).

Ghost-writing has a symbolic function in the novel as a mirror of his alienation and feeling of worthlessness. Hovering behind the scenes like a ghost implies invisibility, absence, marginalisation, and hollowness. Most importantly, it symbolises the state of liminality Saeed occupies: he is someone with no identity, dead to his parents and to his wife Palestine, who barely recognises his presence. He admits that she has not left him yet only because of the children. He is rootless, lost, unwanted, and is barely able to make ends meet, passive and financially dependent on his wife. Hence, the act of remembering itself becomes psychically crucial as it secures for Saeed a sense of his own identity, registering a desire for locating a version of the self that is seen and known, a self that has “perfect knowledge of the battlefield” (26). Re-writing people’s lives transforms trauma into pleasure and grants Saeed an illusory sense of mastery and power, which he is deprived of in real life. Yet, ultimately, his ghost-writing reinforces his powerlessness and invisibility further, forming itself part of the erosion of Palestinian memory and resistance.

“Can those with no lips whistle?”: Colonial Amnesia and Coerced Silence

Saeed appoints himself as the one who sees and remembers on his clients’ behalf. This fixer role, editing and fabricating every unpleasant memory, runs parallel with the recurring and reassuring screen fantasy image in which Saeed imagines himself “as a soldier...trying to stop the advance of a faceless and nameless enemy...in the neighbourhood that [he] knew so well, employing to [his] advantage [his] perfect knowledge of the battlefield” (26). The same military image re-appears when he begins to imagine the feelings of being home again: the first contact with his mattress, the warmth under the cover and the caress of the blanket. He says: “Then I’ll shut my eyes and again become the most devoted soldier I’ve ever been, a soldier who knows the best hiding places, the ones that no foreign invader could ever find” (36). This soothing memory with agentic content is one that “can only [be] imagine[d]” (206). It is nothing but a kernel that supports Saeed’s fractured reality—one marked by loss, fear, trauma, and pain. In other words, it is an optical illusion

concealing behind it a terrifying reality; that soon, after the death of his father, there will be no memories left to remember or forget. Saeed's fantasy memories then "have the power to calm and cause forgetfulness" (99). Therefore, Saeed refuses to admit the possibility of "the notion that they did not [happen]" (16).

The content of the military screen fantasy corresponds with a context in which Saeed "will never be a warrior [...] will always be embarrassed by [his] vulnerability" (181). He has nothing left to defend; neither Chicago nor Tira and Jerusalem are familiar battlefields and "the war games that [he conjures] always end in [his] death" (181). He is weak, defeated, and rejected by his wife and his family. Therefore, the screen memory, like the fixer role he assumes, and the fabrication of memoirs, becomes another coping mechanism to sublimate the guilt that torments his psyche. All these years, Saeed has failed to work through an irresolvable trauma-related guilt disrupting and disturbing his present life and any possibility to transcend and disavow the need for any representational closures for his traumatic loss.

Saeed blames himself for emptying the Tira of his past of every pleasant memory until it has become the most terrifying place (204). He relinquishes his "memory of the trays of rice and sweet milk" his mother used to make on the eve of Ramadan, inserting it instead in "the life of a Holocaust survivor" (203); he gives his memory of "the za'atar in the hills" to new Jewish immigrants; his father's "perfect shave" is given to a young cancer patient; the warm, and "spiritually uplifting" memory of Saeed riding in his father's lap in the driver's seat is lent to old Jewish warriors (204). Saeed also internalises the unbearable guilt of tarnishing his family's name and, consequently, bringing shame to his father. His feeling of being responsible for the symbolic (social) death of his father appears when he imagines him whispering reproachfully: "~~You've already killed me anyway~~" (24). Despite Saeed crossing this out in the narrative, which connotes a

repressed thought, it resurfaces as a slip of the tongue in a conversation with a nurse in the hospital (24).

The Ghost of Memories Behind a Fantasy Screen

To re-write his ideal version of his own life story and relieve himself of the guilt of betraying his people and Palestinian memories, Saeed decides to “start everything from the beginning” (152). He returns to locate the earliest Palestinian memory and put it down in a book of which “the Palestinians will be proud, and in Tira they will at long last believe that I’m a writer and not a gossipier looking to ruin the lives of others” (156).⁴⁴ In the same way Barghouti promises to write Mahmoud’s story the way it happened, Saeed vows to record and “write the truth. Nothing fabricated” (111). Saeed returns to the original memory, which is yet to be excavated and archived—his father’s earliest memories of the days when Palestinians in Israel fought defiantly for their rights, their memories and their national consciousness. He desires to go back to a “pre-symbolic” homeland, to an Eden-like state of symbiosis which he associates with childhood memories in Tira before “the hills were gone, and the za’atar was [...] grown in hothouses and was different—bigger, with wider and sadder leaves and with a taste of decay” (14). Saeed associates the warm memories of the za’atar, the fig trees, and the hills with strong familial ties, particularly with his father. The memory of the za’atar growing between the rocks is a memory of perseverance and defiance that Saeed’s own reality lacks. The image reminds him of his father’s encouraging words, soothing him as a child when he feared the Israeli inspectors—or “insbektors” as pronounced by Palestinians—who were fining Arabs if caught picking the wild za’atar in the hills. The father reminded Saeed that the za’atar was for Palestinians, “and no insbektor could tell us what was ours and what was not, what we could eat and what we could not. The za’atar was here

⁴⁴ The book Saeed dreams of writing to redeem himself could also be an indirect reference to *Track Changes* as Kashua’s redemptive novel

before them and it would be here after them, and the za'atar would stop growing if it saw it was no longer wanted" (140). The za'atar, if not "picked in season and prepared right away" (140) will slowly stop growing. Like the za'atar, Palestinian memories also disappear if not searched for, retold, revived, and celebrated.

As a child, wandering the hills signified a time of storytelling for Saeed: the site where the father passed on his most intimate memories to his son, "stories that I loved to hear" (140). In his present reality, the physical sites of these stories no longer exist. The hills are now covered with newly planted, non-native trees such as eucalyptus trees—referred to by Palestinians as "Jewish trees". The destruction of native Palestinian landscape—the za'atar, the ancient hills, and native trees—comes to symbolise the systemic erasure of Palestinian memory, history and presence from the created European space. Palestinians themselves are now foreign to the current European landscape. Like the uncle of Saeed's mother who crashed into the trunk of a eucalyptus tree (140), Palestinians in Israel struggle to connect with the new unfamiliar landscape which cuts across and escapes any indigenous knowledge of it. The new reality is theatrical, staged, constructed, modified. Much like Saeed's stories, it is a memory that is fabricated from the remnants of the original story. Saeed's memory of the homeland, like that of most second and third generation of Palestinians—refugees and non-refugees, is transgenerational. The memory of Palestine is reconstructed for subsequent generations through the gaze of those Palestinians who experienced the homeland of the pre-Nakba and pre-Naksa. The gaze of his father becomes Saeed's immediate link to a Palestinian memory before the loss. It is a gaze of "the one who believes in it for us, in place of us" (Žižek 1991, 88).

Saeed's insistence on recording his father's first memory is his means of enjoying the homeland vicariously, despite the father's silence and refusal to cooperate. Their relationship becomes divided, split between the present, distorted reality of Palestine and the gaze through

which Palestinians perceive the homeland. Asking for his father's forgiveness, Saeed describes the stark contrast between the older generation's reality and that of the new generation. He compares the former to a lemon tree and the latter to bare branches stripped of a protective bark:

By God, Dad, I'm trying, trying to gather the courage, trying to remember your words, which do not relent and continue to sear like the bark-stripped branches of the lemon tree... Do you remember all the songs you used to play for us, Dad?... at the end of the song the darkness would subside, how they'd promise that the sun would shine, the light would come pouring down, and the wilted flowers would bloom again? (181)

Saeed's only hope for a new beginning lies in his father's recorded memories, which evoke a past filled with warmth, happiness, resistance, and defiance. The new generation, however, faces a reality different from this remembered past. This shift is epitomised by the bark-stripping which indicates how far removed the new generation are from the history and memories of previous generations. Without strong branches, the lemon tree, no matter how deeply rooted it may be, will no longer be able to survive the harsh conditions, nor blossom again. Saeed's anxiety becomes more overwhelming when he first realises that the memories he donated to his clients "had become theirs and would never again be [his]" (80). His hopes to record and document new memories from his father's repertoire dissipate when the father passes away: "the spool on [Saeed's] recorder continued to turn in silence. The brown tape, most of which was filled with silence...was finished" (210).

On the Unarticulated Grief

As well as the warrior fantasy image, Saeed resorts to other screen memories as a second defence in situations where the original suppressed memory, traumatic in its content, threatens to emerge. The

fear of losing the lost object for a second time—the father as a metonymic reminder of the homeland and Saeed’s childhood—in addition to the need for stability and security, trigger what Saeed believes to be two of his earliest memories. He conjures two events, admitting that he is not sure which of them came first: all he knows is that they always surface whenever he is unable to recall new memories. The first retrieved memory is of his mother: she wakes him up to accompany her as she drives his grandmother to the centre of the village to join a group of people leaving for the haj in Mecca. The second memory is of Saeed himself, standing alone against the kindergarten wall, gazing at the other children with tears welling up in his eyes, anticipating the arrival of his parents to pick him up. Suddenly, he catches sight of his father behind him, smiling as he strokes his hair (16).

Both screen memories retain all that is essential to Saeed from his childhood: the reassuring presence of the father and the mother, fulfilling the desire for a sense of security and protection, which his adult self, the one that remembers, lacks. Lucy Lafarge (2012) in her discussion of screen memories, argues that screen memories blend “external reality, fantasy and defense” (1249). They are used to defensively work over other traumatic memories and events that can be remembered only indirectly and “in edited and distorted form” (1249). Although Saeed remembers these two scenes sharply and with vivid clarity, expelling any doubt about their fictionality, they are constructed: they merge Saeed’s current external reality—the anxieties, the feeling of loss, fragmentation, and vulnerability—with the imagined ones which convey a sense of protection and familial warmth lost to Saeed, the adult.

The perspective from which these scenes are viewed proves they are constructed rather than veridical. Lafarge contends, “often the child whose memory was in question was depicted within the scene as if viewed from the outside” (37). In both remembered scenes, Saeed questions why he views “a kid crying rather than being there myself... I watch the kid with leaping heart see his

father, a kid that is no longer me?” (16). It resembles how Saeed, the author of the overarching narrative, is distanced from the traumatic kernel that marks the life of Saeed, the narrator of the embedded story. However, he holds these memories with conviction, the way he does with the rest of the narrative and his interpretations: “I will not even entertain the notion that they did not [happen]” (16)—a statement that screens the possibility of their fictionality. The significance of these two memories is that they speak of a time when Saeed enjoyed the security of home; when he could “smell the trees, the clouds, the strawberries, and the figs that I used to pick with my father” before “the place where the trees once stood” became “home to a row of exhaust pipe garages” (15). What makes screen memories immensely powerful is that they acquire the quality of “stubborn fixity” and “specialness” (Lafarge 2012, 1251) regarding their defensive function, and their position between, as Freud maintains, remembering and forgetting (1250). Saeed’s screen memory becomes a defence operation that eclipses truths about loss and the fear that soon with his father’s death, he will have nothing to remember. This fear does not only work on an individual level. It also conveys the anxieties about the enforced collective amnesia and silence about Palestine, the socio-political history and the history of the Nakba in Israel. Palestinians in Israel, as Saeed angrily notes, have stopped commemorating the Nakba Day. By law, they are forbidden from doing so: any public demonstration of national sentiments is an act of treason against the Jewish Israeli state.

Shortly before his death, the father shares with Saeed what he thinks his earliest memory is. Because the memory carries pain and fear, and because Saeed is not ready for his father’s weakness, Saeed decides to cross it out, and to follow it with a happier childhood memory. This is the original memory the father shares:

~~My first memory is of not being able to remember. I wake up, not from sleep but from grazing, and I know that something awful has happened, but I can’t remember~~

~~what...And I can't tell of the terrible thing I've forgotten, and I tell my mother that I can't remember and filled with pain. (118)~~

The suppressed memory is later revealed, muttered by the father in a delirious state preceding his death:

They're coming, they're coming, Mom. Mom, they're going to get us," ... We have to escape fast ... I saw my father Mom. I saw him. I saw him fall. I saw the whole thing. The blood, the brains, and I saw you screaming, and I saw the neighbors come. We have to go, Mom. (210)

The suppressed memory contains the traumatic event of war which the father witnessed as a child and then suppressed, replacing it with a memory in which he sees himself failing to retrieve any recollection of the events. In Saeed's conversation with his father, this translates into a striking silence that fills Side A and B of Saeed's recorder. Saeed comments that side A of the brown tape "continued to turn in silence [...] was filled with silences [...] I let the silence play until the button popped up to announce the end..." (211). Saeed's father tells him that for fifty years he "has been going to sleep with the radio on so that [he doesn't] have to think about a thing" (231). Saeed refuses to accept the weakness that constitutes his father as an ordinary subject when he says: "I was more prepared for my father's death than his fear" (109). Saeed fails to understand that when his father tells him that his first memory "is of not being able to remember" (114), it carries within it failure of symbolisation: it is a defensive operation shielding the anxieties of a trauma experienced by his father and his generation at a time when they did not "have the language to describe the feeling" of humiliation (79). Saeed's father, who once served as a moral reference point in Saeed's life, is now silent and dying. He is no longer able to articulate the story that once connected him to the land and its history. His silence reflects not only physical decline but a

symbolic collapse: the inability of a former generation to transmit its memory and values in a coherent form. This echoes the post-*sumud* condition traced throughout this thesis, where inherited narratives are inaccessible to those burdened by fragmentation and guilt. Saeed cannot mourn his father properly nor restore the story he once believed in, because that story has lost its grounding. What remains is not resistance in the traditional sense, but the melancholic residue of failed inheritances and the quiet awareness that what was once meaningful no longer endures.

Saeed, unprepared for his father's fear and psychic defeat, responds not with confrontation but with substitution, replacing the traumatic event with a soothing screen memory:

My first memory is of a picture of your grandmother, sitting beneath two giant eucalyptus trees that I used to love to climb when she wasn't looking. In my memory, she's sitting along with a few of the women from the neighborhood and family, and they're singing happy songs and cooking sweet awameh balls in big pots over orange flames from the wood of a lemon tree. (119)

As with Saeed's multi-layered storytelling throughout the novel, several layers of meaning unfold here. In this fabricated memory, the father first remembers a photograph—fixed and frozen in time—and then the scene that is depicted in the photograph which is much more vibrant and open-ended. This imagined scene contrasts with the photograph's composition. In the picture, the non-native trees dominate the scene. The grandmother is sitting beneath the giant trees, tiny and powerless by comparison. The father, as Saeed says, remembers it differently, however. His memory adds vibrant details that may have been necessary to screen the painful circumstances of the father's childhood and the loss of Palestine. The circle of women, the singing, the cooking, and the fire from the wood of a lemon tree all speak of Palestinian heritage and the pride in an identity constructed through strong community ties, food, and songs.

Filled with warmth and joy against a backdrop of oppression and pain, the memory carries a sense of defiance and resilience. Yet, its nostalgic warmth is overshadowed by the memory's unreliability: it is an imaginative construct and an unfaithful reference to the original moment captured by the camera. It becomes even more difficult to discern whether Saeed has invented it (after crossing out the original memory and saving it in a folder he titles "Dad's Edits"), or at least embellished, to screen the trauma that has befallen Palestine and Palestinians. In both cases, the soothing pictorial memory is crucial in relieving the anxiety caused by loss. As Saeed says: "the story that wasn't has become an inseparable and uniquely fertile part of [memory]" (158).

"Write only what they want to hear!": The Silenced Memory and Survival

Saeed refers to his narrative as a space for the marginalised "who were not featured in any book, those who felt wronged by omission, those whose stories were remarkably similar to the others, covering the same well-trod ground of suffering and adversity, and, in its wake, revival and success" (63). He recognises that certain stories are omitted from the mainstream narrative, despite being "remarkably similar" to the ones that are amplified and "immortalized in the official memorial books" (64). On the one hand, this reflects Israel's geopolitical and social reality, which marginalises and excludes Palestinian voices, experiences, and stories. Palestinians are required to publicly adhere to a hegemonising narrative that celebrates the façade of a democratic state for all its citizens, covering over questions of power and control. On the other hand, Saeed's remark could also be a subtle condemnation of the overarching Palestinian political agenda adopted by the Palestinian Authority, which has excluded Palestinians in Israel from the overall Palestinian question. This has created a division between Palestinians in Israel and those in the West Bank, Gaza, and exile (Ghanem & Mustafa 2009), occluding the former's daily struggle for survival. It has also obscured the fact that the watered-down Israeli citizenship that these Palestinians have does

not mean their inclusion in a Zionist society which sees them as a thorn in the throat and an obstacle toward the attainment of Jewish exclusivity.

Two examples of these marginalised stories are those of Saeed's only Palestinian Israeli clients: a retiring sanitation worker and a former member of Knesset (referred to as MK). Their accounts reveal how Palestinian memory is systemically screened, modified, and censored when it "challenges and contradicts the Zionist narrative and omission" (Masalha 234). Their narratives call into question the truthfulness and coherence of the Zionist narrative that misuses memory as a political tool to exclude and silence Palestinians. The stories, especially that of the MK, awaken Saeed to the painful reality, which he has ignored when Hebraising his own memories: that certain truths cannot be spoken, and even if they are, they are never allowed to take centre stage.

When Saeed asks the municipality worker about his first memory, he responds: "What makes you think I am dealing with memories? ...Sometimes the hardships of life leave no time for memories" (70). It soon transpires that the earliest memory he has hoped not to talk about is of the traumatic events he witnessed as a child: "his terror, the soldiers' fingers curled around their triggers, and the way his father told them in Arabic they didn't speak...that he had to get the new job...near Lod...He also remembered the look in his mother's eyes, the fear," and how when he "looked back for the last time upon the village in which he was born and saw nothing" (71). However, the sanitation worker implores Saeed to exclude these memories from the final copy and instead to "write what they want to hear" (72). The memory then becomes a story of a Palestinian peasant family who is saved by Israel "from a life of poverty and the shame of hunger" (72):

How good it was when the Jews came, and how his father found work and received medical treatment from the state in his old age. And write how much easier everything became, with running water and electricity, and thank God, write how well I was treated by the municipality and how for forty years I worked alongside

Jews who were like brothers to me, like brothers I tell you...And write that in '48 the Arabs conspired against the Jews and that their leaders asked that they step out for two days at most and that after that the Arab armies would come and butcher the Jews and then the residents of Jaffa would be free to return... (71-2)

These stories have never happened; yet, they correspond to the Jewish Israeli version of the historical narrative. Saeed, who believes in stories with happy memories, decides to replace the truth with “fictitious scenes of familial warmth” (72). Saeed’s exclusion of the traumatic memories from the final printed memoir is an act of imposition: it replicates the state’s discriminatory practices and laws against the Arab minority who are forced, unlike his Jewish clients, into a conscious amnesia—a deliberate silence employed as a means of surviving the oppressive reality. Memories are not repressed, nor denied, but deliberately silenced. The reason as Jamil Khader (2008) explains is that “questions of identity and collective memory wane in face of the struggle for survival in Israel,” and, therefore, nobody is interested in remembering or talking about memories (354). Saeed refrains from including the silenced memory because it carries within it fear, defeat, and paralysis. Perceiving himself as a fixer, and editor of bad memories, he opts for a defensive distortion of the early traumatic memory, disguising it beneath fictional ones “full of hope,” love, and life-affirming smiles (73).

With the story of his second Israeli Palestinian client, Saeed does the opposite. The MK, now abandoned by his constituents and striving hard to integrate into Israeli society by joining the Labour party, is another example of a “good Arab.” The MK, Saeed notes, shifts between Arabic—to talk about his childhood and the Palestinian version of the war he witnessed—and Hebrew—to talk about his family’s simple home, poverty, and his contributions to his community. Saeed remarks that the MK still believes in the possibility of “coexistence, liberty and democracy,” despite the present-day reality that has been pushed to the “lower depth of segregation and

polarization” (76). Both Saeed and the MK share similar circumstances. Despite achieving conditional and temporary integration, both have simultaneously suffered from the exclusion from their Arab communities whose contempt they earned. Saeed views the MK’s memoir as his redemption by proxy. He decides to beautify the MK’s image and to expose the unspoken truth that is embedded in a childhood memory the MK shares with Saeed.

In Arabic, the MK speaks of the days of the Nakba when the “new rulers” gathered all the men in the village, him included, to detail the new rules; he does not speak of the father’s humiliation but “[w]ithout words he told of the silence of his father...and [his] vanquished face” (78). The MK does not explicitly share with Saeed any of the feelings aroused when he asks him about the war. Therefore, Saeed decides to fill in the gaps by adding what “[e]veryone knows [...] and everyone stays silent” about (77). Saeed justifies the MK’s joining a Zionist party as a fulfilment of a “vow...to avenge in some way what the Jews had done to his father’s gaze, but he possessed neither the strength nor the courage to follow through” (79). In the details Saeed adds, he conveys the MK’s unspoken desire to have the Arab communities in Israel hear what he has to say, hoping to restore his tarnished reputation. Saeed invents memories that speak of the MK’s pride in the face of Israeli racism and sense of superiority and describes his fear of “falling from the path of the just and the concern that if he adopted their language and their ways, he would never be able to return home” (79).

The final printed memoir is not endorsed by any Israeli publishing house; it contains a truth that contradicts the democratic image of a state that does not discriminate. When the MK passes away a few years later, Saeed coincidentally finds an article on a Hebrew site announcing his death. Regardless of how involved the MK had been in the Israeli politics and public life, as an Arab, nothing is said of what he has contributed to that society. He remains unrecognised, an anonymous presence; “[t]here was no picture and no mention of a memoir; no one eulogized him and no one

left any comments” (81). Confronted with the dominant narrative of the state, Saeed realizes that certain truths can never be made public.

In Search of a Beginning

To answer the question of beginnings, Saeed returns to a point of origin, to the depth of the Palestinian repertoire of memories. For him, it is the remainder of “Palestine [that] was ruined,” which will not be found “on a map in geography class” (143). It is the Palestine that must be imagined from stories. The retrieval of such a memory becomes one’s journey of return to the object of one’s nostalgic longing, to that lost object that can never be subjectivised nor transcribed in the Symbolic world of reality. “Tira,” “Palestine,” or “the old country” gain the status of the object cause of Saeed’s desires after the event, following the loss and the realisation that “the village has changed” (87), that “there was nowhere for us to return to and that nothing would ever be restored to the way it was” (89). Saeed eventually acknowledges that a return to these sites of memory is impossible, and hence certain memories will always be inaccessible:

The end of the story with the house was foretold, and I assembled the plot details accordingly. I determined at the outset that there was nowhere to return to, that no matter how much I want to return, the path would be blocked by coils of barbed wire, guard towers, and military dogs with bared teeth that could tear my flesh. (189)

Changing his tracks to try and locate a site from which he can understand the past is, as the above quotation implies, foreclosed. Saeed’s inability to move forward, even after he has redeemed himself before his father’s passing can be explained as a melancholic fear of the finality of loss. Looking backward to the future turns Saeed into a melancholite who views the world from the eyes of the absolute victim, unable to induce real change. Hence, he perceives it as a betrayal of

Palestine to be roaming the space of memory and imagination for new visions of what being Palestinian might mean beyond trauma and loss.

Saeed's inability to retrieve the "earliest memory" and the ambivalence toward the credibility of his childhood memories lead to "a different sort of crying, unrecognizable to me—a wailing that I tried to stifle with a pillow" (39). His pain results from a kind of melancholic knowledge of an irrevocable loss that generates the feelings of "angst and self-loathing" (126), but also an inability to accept the loss. As a melancholic subject, Saeed refuses to relinquish the first memory represented by his dying father. He notes:

As long as I write, I mummify my father, and his body, albeit old and sick, remains whole and beside my desk. My father's life is in my hands; I keep him alive. When I decide that I'm done, When I Accept All Changes and save a final copy, I'll be sending my father to the cemetery in Tira, to the worms. (198)

By juxtaposing contradictory images of death and life, decay and immortality, Saeed's remark exemplifies how remembrance can be both blessing and burden, pain and joy. The melancholic subject is trapped between the desire to be relieved of the burden by forgetting, and the obligation to persistently remember what might soon be consigned to eternal silence. The pressure to repetitively remember becomes Saeed's way of returning to the place of the lost *jouissance*. Yet with every attempt, home becomes more distant, and Saeed repetitively returns to the site of "a long absence"⁴⁵ (Sanbar 2001, quoted in Saadi 2008 175).

45 The idea can be explained in relation to Lacan's notion of *Vorstellung*, or representations. As Bruce Fink (1995) argues, Lacan understood repetition as the subject's way to "return to that place of the lost object, the lost satisfaction." Every attempt at "satisfaction pales in comparison with the one that was lost, and the subject repetitively returns to the site of that absence in the hope of obtaining the *real Thing*, and yet forever missing it" (228).

Saeed's inability to relinquish the lost object turns him into a melancholic subject who sees himself as "worthless, incapable of any achievement and morally despicable; he reproaches himself, vilifies himself and expects to be cast out and punished" (Freud 1917, 246). He compensates for his weakness and vulnerability by creating fantasy images: the warrior he will never become. Toward the end of the novel, the warrior screen image returns. Sitting with his wife Palestine in a restaurant in Chicago, Saeed begins to weave scenarios in his head about how to start a conversation with his wife. He imagines himself asking her, "'Let us not ask one another of the past?' May I, after seventeen years, ask to erase the past? Or maybe the right opening line ought to be: 'Let's edit our past from the beginning?'" (225-6). Saeed's musings reflect a desire to start over and leave the traumas of the past behind. However, erasing the past, as the novel suggests, is not an option available for Palestinians. To ignore it the way Saeed does before seeking redemption implies a betrayal of Palestinian struggle for liberation, and a negation of the historical injustices that are still inflicted on Palestinians in the present.

The impasse that characterises the ending of the novel reflects the absurdity of the post-*sumud* situation: the unresolved tension between the desire to lead a normal life, and the commitment to the first memory. This paradox manifests in Saeed's words as a clash between the 'fierce desire to forget' and the crippling fear of the consequences of forgetting:

I so wanted to throw away that copy of the story, which I could recite by heart, but I was not able to. The fierce desire to forget, as though it never were, clashed with the fear that its words would fall out of order and be forgotten until my only recollection of them would be hazy. (222)

The novel ends with Saeed's failure to resolve the feeling of alienation, loneliness, and loss. He is left stranded outside the locked door unable to return to the place of his beginning or to edit the past

by resolving his trauma. Saeed's predicament is a mirror of the Palestinian entrapment in an historical deadlock. Palestinians, too, are unable to return to what was or to move forward and freely choose alternative paths that are more oriented towards the present and the future.

Looking Forward to a Future Impossible

Kashua succeeds in presenting the dilemma and existential and ontological impasse Palestinians are trapped in, and the ambivalent role memory plays in maintaining a connection with a place to which return is literally and figuratively impossible. The exclusivity of the memory that Saeed refuses to give up locks him in a nationalist and communal dialectic of identity and identifications. It distances him from actualising a more radical form of existence that might allow for a non-essentialist, non-hybridist vision, one which is defined by an acknowledgment of not a split subjectivity maintained by desires and fantasies, but of an emptiness at the core of all identities. Adhering to the actualisation of return, of finding "the whole tale" and the satisfactory "ending" (162) would only intensify the plight of the subjects, placing them in a competition of victimisation with their oppressor. This race to be the ultimate victim in the story "gives us the satisfaction of feeling morally superior, the feeling that we are in the right and others are in the wrong. Now for this to work, things must not really change. We are much less interested in changing things than in proving, again and again, that we are in the right..." (Zupančič, interview by Seltman 2018). Here lies the danger that underpins the question the father asks Saeed: "Are you still the victim in these stories" (162)? Capitalising on the "status as a victim of circumstances beyond their own control" is very problematic as every contact with the outer world is perceived as a potential threat (Žižek 2018).⁴⁶ "The declaration of suffering," Alenka Zupančič (2018) maintains, is limiting and

⁴⁶ For a critique of the misuse of Holocaust memory and its weaponization against Palestinians, especially after the events of the 7th of October, 2023, see Marianne Hirsch's "Rethinking Holocaust Memory after October 7" (2024).

unproductive as it freezes the subjects into figures of victim instead of “becoming active agents of social change.” The message is simple and clear: as long as both Palestinians and Jewish Israelis define themselves in relation to “an extreme narcissistic perspective” of themselves as victims and the other as threat (Žižek 2018), there will be no possibility for a different ending to Saeed’s beginning.

However, the novel does not fail entirely to suggest a remedy for Saeed’s pain. Indeed, like Barghouti, Kashua’s answer to Saeed’s question, “Where does the beginning begin?” gestures towards the next generation. It is embedded in another question that Saeed wishes he could ask Palestine about: “What happens to kids who do not know their roots?” (224). In America, Saeed’s children are no longer forced to understand themselves in the shadow of an exclusivist identity, discrimination, and the enduring catastrophe in the same way that Saeed, Palestine, and other Palestinian Israelis do. This distance grants them the freedom to forge new connections with their roots, mainly through the preservation of language, culture, and memory, while at the same time carving out new meanings of what being Palestinian could mean in the future tense.

Both Barghouti and Kashua perceive the potentiality for restoring the original meaning of the struggle for liberation by turning towards the future generations. Yet, Palestinians in the occupied territories also know that distance from their hostile reality, which Barghouti and Kashua have, is a privilege and a luxury not afforded to the majority, who must continually navigate oppressive conditions. I am not suggesting that capturing the Palestinian reality requires only an insider’s perspective. On the contrary, such a reality can be better understood through a combination of both. Yet, what I am arguing here is that it is often easier to perceive hope when viewing situations from the outside, when as Kashua (2015) writes, one is no longer “[looking] the object of the writing in the eyes.” Kashua admits that it is “tremendously difficult to write from afar...It’s difficult to feel free about what you write, without shackles that bind the hands of the

hostage.” Kashua’s statement suggests that freedom in writing does not necessarily mean physical distance from the object of the writing. Instead, distance can impose on the writer its own shackles—guilt, responsibility, or the pressure to conform to certain representations.⁴⁷

The following two chapters raise questions from the insider perspective of a generation forced from birth to confront a reality far from being safe—a generation, unlike Saeed’s children, lack the privilege of a place that does not constantly remind them of their identity. Where, and how, can they find escape? How can they see hope, when hope has become merely another mechanism for survival? To answer these questions, the final part of the thesis delves further into the experiences of Palestine’s new generation as portrayed by Ahlam Bsharat in her two Young Adults novels: *Code Name: Butterfly* and *Trees for the Absentees*. The novels explore, in the language of children and young adults, their daily struggles, shedding light on the psychological repercussions of enduring the occupation’s indiscriminate direct and indirect violence. Like Kashua’s work, Bsharat’s novels provide a critical space that allows its young Palestinian readers (her target audience) to question and rethink issues that are often unchallenged in hegemonic discourses, such as identity, masculinity, nationalism, and memory. However, whereas Kashua’s protagonists gradually become estranged from inherited narratives of resistance, as we will see in the next chapter, Bsharat’s young characters are already situated within that rupture. Though both authors write in the same post-millennial period, Bsharat’s novels are written for a young audience in the West Bank, and reflect a context in which the breakdown of the *sumud* paradigm is not experienced as loss, but as the condition of everyday life. Their subjectivities are shaped by symbolic rupture, emotional ambivalence, and a persistent sense of psychic fatigue, a post-*sumud* sensibility that no longer seeks coherent meaning, but survival.

⁴⁷ See the introduction Chapter

CHAPTER FOUR

The Role of Gendered Codes, Nationalism, and the Israeli Occupation in the Production of Palestinian Female Adolescent Identity in Ahlam Bsharat's Young Adult Novel, *Code Name: Butterfly*

This chapter examines the interlinks between gender roles (particularly concerning honour and masculinity), (gendered) nationalism, and the Israeli occupation in Ahlam Bsharat's Young Adult novel, *Codename: Butterfly* (2016). It highlights the crucial role this triangulation plays in the formation of female subjectivity (social identity and unconscious structures). While tracing the coming-of-age story of its young female protagonist, *Butterfly* critiques Palestinian society and its masculinist fantasies of authority and vitality. By exploring the harmful psychological effects of Palestinian labour in Israeli settlements on the psyche of Palestinian male labourers and their families, particularly the children, the novel does not only reveal a masculinity in crisis, but also exposes the gaps, fractures, and ambivalences at the heart of Palestinian society today. *Butterfly* is a marked shift from Barghouti's celebration of daily heroic acts of survival. Like Kashua's, Bsharat's (male) characters are crushed, dispensable and poor, lost in the alienation of the present and the harsh economic conditions, which, if it indicates anything, it is that the Palestinian tragedy has always been "a tragedy of the poor" and the downtrodden ('Āshūr, 1977, 40).

Codename: Butterfly focuses on the daily life and inner world of its young protagonist and narrator—a young girl from a small village near the city of Nablus in the West Bank who goes by the codename, Butterfly. Through its five vignettes, the novel reflects on a reality in which children, like Butterfly, her siblings, and friends, cannot be protected from the devastating effects of political conflicts and wars. Nor can they be extracted from the traumatic encounters (directly and indirectly) with the Israeli occupation, its apartheid regime, and the permanent assaults which "[touch] [their] very being" and "[disorient] and [scrambles] [their] 'cognitive mapping'" (Zalloua 2021b, 296). Through the narrator's inquisitively innocent voice and her observations about her surroundings,

Bsharat succeeds at registering the Palestinian pain and the socio-psychological effects of the occupation on the formation of Palestinian subjectivity.

The more Butterfly becomes attuned to the tensions and contradictions in the Palestinian economic, social and political reality, the more she turns from a carefree girl who “always needed to giggle uncontrollably whenever things were tense” (2) into someone who “felt miserable,” and who “didn’t get the giggles” again (15). The older she gets, the “less satisfied” she becomes with the answers her mother gives her. This dissatisfaction, her thirst to find “real answers” (27), triggers her idea to create an imaginary treasure chest where she can keep the unanswered questions her mother warns her could disrupt the seemingly coherent social fabric and destroy it. She says:

So as not ‘to make the occupiers happy,’ I’d have to make my treasure chest even bigger so that I could stuff all my questions into it. I even started thinking that I might be able to fit into it myself. As time went on, I liked the idea more and more, so I started looking up facts about cocoons. My treasure chest was like a cocoon that would let me turn from a caterpillar into a colourful butterfly. And then I could fly high up in the sky. (55)

Butterfly imagines her treasure chest as a cocoon incubating her invisible growth and internal changes. It is the period that prepares her to turn from a vulnerable caterpillar that relies on her surrounding for survival—in this case knowledge and understanding—into “a glorious butterfly” (89), unfurling her wings as she scatters her unanswered questions and unfulfilled dreams, “like matchsticks of all different sizes, colours and shapes” (89). Her imaginary metamorphosis into a butterfly takes place in a dream at the end of the narrative. The choice of a butterfly to be, as she says, her “alter ego” (56) mirrors her growing desire to forge “a singular identity apart from the social [and political] conventions that seek to determine the parameters of [her] being” (Ruti 2008,

486). Becoming an insect that moves freely, and crosses boundaries, is a fulfilment of the wish to escape the growing sense of entrapment and alienation (symbolised by the caterpillar in the cocoon) as a Palestinian child under occupation, and as a female subject in a patriarchal society. By concluding with a dream of transition and transformation, Bsharat offers her young readers a sense of hope. She creates a safe psychic space where they can channel their fears and anxieties into envisioning future possibilities. Even if their desires and wishes might not be realised in their current reality, there is still a possible way to achieve freedom, and that is through imagination and dreams. By using a dream to actualise Butterfly's metamorphosis, Bsharat manages to explore themes of escape, freedom, and change while being faithful to the bleak reality her novel is set up against, one from which there is no escape.

Bsharat, herself an instructor of creative writing, recognises the significance of creating "an embracing space" for Palestinian children and young adults who are torn between the wish for normalcy and a life that is marked by anything but that. Writing for Bsharat offers a safe space:

through speaking to them, through the stories which they tell about themselves in secret, the subjects about which they cannot speak like grown-ups, the questions that they cannot pose, the mistakes which they make and whose traces they try to erase, the secrets they hide and cannot drag along to an advanced age, and when they do, they are transformed into a useless metal coin, like that of the Seven Sleepers.

(Bsharat, quoted in F. Watad 2022, 24)

In "Palestine's YA Fiction and Identity in Ahlam Bsharat's *Code Name: Butterfly*," Aida Fahmawi Watad (2022) reads *Butterfly* as one example of Palestinian Young Adult novels that explore, through the perspective of young protagonists and in their own language, the struggles of a generation growing up under occupation. F. Watad argues that Bsharat manages to create a

“holding space” for her young readers by refusing to impose any ideological agenda or to let the political situation, which, as Bsharat notes, “operates on the sidelines, at the roadblocks, in conference halls and under the tables” overtake the story (quoted in Watad 2022, 27). Instead, she presents a character who embarks on a quest for individuality and introspective thinking while simultaneously negotiating the contradictions that permeate her society, especially what pertains to Palestinian masculinity, Palestinian labour in Israel, and the external political reality.

Like Bsharat, F. Watad reads the novel as a safe place where the political reality of oppression does not overwhelm the narrative, nor the life of the characters. She argues that while Bsharat focuses on the protagonist’s development as “an independent process of identity formation, embodying freedom and liveliness, as well as a sense of frailty and danger” (35), she does not dismiss the political reality. On the contrary, her protagonist’s desire to grow wings and her metaphorical metamorphosis into a butterfly speak of the youth’s disappointment in any “political, social or intellectual leadership that can extricate them from their situation or offer real opportunity for change” (36). Real change requires breaking free of these shackles by pursuing personal freedom of which the butterfly as a symbol is a correlative (36).

In the last decade, Palestine has experienced a significant surge in literature aimed at children and young adult readers who constitute more than half of the Palestinian population in the West Bank and Gaza. This growing attention is not surprising given the genre’s significance as “an unconventional tool of resistance” (Al-Nābulusī 22:40-22:49) that tackles crucial political, social, gender and cultural themes in a language that is suitable for its young reader. These stories offer a safe alternative to the uncertain reality “in which the Israeli state demarcates [children’s] lives as undesirable and unwanted” (Shalhoub-Kavorkian 2019, 2). The Israeli occupation invades Palestinian childhood, penetrating the most intimate of spaces, such as home, school, body, self, family and familiar places, thus inscribing “power over [their] bodies and lives” (2-5). This, in turn,

does not only shape traumatised, helpless subjectivities, but it also creates identities that are liminal and uncertain, seen in their status as the non-living dispensable other. This process of “unchildling” maintains, as Shalhoub-Kavorkian (2019) argues, “an unending suffering that marks children’s psyches with an ontological sense of loss of personal direction, the result of which is an imposed outlook of impossibility and hopelessness” (132). In such situations, stories can provide the necessary psychic space where young Palestinians can explore their own unarticulated emotions and fears which such novels often engage with.

The significance of stories and historically and culturally specific representations and images is that they are more likely to generate, as Karen Coats (2004) argues, formative encounters because they are usually read “at a time in a life of a person when she is still less structured, or...when her boundaries are more porous, her mental architecture less crowded or filled in with images that define and stabilise her sense of reality and the self”(4). Developing inquisitive minds needs to be fostered at an early stage in the child’s life, when she is still collecting experiences and negotiating her position in the world. Children at that stage are the most to be influenced by the message that comes from the Other in the form of stories. Bsharat, and many other Palestinian female writers of Young Adult literature such as Taghreed Najjar, Sonia Nimr, Ibtisam Barakat, and Randa Abdel Fattah, to name a few, use their young female protagonists and their journeys to scrutinise (masculine) Palestinian identity, social conventions, and the Israeli occupation. Portraying inquisitive protagonists, or what Barghouti (2012) calls a “clever branch” (169), to be their role model, Bsharat creates an alternative social mirror, an Ideal I, with which they can identify, especially since the mirrors they have in real life do not offer any sense of stability in the face of fragmentation. This helps mitigate the sense of alienation they feel in their social environment, while reinforcing more positive self-images.

Butterfly's narrative of maturation is filled with social mirrors, each adding depth and perspective to her complex world and journey of becoming. With her and her little sister Ms. Tala, who never keeps a secret, we share the silent giggles and bursts of "noiseless hysterics" when mimicking Mama's "daily summons" (8) and her tension after binging on "her depressing soap operas" (53). Butterfly's story is also intricately tied to that of her older sister Zaynab, whose secretive world and arranged marriage in Saudi Arabia unfold alongside the mundane pains of menstruation and a doomed love story. Through Zaynab's arranged marriage, Butterfly learns about a woman's 'honour' and how losing it is viewed to be as destructive as the Israeli occupation. The narrative is also about friendship. Butterfly, together with her two friends Haya, the fashionista, and Mays, the nationalist, form a "motley crew" (19), united by their different personalities and interests. We also delve into the psychological landscapes of her orphaned cousin Salem, the steadfast *sumud* of her grandparents, Grandpa Mubarak and Grandma Amna, and Butterfly's first love, Nizar and his death at the hand of an Israeli sniper.

My reading of Butterfly's journey, however, is closely linked to one of the most central figures in her narrative, and with whom Butterfly begins her story—her father, or Baba. In contrast to Barghouti's portrayal of a defiant masculinity, Bsharat presents a masculinity in crisis through which, I argue, she challenges the discursive axioms of the (masculine) Palestinian national thought. Through Baba's central role in Butterfly's development, Bsharat reflects on an aspect that often remains hidden under the ethos of *sumud* and resistance: a damaged masculinity burdened by poverty, social expectations, and oppression. The novel explores how the social and psychological role of the father/man is undermined, not only as a symbol of strength, safety and masculinity in the eyes of daughters, but as a stand-in for Palestinian nationalism and national identity. Baba's experiences and Butterfly's observations of him and other men in her village, who are desperate to

find jobs in Israeli settlements, fuel her desire to escape the sociopolitical structure she is born into and to be the author of her own meanings.

Butterfly exposes the gaps inherent in traditional masculinity and the limitations in the current (masculine) Palestinian identity through Baba's experiences at his job as a farmer and overseer at a nearby Israeli settlement. Butterfly sees the humiliation on Baba's face when he loses his job after his Israeli bosses, Gabby and Yuval, accuse him of poisoning the trees he has nurtured for years. The novel unveils a fractured and alienated masculine subjectivity that masquerades behind fantasies of authority and agency—fantasies that are reinforced by an uncontested masculine national identity. However, the story of Baba also shows that these fantasies of being cannot be fully embraced because they are continually undermined by the occupation, forcing Palestinians and Palestinian men to continuously confront their ruptured material and psychic reality.

In this sense, Bsharat's novel also reflects post-*sumud* sensibilities, not only through the protagonist's ironic distancing from nationalist discourses, but through the intimate psychic toll Baba's silence and humiliation represent. If traditional *sumud* required the concealment of weakness, *Butterfly* gently exposes it. It points toward a younger generation's recognition that survival under occupation also breeds internal fragmentation, inherited silences, and a masculinity in crisis. The performative *sumud* of the past gives way here to a more ambiguous psychic landscape, where retreat, doubt, and quiet dissent mark the contours of subjectivity.

Butterfly begins with Butterfly's observation about Baba's appearance upon returning from work. Baba is described as "dog-tired" with "sun burnt almost blackened face" (1). He always "came home irritated" for reasons Butterfly "couldn't fathom" nor dare ask about (29). She acknowledges that she was too young then to understand the reasons for Baba's "grim expression and forbidding air about him" (1) which could silence her and her sister, Tala "like sparrows whose nest is being stalked by a predator under the tree. Not a chirp. Not a breath" (1). The "nest," the

internal and private sphere of home and safety, is penetrated in a way that threatens the well-being of their interior psychic space. Just as sparrows remain silent to avoid predators, Butterfly learns that certain issues and truths are to be kept hidden. Instead of raising what needs to remain unarticulated, Butterfly begins to create her own internal space where she can express herself and her thoughts freely. Looking at Baba's face, Butterfly, "with a mixture of sadness and intuition," remarks to herself: "*You're nothing but a labourer yourself, Baba. Gabby and Yuval are the real bosses, and they'd fire you in a minute if you made the slightest mistake, even over something as teeny tiny as baby Ali's shoes!*" (23).

The cynicism and doubt that the protagonist holds towards the Symbolic—both the Israeli occupation and the Palestinian masculine discourse—trigger her determination to be different. Despite her friends' mockeries and judgments, Butterfly vows to fight for a nom de guerre that is non-identitarian and non-conformist, cherishing "the idea of dying for the sake of dreams and questions...*I was going to be a martyr, too*" (57). Unlike her friend Mays who calls herself Dalal al-Mughrabi after an iconic female freedom fighter, or Nizar who goes by Abu Ammar after the Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat, hers is apolitical, subjective, and personal. It is a universal symbol for freedom from all shackles of oppression, including gender, identity, and ideology. The codename also signifies feminist agency and defiance. It evokes the story of the Mirabel sisters of the Dominican Republic who went by the codename Butterflies in their fight against the oppression and tyranny of Raphael Trujillo's government. Three of the four sisters were assassinated on the orders of Trujillo on the 25th of November 1960, a day that is now commemorated in many Latin American countries as the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. The sisters are also described by the Dominican American author Julia Alvarez in her novel, *In the Times of the Butterflies*, as feminist icons who "have served as models for women fighting against injustices of all kinds" (324).

In the fourth vignette titled “Am I Really That Naïve?” Butterfly clearly states how her choice stems from an unfulfilled, yet enduring, collective desire for liberation. A butterfly’s unrestricted freedom to fly “over the water like a seagull” is contrasted with the inability of Palestinians “to access the seas that “have been stolen” (61); its ability to effortlessly “soar high like a plane” is juxtaposed with a reality marked by restrictive “crossings, checkpoints, and bypass roads” (61). The idea of a butterfly begins to materialise after Butterfly returns from a visit to Jordan with Baba. They both accompany Zeinab to the airport to join her cousin-husband in Saudi Arabia. Experiencing what it means to be in a country that is free and independent, Butterfly manages to understand the reality around her which is marked by settlements, checkpoints, borders, assaults, arrests, and death. In a mature and politically conscious manner, she reflects on the deprivation of children in Palestine. “Visiting Jordan,” she remarks, “I realized that the children of Palestine were deprived of everything—they couldn’t even play in the street” because they risk being shot dead by an Israeli sniper, like Jawhar. Jawhar is a small boy from an adjacent village, who is shot dead when an Israeli sniper mistakes the plastic shotgun he is playing with for a real gun (68).

The turning point in Butterfly’s narrative takes place when her puppy love Nizar is killed by an Israeli sniper during a non-violent demonstration. Butterfly and her family have just started to cope with their new life when Baba loses his job which left them “dejected” (78), “helpless and defeated” (77), to relive a more devastating loss. After a bullet shatters her “most beautiful dream” (86), Butterfly “felt devastated—too dazed now to talk or ask questions” (83). Nizar’s unjustified killing leaves her “mind devoid of shrewd thoughts” (86) and raises for the first time “the question [that] was in red ink”—the colour of a love bathed in blood. All of her unanswered questions “nearly overwhelmed” her until she “felt as though [her] head, and [her] treasure chest, were about to explode” (54). Thus, Butterfly’s dream of becoming insect allows her ego to detach from her

overwhelming reality, preventing its collapse under the unbearable burden of ongoing traumatic experiences.

Baba's humiliation and Nizar's death trigger a state of ambivalence and doubt about the struggle and the physical and psychological toll paid for it to continue.⁴⁸ While sitting in her grandparents' tent, Butterfly writes in the air a question she imagines addressing to Grandma Amna: "will I ever be as resilient as you?" (87). The question is then followed by a description of Grandpa Mubarak's "skipping after his sheep like an eighteen-year-old" (87). Grandpa Mubarak lost his leg when he was wounded in the Six-Day War of 1967. His lost leg has earned him the title al-a'raj (the one with the limp) which he wears "like a badge of honour" (87), and which Butterfly has used in place of her surname on test papers. She then asks: "*Which is more important: the name on my birth certificate, or my grandfather's leg and the sacrifices made by the revolutionaries?*" (88). Butterfly feels compelled to hide both questions in her treasure chest when she remembers that "Nizar and Uncle Yasin were gone" and "Grandpa Mubarak was still chasing his sheep with one a half leg" (88) while the Israeli settlement "was getting bigger all the time" (86). By hiding her questions, Butterfly avoids confronting the harsh realities of her doubt—the possibility that these sacrifices might have been in vain.

In what follows, I will examine how the interlinking between social and political forces influences Butterfly's thoughts and trigger her desire to escape. I will then read the story of Baba as an embodiment of damaged masculinity, arguing that Bsharat uses it to challenge and problematise traditional images of Palestinian masculinity. Unlike the idealised, heroic figures of steadfast resilience, such as Mahmoud or Butterfly's Grandpa Mubarak, Baba is portrayed as vulnerable, manipulated, and exploited. His story reveals the silent, often unquestioned, psychological and emotional toll such struggles impose, and refutes the representation of Palestinian psyche as

⁴⁸ See Samah Jabr and Elizabeth Berger in "The Trauma of Humiliation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories." (2017)

coherent, unbroken and intact. Baba's vulnerability contravenes the cultural representations of an unbreakable spirit and psychic autonomy of individuals enduring the brunt of protracted conflicts. By acknowledging Baba's psychological struggles and Butterfly's internal conflicts, Bsharat expands the narrative of *sumud* beyond mere unwavering moral strength and psychological coherence to include the silent stories of pain and vulnerabilities. The inclusion of damaged masculinity and compromised will in the narrative of *sumud* provides a more realistic picture of what being a father and a man under occupation often entails.

Between the Fire of Gendered Codes and the Frying Pan of the Occupation

On different occasions throughout the narrative, Bsharat juxtaposes social and cultural codes, particularly those pertinent to the female body and social behaviour, with the violence of the Israeli occupation and its abhorrent and dehumanising practices. From an early age, Butterfly learns about a woman's chastity and that "honour was a dangerous matter" (11) to the extent that her nightmares become solely "around the word 'honour'" (48). Her mother "had drilled into [her]," that certain topics, such as a woman's reproductive system and her bodily changes, "were shameful to mention" (37). Therefore, they should be kept hidden in their "own place" in her treasure chest along with different memories, especially those "tinged with desire, fear and hostility" (39). As a young girl, she finds herself entangled in the social and public opinion about the role socially assigned to women. She sees her mother "as usual" waiting on her dad, following him into the bathroom "with the green towel" (7). Butterfly learns then about the assumed passivity of women whose role is limited to the domestic sphere, and to the burden of the mundane chores like cutting the stems off the "huge pile of vine leaves [which] ever since I'd opened my eyes to the world, our house had been filled with them" (9). Being forced to help her mother with cutting the stems and sorting the leaves becomes a heavy chore that she begins to hate "growing up" (12). To "wheedle out of" it (12), Butterfly starts to use her schoolwork as an excuse. Escaping a chore relegated to women

only, Butterfly finds herself running into some homework about “the massacres that were committed as part of the occupation of Palestine” (13). Gender roles and the violence of the occupation intersect, and “in addition to having to count and guard the bags of vine leaves, I’d also have to memorise all sorts of awful dates and statistics” (13).

On another occasion, Butterfly entwines gender roles, particularly a woman’s honour, with the occupation when she accidentally learns about her older sister Zeinab’s love for Omar who is serving a life sentence in an Israeli prison. She hears her mother scolding Zeinab for the crime of “falling in love” (58). To avoid any scandal, Zeinab is forced to marry a cousin in Saudi Arabia, a decision that made “her voice so strained and weepy” (59). Zeinab’s misery, her helplessness, and forced silence, lead Butterfly to conclude that “there was a connection between falling in love, honour and Israeli occupation. The common denominator [...] was that all three ended in disaster” (59). She comes to the conclusion that marriage in Palestine “is a miserable affair” (59) and not the consummation of the love that finds no place to grow in such a hostile environment. On an earlier occasion, Butterfly reflects on the family’s decision to marry off her uncle Rashid to Salma, the wife of Butterfly’s martyred uncle, to protect the family’s honour which Salma might jeopardise if she decides to seek her independence and freedom after the death of her husband. Honour becomes Butterfly’s worst nightmare, no different from the fear instigated by the violence of the occupation. She remarks:

It terrified me to hear the words ‘honor’ and ‘flesh’ in the same sentence. The word ‘honour’ was one that people used a lot in our village, and when they did, they talked in a strange way, as if losing it was some sort of catastrophe, like the Israeli occupation. (47)

As a Palestinian girl, Butterfly learns that in addition to the political conflict and the unequal power relation between the occupier and the occupied, she will not find tranquillity in the pre-given meaning that her society provides—in the social sense of alienation. Butterfly is constantly reminded by her mother and other “God-awful women” that “no woman would want her son to marry a girl who’s got no manners, who opens her mouth and guffaws for the slightest reason” (4). Women’s “glares” and “murmuring” (4) when a girl does not adhere to the conservative codes of conduct trigger Butterfly’s anger. The strong feeling of detestation to “[be] around them” (4), and the fear of “growing up, and becoming more and more like [her] mother” (71) spark her initial desire to escape. It is then that “the dream of leaving Palestine” begins to ferment (5). The same feeling hits her again every summer holiday when she has no excuse to leave the house which becomes like a prison cell. Yet, she finds herself obliged to hide her dream to escape, to keep it “locked” for fear of being “made fun of” or accused of being a traitor to “the land of the sacred bond” (5). She, therefore, “felt alone in the world with nothing to relate to” (78).

Butterfly’s desire to escape prompts a fear of being perceived as a traitor to the land and the cause. She learns that the word ‘honour’ is tied to nationalism: the metaphor of Palestine as both a woman and a mother for “the Palestinian man who is the conceiver/reproducer of the nation” (Massad 1995, 477). Following the loss of the land, or its “rape” in 1948, Palestinian nationalism has been linked to the Palestinian man’s role in preserving and defending the (woman) land’s honour and reproducing the nation (472). Joseph Massad (1995) maintains that “while the land as mother was responsible for the reproduction of Palestinians until 1947, the rape disqualified her from this role. It is now the fathers who reproduce the nation. *Territory was replaced by paternity*” (472). Women are no longer perceived in national discourses as active agents capable of having a primary role on the national front. “Their role, thus, becomes secondary and supportive in the narrative of nationalism” (472), Massad suggests. It is a faulty masculine-supremacist perception

that reality has refuted times and times again, but, unfortunately, still reigns supreme in the construction of Palestinian national identity that is “always already conceived in the masculine” (483).

Along the same vein, Amy Zalman (2006) contends that Ghassan Kanafani’s novels present national loss and return as solely masculine. These masculine qualities, she adds, are embedded in “a well-noted trope within Palestinian literary expressions of nationalism in which women are associated with an enduring and feminine land” (17-18). This same image appears in *Butterfly* in the character of Grandma Amna who shows tremendous power, and fairy-tale like resilience. *Butterfly* contemplates the inexplicable strength Grandma Amna shows upon learning of her son’s martyrdom while fighting with the Palestinian armed resistance in Lebanon. Grandma Amna “ululated, she’s sung... she hadn’t let a single tear drop fall” (87). Pinning women down to such idealised images of “a willing mother,” or as Massad notes, “the soil on which ‘manhood, respect, and dignity’ grow” (474) only serves a certain masculine agenda, one that aims at redeeming a masculinity in crisis.

Butterfly refuses to identify with and conform to the mirror-image of Grandma Amna and others. She knows she does not have to be “resilient” like Grandma Amna who looks “like a star on the edge of the sky” while “coming and going as energetically as a little girl” (86). She chooses, instead, to embody the free feminine spirit which her codename connotes. *Butterfly* reaches this conclusion only when she questions everything her society accepts as normal, refusing to take anything at face value. Bsharat, through *Butterfly*’s observation about Baba and other male characters, manages to critique Palestinian masculinity, break it down, and create a free space where to map out for her young (female) readers a new figuration of a Palestinian female subject outside the discursive (masculine) national thought—even if it is still framed within the realm of imagination.

A Damaged Masculinity: Unveiling the Unquestioned

The masculine fantasy of being the “makers of glory, respect and dignity” (Massad 1995, 476) at the expense of female agency nourishes an illusion of control and empowerment that fend against castration anxieties and feelings of vulnerability and disempowerment, especially in their daily painful confrontations with the occupation’s direct and/or subtle forms of control and violence. The occupation, as Ravi Gokani et al. (2015) argue, systematically challenges men’s roles and interferes with their ability “to perform as breadwinners, protectors of their children and families, and models of masculinity” (209). The Oslo agreement has legitimised Israel’s tight control over Palestinian economy leading to the Palestinian people’s economic dependence on Israel, particularly through their incorporation into the Israeli labour market. This may seem to be a ‘voluntary’ servitude in Israeli settlements, turning the latter into places that provide work opportunities for ‘cheap’ Palestinian male labourers. This inclusion, however, leads to the emergence of a new apolitical, docile Palestinian masculinity whose primary trait is employment and financial provision as opposed to confrontational forms of masculinity and resistance (Gokani et al. 2015, 207). Baba’s story exemplifies this dispossessed masculinity as it accentuates the dissonance between an illusion of a Palestinian masculine agency and the reality of an occupied masculinity. As the novel unfolds, Butterfly’s observations show how this logic of “reality bending” (L. Sheehi and S. Sheehi 2022, 14) is created to facilitate Israel’s totalising control over Palestinian psyche, producing alienated subjects who are used by the Israeli state as means to its own interests rather than as equal beings.⁴⁹

Baba’s psychological and symbolic collapse mirrors that of the lawyer in *Second Person Singular*. Both figures invest in the fantasy of symbolic stability under settler-colonial conditions, and both are undone by that very fantasy. Baba models his authority and self-worth on the settler’s

49 L. Sheehi and S. Sheehi employ “reality bending” following Hannah Arendt to mean Zionism’s “‘insubordination’ against reality” (Rose 2005, 67). It is the disavowal, denial and foreclosure of the historical and material realities of Palestine and the existence of Palestinians to consolidate the Zionist national myths.

structure of recognition, believing in the illusion of his indispensability. Both men are abandoned by the very systems they seek to please. Their fantasy of authority is shattered, and both are returned to a state of psychic disorientation, humiliation, and self-doubt. If the lawyer's collapse takes the form of internalised paranoia and misrecognition, Baba's is rendered visible through the eyes of his daughter. In Kashua's and Bsharat's narratives, one encounters a post-*sumud* reality in which the affective costs of enduring the unimaginable, without voice or agency, begin to register on the next generation. Butterfly's recognition of Baba's symbolic failure becomes foundational to her affective refusal. His breakdown becomes her lesson in the urgency to refuse uncontested national scripts. Her silence is not a passive withdrawal but an ethical reaction to a world where coherence and strength are performed at unbearable emotional cost.

By narrating Baba's work in a settlement built on land previously owned by Palestinian villagers, and her failure to understand the complexities of these situations, Butterfly draws an honest, unfiltered picture of the humiliation Palestinian men and these workers endure and the objectifying position they are forced to occupy. The novel clearly demonstrates how internalisation of inferiority—the colonisation of the Palestinian psyche—can be achieved through economic subjugation and exploitation. Butterfly looks at Baba's "grim expression" (1) and "helpless" (77) face, unable to confront him with the truth about his position as "nothing but a labourer" who can be fired any minute for "the slightest mistake" (23). What troubles young Butterfly the most is the split reality she is forced to endure especially when she witnesses villagers, mostly "school boys" (30) seeking her Baba's help to secure them jobs in adjacent Israeli settlements. Butterfly fails to understand why Baba and the other men choose to serve in the settlements despite the fact that the Israel soldiers murdered her two uncles, Yasin and Saleh, orphaned her cousin Salem (14), left, Bakr, a boy her age, legless and crawling on the floor, after one of their mines exploded under him (14), and imprisoned the brother of her friend May who is "serving the first three consecutive life

sentences” (30). How can she resolve the contradiction between Baba’s devotion to his work, and what she learns at school about the atrocities of the occupation? How can she reconcile and make sense of Baba being “unfailingly honest in his work” as if he was “working on a land he owned himself, rather than land the Israelis had seized from him and his ancestors” (13) and “all the dates of massacres the occupiers had committed against us” that she is required to memorise and be tested on (13-14)?

The novel portrays the psychic struggles of working-class Palestinians who are torn between the violence of the occupation and the subtle dispossessing strategy hiding under the labour regime. Including Palestinian labour into the Israeli state’s economy, argues Andreas Hackl (2022), aims at stripping Palestinian men of their political and legal agency, turning Palestinian areas into “containers designed to warehouse a racialized surplus population” (2). What is even more crucial for my argument about this systemic and insidious form of dispossession is the way it relegates those Palestinian workers into a psychic space where the self becomes foreign to itself, alienated in the space of the Other. It is the alienation of oppression that propels loss and suffering, an othering and wounding of the self. No matter how devoted to their jobs these men are, they are not seen as equally human in the eyes of their Israeli employers. Mays, Butterfly’s friend, tells her about the story of her uncle who used to be a construction worker in Israel. After he falls from the fourth floor and breaks his spine, his Israeli boss “refused to acknowledge him because he’d been working there without a permit” (28). The value of the Palestinian male labourer is measured by the work he produces, and once he stops meeting the needs of his Israeli employer, the Palestinian worker is immediately reduced to a disposable object, and Baba is a clear example of this disposability.

The grapevines and date palms which Baba grows and nurtures in the settlements become part of Baba’s constructed fantasy of “authority in his job, and that he had workers who took orders from him” (22). Being responsible for the trees and land nourishes the illusion of vitality and

control, and speaks of a desperate desire to disavow his immediate reality that is characterised by inequality, aggressivity, and hatred. As Linda M. Pitcher (1998) argues:

Under occupation, critical events (e.g., arrests, beatings, collective punishment) confront the cultural norms and social standards that traditionally sketch the parameters of “identity” on both individual and collective levels. When one's internal and social continuity is challenged by a real or perceived life-threatening event, the relationship between individual and environment is severely disrupted, compelling the survivor to probe deeper into definitions of self and agency in an effort to reclaim a sense of identity and control. (16)

Like Kashua's lawyer, the authority Baba has in his job as a foreman over other Palestinian labourer allows him to recapture his stolen masculine identity and articulate an image of an authoritative self. However, immersing himself in his work as a source of his imaginary liberation estranges him and other Palestinian men like him from meaning making outside the ‘impossible recognition’ from the settler other.

The political docility required to secure work permits in Israel distances men from the national struggle which also goes hand in hand with the conception of the masculine in the Palestinian society (Massad 1995, 483). The lack of political meaning promotes a new docile masculinity which “the good Arab” stereotype embodies.⁵⁰ Hackl (2022) argues that workers are pressured to “refrain from challenging exploitative practices and the Israeli security regime pressures them to become apolitical, hardworking, and compliant individuals” (15). Butterfly reflects on the same idea when she remembers Mays' brother who is refused a work permit “because, in the eyes of the occupation, his brother [who is a political prisoner] was a saboteur”

⁵⁰ See Chapters II and III

(76), and therefore, he cannot secure the money needed to pay for his tuition fees. The economic dependence of Palestinians on Israel is a dangerous dispossessing tool that aims to break the Palestinian psyche. It forces Palestinians to accept the reality of the occupation and Israel's ultimate control over their life.

Enforced passivity and the consequent psychic wounding, moreover, connote a colonisation of the psyche which in turn causes what Kelly Oliver (2004), following Fanon, calls "debilitating alienation": a painful estrangement that turns the subject "inside out to become an object for another." It works, argues Oliver, on weakening one's "sense of itself as an agent" (27), accentuating his/her inferiority. Debilitating alienation, in other words, traps the colonised in a 'foreign' state of the self. This is best described by Julia Kristeva (1991) in her definition of the stranger as "[b]arely an empty confidence, valueless, which focuses his possibilities of being constantly other, according to the others' wishes and to circumstances. I do what *they* want *me* to, but it is not "me"—"me" is elsewhere, "me" belongs to no one, "me" does not belong to "me," . . . does "me" exist?" (8). As such, the trauma the novel portrays is one that is directed at the Palestinian subject's fantasies of autonomy and authority as crucial coping mechanisms that veil the alienation and psychic fragmentation caused by living under a brutal occupation.

Oppression leads to a compromised will, to a negation of selfhood, and to an existential paradox that blocks the Palestinian subject's access to the fantasy of a grounded identity. The racist Symbolic of the settler-colonial state systemically works to cripple the Palestinian psyche, trapping Palestinians in a devastating pursuit of an imagined wholeness, and of a sense of power and control the occupation keeps robbing them of. This futile pursuit is clear in Baba's devotion to his work in the settlement and how this fantasy of "authority" he thinks he has is modelled after his oppressors to the extent that he starts perceiving other Palestinians through the settler's degrading gaze. Butterfly remarks that whenever her Baba watches the news, he "listened to everybody but the

Palestinians, ... even swore at them sometimes” (54), an observation that forces Butterfly to question Baba’s position, his loyalty, and the possibility of him being a traitor to the cause.

Baba seeks recognition from the settler’s gaze, which is posited as Baba’s Ideal-I. Gabby and Yuval possess what Baba lacks—the phallic signifiers of power and authority. When observing Baba’s pride in the authority he thinks he enjoys in the settlement, Butterfly sees through Baba’s fantasy which she knows will never be permitted simply because Baba is the subservient other, a profitable tool and an object of exploitation. Butterfly’s acute remark proves to be true. Baba’s fantasy and pursuit of wholeness is soon crushed by the unlimited agency and callousness of Yuval and Gabby. Butterfly notes:

Gabby and Yuval had deserted my father. In fact, Yuval had accused him of being behind the culprit, if not actually being the culprit himself. As for Gabby, who received compensation for the dead grapevines from the Israeli government, he totally ignored the years of devoted, loyal service my father had given to his farm.

(76)

Baba is treated as an accessory for “a struggle going on among the various farm owners on the settlements” (76). He realises he can never be allowed to inhabit the idealised image of authority and agency. He is a mere object of a pejorative, racist gaze that perceives all Palestinians as “the external cause of Israel’s troubles, menacing its national integrity; they are cast as an unending source of anxiety, the ultimate menace to Israelis’ enjoyment and global image” (Zalloua 2021a, 6). Capitalist struggle and economic relations are displaced onto the figure of the Palestinian who is the source of all ills in the Zionist ideological fantasy. Instead of remembering his dedication to his work and his unfailing nurturing of their trees, he becomes the phobic object who must be expunged. Baba is jailed for six months after both Gabby and Yuval “deserted” him. Baba’s

maltreatment by his bosses—“how fast [they] have forgotten what a dedicated worker [he] was all those years” (77)—shatters Baba’s illusion of vitality, unification, control, and agency and returns him to a state of fragmentation, vulnerability, and lack.

Following Baba’s release from jail, jobless and unable to provide for his family, Butterfly sees that behind “that good-natured smile of his, his face looked dejected and gaunt. His eyes were sunken [...] while his hands bore the tell-tale signs of the hardship he’d endured on our stolen land” (77). The racism Baba encounters from Yuval and Gaby forces him to question himself, traps him in a vicious cycle of shame and self-doubt. “It was hard” Butterfly admits, “to imagine that he also had questions without answers” (77). He is left with a wounded soul and is forced again to internalise inferiority by occupying the place of the suspicious other and the object of hatred and aggression. He becomes, to invoke Fanon’s (1961/1963) powerful words here, “the corrosive element, destroying all that comes near him; he is the deforming element, disfiguring all that has to do with beauty or morality” (41).

After Baba’s exclusion, the family’s economic situation severely deteriorates. They go back to lighting “the traditional Kanoun stove” using “dried grapevine branches” to warm the house after they “had to stop using the electric heater” (80). Baba becomes a shepherd of sheep “that weren’t for us to eat” because he “didn’t know how to do any other kind of work” (80). Although he tries to appear collected in front of his children, comforting them by assuring them that they “won’t go hungry” because Palestinian mountains “are still bountiful” (81), witnessing his hidden pain and their circumstances is too painful for Butterfly to accept. She develops an unconscious aversion to grapes and an intolerable feeling of bitterness whenever she eats them. Avoiding them is a normal response to witnessing Baba’s humiliation as it becomes her defence mechanism against re-experiencing the same painful emotions she has felt then.

As a result of the inability to work through the negative emotions and traumatic events, anger piles up inside of her. Anger turns into a strong wishful desire to burn down the houses in the rapidly expanding settlement. She imagines them “made of colourful match-boxes” which can be set on fire “with the strike of one little match” (86). Butterfly’s resentment should not be pathologised. It is an understandable socio-psychological reaction to oppression, to the daily terror of a destitute people, and to the tragedies she, and young people like her, are forced to witness from a very young age. The army of the occupation leave them feeling “miserable” (51), susceptible to various psychological disturbances and unable to “sleep because of their nightmares. It happens to Palestinian kids all the time” (49). What image of the Jewish Israeli other would her cousin Little Salem, who tries at Nizar’s funeral to “smile like Nizar, but ended up crying like everybody else” (84) develop? As the novel demonstrates, the paranoid fear of the other, including hatred and aggression, is the effect of, as Fanon (1961/1963) argues, “a systemized negation of the other, a frenzied determination to deny the other any attribute of humanity” (182). Butterfly’s anger is not innate. She was neither raised by parents who fostered racial othering of the settler living on the opposite hill, nor had she been encouraged by her religion teacher to hate and discriminate when Butterfly and her classmates ask if it is acceptable for a Palestinian to steal from an Israeli Jew in the same way they confiscate Palestinian land, appropriate their cultural heritage, and deny their history.

Bearing witness to daily traumatic events—Baba’s imprisonment and humiliation, the killing of Nizar, her uncles, Jawhar and others she knew, in addition to orphaning children like her cousin Salem—Butterfly, like all Palestinians, expects the worst from a system that deliberately maintains their vulnerability. Weakening the Palestinian ego, especially that of children, facilitates Israel’s control over Palestinian bodies and their material and psychic life. It also feeds a hostile imaginary which, as Zalloua (2021b) argues, perceives the actions of Palestinians (violent, terrorist

acts and hatred) as emanating “naturally or unprovoked from Palestinian bodies,” an image that helps position “Israel as the aggrieved party, whose grossly disproportioned acts of violence are ideologically reframed as defensive and thus justified” (283). Regardless of how committed Baba has been to his job, in the Zionist imaginary, a Palestinian is essentially paranoid and intolerant of Jewish existence, hence, cannot be trusted in the process of making “permanent and meaningful peace” (283).

Redefining the Performative

Through Baba’s experience, Bsharat challenges a masculinity that still stages liberation as “a transaction between men over the honour of a woman-mother whose ownership passes through paternity” (Massad 1995, 473). Yet, at the same time, she exposes the theatricality of the ‘unchallenged’ power of the Israeli occupation, exposing it to be, like masculinity, performative. In two different places, Butterfly describes the settlement in a way that centres its staged, unnatural and unreal presence on Palestinian land. Looking down toward the settlement at the foot of the hill, she observes: “The settlement was neat and tidy, like the towns you see in cartoons. The houses with their red terracotta roof tiles were all the same size and the same distance apart, with green trees all around them. They were beautiful, and yet I didn’t like them at all—they made me feel scared” (28). On another occasion, she compares the settlement to “colourful match-boxes” (86) and to a “city of boxes” (89). The settlement is described by Butterfly as an illusion, as part of Israel’s agenda to legitimise and naturalise its presence by maintaining the fantasy of wholeness. Her “shrewd” (69) nuanced observations penetrate the reality of the occupation, opening up a space for the disposable voices like hers to undermine the state’s hegemony as being fantasy and illusion. It is an artificiality, constructed and maintained in the same way the settlements are, by excluding and marginalising Palestinians. Flying over the settlement as a free butterfly proves the power of a Palestinian imagination to erupt through the gaps in the Symbolic reality of the Other that is

“inconsistent, porous, perforated” (Žižek 1989, 138), showing that “the Other is no longer a complete mechanism that controls me: I can exploit its inconsistencies, play the Other against itself” (Žižek 2017, 458). Butterfly’s imaginative flight over the settlement is a political act par excellence. It exposes the vulnerability of the settler colonial project exemplified by the expanding settlements. The subversive employment of her imagination manifests as a call for a new limitless political imagination that may enable Palestine’s new generation to rebel against the status quo, and to re-write the oppressive reality and hence politically undo, as Gil Hochberg (2021) argues, “the colonial order and its replacement with an altogether different future” (27).

Re-conceptualising the ‘unquestioned’ relationship between gender and nationalism can be one way to achieve radical transformation in the Palestinian anti-colonial struggle in ways that can open it up to its universal dimension, to the negative at the core of each exclusivist identity. Change is not farfetched the novel suggests. As long as young people learn how to fight for what they believe in, and critically engage with their reality until their treasure chest explodes, there is still a possibility to imagine a new Palestinian reality—a reality where boys and girls do not have to go out on marches (Bsharat 2016, 70), where they don’t have to “prove they are children” (60) and where they do not feel, like Butterfly, “dejected...even older than the school principal” (78). This suggested path to true liberation, the one the novel promotes, is an arduous one given the occupation’s strangulating measures against Palestinians. As long as these remain, a commitment to a hegemonic (patriarchal) Symbolic which reinforces phantasmatic images of coherence, authority, and vitality will be hard to break down.

Bsharat maintains in *Butterfly* an optimistic tone, especially in her representation of young Butterfly and her wilful disobedience of her Symbolic order. However, this sense of optimism disappears in *Trees for the Absentees* in order to speak of ambivalent and rather pessoptimistic outlook toward the viability of a better future. It exposes the current socio-political paralysis and its

repercussions on young adults who find themselves torn between subjective desires and expected commitment to the collective. The shift from *Codename: Butterfly* to *Trees for the Absentees* parallels the broader transition this thesis outlines—from a sense of defiance and hope to a post-*sumud* sensibility marked by ambivalence. In *Butterfly*, the protagonist still flirts with defiance, dreams, and transformation, even if bitterly or as force of imagination. But by *Trees*, like Kashua's later fiction, the protagonist can no longer imagine a future outside loss. This tonal and affective shift illustrates the generational psychic toll. Baba's humiliation foreshadows the deep psychic fractures in *Trees*, where even inherited symbols of resilience seem insufficient to bear the weight of present despair.

Trees compellingly brings to the forefront the following crucial questions which the following chapter will address: What options do young Palestinians have in the face of a profound despair and defeat? With the increasingly dire outlook for a meaningful solution to end the cycle of violence and suffering, can young Palestinians find refuge in the visual field of the Imaginary—fantasy, colours, dreams, hallucinations and so on—the way *Butterfly* suggests without having to ultimately confront the Symbolic, or be forced to dissociate completely from reality? In other words, how does one endure an endless oppression?

CHAPTER FIVE

“When Things Don’t Make Sense Anymore”: ‘Post-*sumud*’ Sensibilities and the New Generation’s Ruptured Reality in Ahlam Bsharat’s *Trees for the Absentees*

This chapter argues that Ahlam Bsharat’s Young Adult novel *Trees for the Absentees* (2019; Arabic, *Ashjār li-l-nās al-ghā’ibīn*, 2013) explores post-*sumud* sensibilities as an integral part of the current fractured political landscape. The novel successfully probes the burdening weight of an enduring struggle, fragmentation, and incoherent social reality on a subjectivity in the process of becoming. It shows how such a subjectivity comes into existence on the basis of double repression: the screening of negative affects such as pain, grief, psychic injuries, and other narcissistic vulnerabilities in order to maintain the ordinary and the seeming coherence of the collectivity; and the repression of personal desires in visualising an identity beyond the parameters of *sumud*, resistance, trauma, and occupation. I contend that the text demonstrates how this inability to separate from the Other—the arbitrary laws of the settler colonial regime, national ideologies, exclusivist identities, and collective memories—creates individuals who are fractured, isolated, and lost in a jarring sense of alienation and melancholic despair. The new generation, the novel shows, is deprived of the capacity, as Nadia Bou Ali (2004) argues, “to utter any desire beyond that of their identity as it has been fashioned by and in the occupation” (96). This type of psychic dispossession is one of the cruellest faces of dispossession wherein the subject fails to separate from the Other but remains entangled within its demands, fulfilling its desires rather than her own.

Trees for the Absentees narrates the coming-of-age journey of its young protagonist and narrator Philistia, a girl from the village of Deir Sabra near the city of Nablus in the West Bank, whose father is jailed in an Israeli prison. As a result of the father’s incarceration, Philistia embarks on a journey not of her choice as much as it is of the social and political circumstances that force her to find refuge in a world she creates in her head and in her job at the hammam (a Turkish bath).

She becomes responsible for “scrubbing, unresisting bodies” (17) of women who “came to the bath house to start a new chapter in their lives” (24). Washing “unresisting” bodies is not something new to Philistia. Indeed, she learns how to wash bodies and corpses delicately and compassionately from her paternal grandmother, Grandma Zahia. The latter had before her death played an “historical role” in the village’s life, being its midwife and corpse washer (20). Philistia has accompanied Grandma Zahia since she was just a child learning about issues pertaining to the truth about the existentiality of being, life and death, ablutionary rituals, and most importantly the naked body that reveals its secrets to the compassionate touch and the “blind eye” (20) that sees but does not judge, nor discriminates. Philistia’s job at the hammam allows her to follow in Grandma Zahia’s footsteps, to commemorate her memory, and to re-connect with her “ghostly image [which] appeared on the wall above the large tiles that the water splashes against” (40).

When her Symbolic reality fails to appease the anxieties that arise from a trauma rooted in the ordinary (life after the imprisonment of her father), Philistia retreats into the Imaginary, a fantasy-laden world of dreams, myths, and hallucinations. This movement into the Imaginary echoes the psychic strategies found in Kashua’s *Track Changes*. Both Saeed and Philistia seek psychic refuge from a reality that is no longer meaningful: Saeed through his compulsive editing of memory and ghost-writing, and Philistia through her spectral encounters and the world of the dead.

This retreat into fantasy is not merely an escape, but a coping mechanism shaped by the gendered and collective pressures placed on her in the aftermath of her father’s absence. Fantasy enables her to neutralise the monstrosity of the traumatic absence of her father. Indeed, the father’s incarceration has placed heavy expectations on the family to adhere to societal and national codes. In the absence of a patriarchal figure, it becomes the responsibility of the extended paternal family and community as a whole to ‘protect’ his honour and perpetuate the patriarchal power now under threat by the father’s absence. Her father’s sister, Auntie Mariam, criticises Philistia on

multiple occasions for wanting to live a normal life. Philistia complains that Auntie Mariam “tut-tutted about how I was going to the salon while my dad is in prison—as though it were something shameful!” (55). This also explains Auntie Mariam’s anger when Philistia, with her mother’s support and her friend Fathia’s help, and after having obtained her father’s approval, finds a job at a hammam in Nablus, on the basis that it is morally inappropriate and shameful for a daughter of a heroic figure to be exposed to women’s naked bodies.

In a conservative village community, Philistia’s financial freedom is perceived as a challenge to traditional gender roles and societal expectations of the father/man as the primary breadwinner in the Palestinian family.⁵¹ Her financial freedom, coupled with the fear of some moral corruption from being exposed to naked bodies, are both seen as repulsive acts. As bearers of “cultural authenticity,” opposing the traditional positions assigned to women which are, as Tina Sherwell (2003) argues, “dressed up within the national discourse as part of the nation's essential identity (which [is] under threat) ... would render women anti-nationalists” (250). Philistia is not any young Palestinian woman; she is the daughter of a political prisoner who stands in the national discourse as an icon of the national struggle and *sumud*. Going against the assigned image implies a betrayal of the collective and the political project for which her father has sacrificed his freedom. The societal pressure to ‘heroically’ endure the traumatic absence of the father and to set an example of strength through his detention induces the feeling of guilt whenever the desire to live happily surfaces. She currently bears the brunt of incarceration and the brutality of an ongoing conflict at large. Suppressing her own desires and any feelings she wishes to express freely and fearlessly becomes an uncompromising patriotic duty.

⁵¹ For further discussion on masculinity and gender-based roles within Palestinian society, see Hamamra 2020; Richter-Devroe 2011; Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2009

The main events of the protagonist's journey unfold in an Imaginary pre-Symbolic, pre-linguistic, timeless space between birth and death, past and present, silence and speech—a fluid space which recalls Julia Kristeva's "Semiotic chora." Such a space, Kristeva (1978) writes, comes before "any mirror shows [the infant] any representation whatsoever, before any language begins to encode his ""idealities"" ... prior to the sign" and "the closure of meaning" (102). Struggling to cohere a sense of self, Philistia creates a space that allows her to do so by recovering the maternal body to substitute her phallic, war-driven Symbolic reality. In place of the language of violence and prohibitions, she resorts to the tactile, to the compassionate touch that "has the potential to disrupt, subvert, and displace the paternal law" (Butler 1989, 105). This quest for an alternative (feminine) language mirrors Philistia's disappointment with the identity she is expected to assume—a performative identity embedded in signifiers that bind her to ideals and expectations. Her escape speaks of a wish to evade an evacuated identity that chains her to her being as Palestinian under occupation and to her body as female subject in a conservative masculine society.

The novel speaks of a strong desire to move beyond the moment, yet it fails to actualise it outside the realm of fantasy and imagination. Philistia's attempts fall short when the journey cannot escape the maddening reality it is a product of—a reality where suffering is not an event, but an ongoing traumatic experience. This failure reveals the same impasse that, as I argue throughout this thesis, lies at the core of Palestinian subjectivity. It is caused by an internal tension between two irreconcilable forces: first, the desire to transcend the monolithic identity imposed on Palestinians by locating the self within the tapestry of shared human struggles, experiences, and desires; second, an unspoken collective acknowledgment that in the face of impending threats of erasure, escaping the confines of the (national and collective) Symbolic is an implausible wish to fulfil, and exists only within the realm of fantasy.

A Universality of Being or a Wounded Reality?

Following Grandma Zahia's death, and her new job at the hammam, Philistia begins to see herself in a recurring dream accompanied by Grandma Zahia in a heaven-like place where women of all statuses, "the deceased, the spinsters, the depressed...the ones who've miscarried, the ones who are misjudged, the happy, the beautiful, the ones who want to be happy and beautiful," are dancing joyously in a "cascading water" (37). Describing this liberating dream, Philistia says:

I had begun to dream almost every day of naked flesh, stretched out, and of me pouring water on to the body from a metal jug. And as time went by, the water flowing from the spout of the jug transformed into a cascading waterfall or a spring where water dripped from a crack in the rock, like tears emerging between the eyelashes of a closed eye. I started to dream of old women dancing with newborn babies in the cascading water, all naked. And my task, together with Grandma Zahia, was to oversee this ritual dance of babies and grown women. (21)

By assuming Grandma Zahia's role, Philistia imagines herself becoming the light in the darkness of the life of women who come to the hammam to have something new. As the overseer who fixes women's burdens and guarantees their happiness, Philistia vicariously compensates for the desire to have her fractured life fixed and under control. The fantasy dream juxtaposes cyclical images of life and death, weaving endings with beginnings, and old age with youth. It invokes a sense of continuity across generations, rebirth, and new beginnings. The dream, in a Kristevian sense, is an upheaval that comes about as eruption of "the semiotic rhythm" (Kristeva 1980, 32). Its time frame is a "future anterior" that suspends the present and "evokes a later time, that is, a forever" (32). The Imaginary and nostalgic site of identification with a pre-Symbolic maternal realm of rhythms, movements, laughter, bodily fluids, flowing water, and naked bodies which the fantasy dream

appeals to grants Philistia access to a fantasised vision of a future that is excluded from her barren reality, and is accessible only through this fantasy dream.

The humanist dimension that is embedded in Philistia's dream is established in the novel's representation of the naked body and the language of touch. In the creative world that Philistia imagines, "even if it contradicted all standard measures of what was real" (83), she recognises the possibility of a different future, a different existence embodied in both the naked body and her vision of the hammam as a womb-like space that provides women with utmost satisfaction. The hammam becomes a metaphor for the early encounter with the maternal body when babies and women dance in "a cascading waterfall or a spring ... like tears emerging between the eyelashes of a closed eye" (21). Water as a recurring motif in the novel is linked to the oceanic state of being that precedes the creation of all symbolic and imaginary boundaries. It represents the fluid feminine (non-phallic) alternative to language. Philistia learns early on from Grandma Zahia that the naked body is an inscribed text, and the role of the compassionate touch is to decode its secret. Touch resurfaces as a medium through which connections with others can be established. It helps fill a void left by the absence of such intimacy in Philistia's material reality. Through touch, a profound feminine affinity is forged, transcending the trappings of exclusivist and gendered identities and revealing the fundamental human core that is shared by all.

Stripped of the veneer of identity, bodies become indistinguishable under the non-discriminatory embrace of that touch. Touch emerges as an alternative to the language of exclusivity and division, the (phallic) language of war and violence—offering a pathway to construct an identity that is not rooted in national or exclusionary narratives, but in the universal experience of being human. The naked flesh and the language of touch parallel Philistia and her generation's unfulfilled wish to break the shackles of all sorts of identities, especially the ones that exclude, other, and oppress, be it the social or the political. Creating her ideal world in the hammam

where she can scrub women's bodies enables her to fulfil an overwhelming desire to rid the body of the toxins of discriminatory discourses, to open up the possibility of blending together the lived experiences of all people, particularly of those who suffer on the fringes of humanity and whose stories do not take centre stage in dominant narratives.

Washing bodies obsessively (both dead and alive) serves as a symbolic substitution for an impossible desire to wash her stunted 'unclean' present in which the internal world of Palestinian youth and children, like her, is constantly violated, and where any hope for a liveable future to look forward to is eliminated. Corpse washing is a sublimation of death in a context where death is a prevailing everyday horror, and where "even in their death [Palestinians] cannot escape the Zionist co-optation of their subjectivity" (Bou Ali 2024, 94). The act stands against the colonial logic of elimination that marks the Palestinian body as abject, subhuman and unmournable. Philistia's emphasis on the sanctity of bodies and on the need for a compassionate touch are all unconscious attempts to reintegrate the Palestinian body and the Palestinian (othered) self, dead and alive, back into the realm of the human, and the mournable body.

The humanist alternative to a brutal reality that Philistia dreams of can be obtained, the novel shows, if people reconcile with the traumatic facts of life—the trauma of birth and death—that binds them together as humans regardless of differences and affiliations. In a vignette titled "The Light," Bsharat shifts the focus from the particularities of the Palestinian historical and ongoing trauma onto the transhistorical/existential trauma—the trauma of birth and to the universal human conditions. She situates Philistia's journey within a shared human experience. Philistia beautifully imagines the journey of subjectivisation, the universal story of how we find our place in society. It begins with the trauma of birth: the moment we descend from "that other world" (6) which Philistia pictures as a celestial place of light, and to which she aspires throughout her narrative to re-find and re-create on the assumption that it was once there, then lost, and hence can

be remembered and retrieved. She describes it as a blissful state of wholeness that preceded identities and rigid Symbolic laws, desires, prohibitions and boundaries. That imaginary heavenly realm shelters “brand-new babies, with ruddy cheeks and on their back ornate wings, which folded at their sides. Their wings fluttered as they descended from heaven. They were like plump birds spreading their wings and laughing. They each carried a burning torch” (7). The rich sensory images mirror a desire to return to a pre-Symbolic state of being, to the idyllic safe space of her recurring dream which undoubtedly stands in stark contrast with the “the darkness of life” (7) those babies are later dragged into. Encountering the Symbolic law and the irretrievability of the heavenly pre-Symbolic state create a reality which she describes as “no different from a dead creature: grotesque and putrid with a smell that carries a reminder of all your old fears” (17).

In the second vignette, “The Cat’s Got my Tongue,” the story shifts to describe what initially resembles any story of becoming: the protagonist’s journey from the innocence of childhood into the real world of challenges. Philistia’s decision to leave her home and to work in Nablus despite the disapproval of her paternal family at first is no different to any young adult journey of maturation, and of finding one’s place in society, or as she describes it, one’s own “light” in the world. She leaves the threshold of girlhood and forgoes the safety clinging to “the hem of Mom’s dress” or “her neck” offers only to experience “the mounting fear and anxiety” (15) of being lost in “an unfamiliar place, a new context” (13). She aspires for a new beginning where she can carry her own light all by herself in “the great harsh city” (16) of adolescence. Philistia’s mother “was all of a sudden ready to throw [her] to an unknown fate among people [she] didn’t know in a huge, strange city” (16). Philistia who desires to prove that she is no longer a child, realises soon that she “was just a girl with no idea about life who woke up one day and said, ‘I will carry my own light’” (16). The “long road” she “wished would never end,” the one leading to the

hammam which she walks for the first time with her mother squeezing her hand, eventually ends, and the hand “shatter[s] like glass, shards of [it] penetrating into her flesh” (17).

While the violent image of the shattered glass penetrating the flesh can signify the end of childhood and the beginning of her journey of maturation, it also invites a different reading, one that is more attuned to the ruptured reality she is forced to navigate. The end of the road and the shattering of the hands is the novel’s turning point and the collapse of Bsharat’s futile attempt at universalising her protagonist’s internal and external conflicts. It collapses like the violent image of the shattered glass hand, preparing for a fragmented subjectivity and shattered futurity—insecure, uncontrollable and unpredictable. Like broken glass, the loss endured is irreparable. The sharp splinters of the ongoing trauma pierce violently through the Palestinian body that is already “covered in little scratches” (66) creating “a wound that spans [the] entire body. It stretches from top to bottom like [the] spine” (66). Trauma is a wound, Cathy Caruth (2016) writes following Sigmund Freud, “a breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world” (3-4). The Palestinian wound, however, problematises a straightforward Freudian-Caruthian contemplation of trauma as a singular unassimilable event manifesting belatedly through symptomatic disruptions of body and mind.⁵² The wound of “defeat” as referred to by Philistia’s friend Fathia, is given to Philistia, Fathia, and all Palestinian children to handle when, to use Judith Butler’s (2004) words, “it is too large for the child, when it is too large for the adult, when the loss is trauma, and cannot be handled by anyone, anywhere, where the loss signifies what we cannot master”(96-7). It is a recurring unhealable wound that extends like the spine from conception to death, and from one generation to the next; it penetrates deep into the familiar, disturbing the most intimate spaces of life—a wound that has been made to be the Palestinian ordinary.

⁵² For a discussion on the omission of the Palestinian Nakba from trauma studies, see Rosemary Sayigh, “On the Exclusion of the Palestinian Nakba from the ‘Trauma Genre’” (2013).

Philistia's obsession with the naked body stretched before her eyes slowly unfolds as an unspoken desire to resolve the trauma of loss which she witnesses and endures from a young age. Her father's imprisonment, his absence from young Philistia's life and that of her siblings, creates a rift in her material reality, especially when Grandma Zahia who has acted as Philistia's symbolic anchor in the absence of her father passes away. Touching bodies becomes an alternative to the bodies that she cannot touch, nor say goodbye to. In a vignette titled "The Real World and the Imaginary World," Philistia acknowledges that:

at the hammam where it was my job to bathe the living, was no different from what used to happen in the room where we washed the dead. If I can turn living people into corpses, then what's to stop me from bringing corpses back to life? They are our loved ones, as Grandma Zahia used to say, and we mustn't lose hope in their continued existence and everlasting presence, even if they depart from us physically and no longer share our life. (23-4)

Trees focuses on the cyclical nature of the wounding of Palestinian children in general, and children of prisoners, in particular, whose suffering is not often highlighted, nor publicly acknowledged. The trauma the reader bears witness to is one that is muted; it is a grief that finds no place in the Palestinian language of *sumud* and must be kept hidden "to sustain the aspiration of the ordinary during ongoing conflict" and to maintain an image that is exemplary for the Palestinian collective (Buch Segal 2015, 31). The demand to suppress grief under the ethos of *sumud* is described in the novel as the suspension of the senses. The adaptation to "monotony and repetition" Philistia says, "meant my senses adapted; things seemed normal here that wouldn't seem normal outside" (4). The senses adapt to the unfamiliar, become desensitised to the chaotic disruptions of recurring traumatic experiences. Monotony gradually normalises the abnormal as it is integrated into the ordinary.

Philistia is driven by the urge to escape this ruptured reality, the constraints and demands of the national and collective authority to which she is expected to answer. The unresolved conflict between her subjective desires and that of the collective informs her decision to “get rid of [herself]” and turn into someone who does not hear, does not see, and does not speak (61). She chooses silence and becomes the girl whose tongue, as her mother jokingly tells Philistia’s employer Umm Walid, was eaten by the cat. Philistia learns that she is not permitted to voice her frustration over the absence of her father. Allowing “doubt as to the national project of becoming to seep into the social structure” (Buch Segal 2016b, 42) would mean the betrayal of her father as the stand-in for Palestinian *sumud* and sacrifice.

Philistia is not only pressured by her social position. She is as well a captive of a name that evokes a history, claims a land, and establishes an identity that is deeply rooted in an ancient past. She is named by her father after her country and the first indigenous people, the Philistines—who lived on the land preceding all Israel/Palestinian conflict over names and ownership. Philistia is from birth transformed into a signifier of a collective nostalgia to return to a glorious past, to the land of the Philistines that has been taken away. Her father’s choice of name, Philistia, rather than the common name Filasṭīn (which is the Arabic spelling for Palestine) is part of a Palestinian melancholic attachment to a glorious past and the resistance against the loss and erasure of the land’s indigenous identity—one that dates back to antiquity. The act of space naming in the Palestinian-Israeli context, as Massad (2006) argues, is a means of historicising it. It functions “as locating in history, as temporalizing, and ultimately, as asserting power as colonial domination or as anticolonial resistance” (14). The name Philistia establishes an historical continuity and evokes memories of a blissful past— memories that screen the incoherencies of the present, the ongoing injustices, and the growing sense of fragmented Palestinian self. It also responds to how naming and history have been used by Palestinians as weapons in their struggle “to affirm the authenticity of

their national identity and the depth of their roots” (Litvak 2015, 38). This melancholia is, as Nouri Gana (2023) contends, “a commitment to freedom from injustice in a postcolonial colonial context of compromised dignity and lost sovereignty” (38).

However, Philistia is also a name with different connotative meanings and debatable historical truths. It also means the land of the strangers, who, as the Israeli historian Benny Morris (2005) claims, were exiled and vanished from history following the Babylonian conquest in 586 B.C. Philistia, therefore, becomes the epitome of the two conflicting narratives, a paradox that prepares for a subjectivity at an impasse. She is torn between her duty as a daughter of a heroic figure of resistance and steadfastness, and the psychic energy required to persistently tolerate disappointments, false hopes, and the maddening conditions of life under occupation.

With the father’s absence and Grandma Zahia’s death, Philistia’s sense of self begins to disintegrate. In her head, the world is reduced to a site of horror, materialising “as a tumultuous sea of crashing waves and emerging from the water was a monstrous fish with human legs and heads dangling from its blood-coloured fangs” (82). This nightmarish statement is loaded with grotesque and disturbing imagery which, I contend, reflects the overwhelming nature of a prolonged trauma on the psyche of young Palestinians which requires them, as Philistia tells her friend Fathia, to learn to “make sense of things early” and “about a lot of things that don’t make any sense” (67). Philistia describes the world they inhabit as “a tumultuous sea” implying its rupture, instability, and inadequacy as a framework of structured systems and coherent meaning. Like “the monstrous fish” emerging violently and abruptly from the water, the (re)emergence of trauma threatens to shatter the seeming coherence of the self and one’s relationship with the world. The uncanny image of dismembered human bodily parts attached to a blood-thirsty fish represents the horrifying nature of the human and the familiar. What should have been the source of stability and coherence breaks down to reveal its most horrifying form. The fragmented body speaks of the detachment from parts

of the self that are perceived by the subject to be monstrously alien. In other words, it is an image that reflects the fragmentation of the self when placed under the pressure of a trauma that is not an event. Its repetitive nature is disruptive and consuming. It shatters the clear demarcations between self (in its human form) and other (the grotesque blood thirsty fish), and between what is real and what is imagined.

Philistia acknowledges that “[s]ometimes the worlds merged in the cupboard of my mind: reality was my imagination, and my imagination was reality” (4). The conflation between the real and the imagined—between reality and fantasy—is symptomatic of Philistia’s repressed anxiety of being consumed by a ‘putrid’ reality that is incomprehensible, unpredictable, and chaotic. Philistia, therefore, decides to “keep [her] hands firmly over [her] eyes for as long as [she] could” (82). The hand is a metaphor for the need to find a protective screen behind which she can hide all her fears. The symbolic significance of the hand as a protective buffer against trauma, manifests in two ways: first in the alternative realm of comforting fantasies and affectionate imaginings; and second in a screen memory captured in a framed picture she has of herself squeezed between her father and Grandma Zahia, and where he, with a “moustache”—a symbol of masculinity and strength—is laughing like “the rays of the sunshine” (52). In one of the letters to her father, she tells him: “You can see the rays of sunshine in the picture and you’re laughing—your moustache is hovering on its own over your mouth. You’re wearing your dark blue denim jacket and light blue jeans. Grandma has a smile on her face, and you and I are laughing” (52).

This colourful framed memory describes an idyllic scene—sunshine, warmth, laughter, smiles—which Philistia fixates on to avoid a psychically tormenting confrontation with the reality of the father’s current state in an Israeli prison. The father with a moustache hovering over his mouth when laughing is now confined to a space of castration, complete paralysis, and dark unfulfilled dreams. Because Philistia fails to endure the disappointing, inadequate reality as it is, she

clings to a memory from the past to mask and compensate for a reality that is evacuated of any meaning. The framed picture is established as “a fantasy-construct filling out a certain void in a symbolic structure” (Žižek 1989, 169). It functions as a mirror through which she believes she can achieve a unified self to counteract the tormenting sense of fragmentation and lack. “The photograph” writes Avery Gordon (2008), “has an enormous power to ‘give people an imaginary possession of’ an ‘unreal’ past or present” (104). It is as Barthes (1981/2000) argues “fantasmatic, deriving from a kind of second sight which seems to bear me forward to a Utopian time, or to carry me back to somewhere in myself” (40). Between time in the ‘here’ where terror, dispossession, and pain reign supreme, the picture alludes to somewhere else, to a ‘there’, a second sight, a “blind spot” (Gordon 2008, xvi), to utopian time “where that I imagine for my future ... The longing to inhabit carries me forward and back, from force to hand to face” (Gordon 109).

The Fractured Material Reality and the Imaginary Screen

To compensate for lack of control over the details of her life, to find the light in the darkness, Philistia resorts to the only place nobody else has “touched it, or smelled it, or tasted it”—the Imaginary. The Imaginary refuge becomes a necessary mechanism to protect the ego from an inevitable collapse under mounting pressures and symbolic paralysis when life becomes too enigmatic for her young psyche to comprehend. Philistia’s fantasy-laden world is crucial to channel negative energies, and the anxiety that is generated by the possibility of losing the sense of security she associates with her father and Grandma Zahia. She confesses to her father in one of her letters to him: “how afraid I am of being left as a single light all alone. And I reassured him that although he wasn’t here, his light was still with me. Sometimes it faded, but it never went out” (8). The light represents those memories of the absentees who are no longer present in Philistia’s real world. Their absence as she admits leaves “a void in time” (63), “an inert stain resisting communication and interpretation” (Žižek 1989, 75).

Philistia turns the hammam into the flip side of the reality she views as “hostile, unknown world, a disappointing one” (6). She uses her imagination to transform it into “a laughter market” simply because she “didn’t want to be sad” (2). She creates a place that becomes too “ordinary,” too “dull” and “familiar” (4) so her senses can adapt to circumstances she can control as long as they are in her head. She creates a world in which what she does and what takes place is monotonous and repetitive. Imaginative escapes can quiet the disturbances and disruptions of the Real of trauma and provide a sense of hope that there is still a way for her to envision a different reality where “not even the Israeli occupiers, would be able to demolish our house as long as it was built in our imagination” (77). However, the more Philistia is immersed in her imagined world in the hammam, the more her dissociation from reality intensifies until the boundaries between what is imagined and what is real merge (4). The “[n]ight in the real world [becomes] clearer than day in the world that’s in [her] head” (33), her friend Fathia concernedly tells her.

Philistia’s escapes, her identification with the naked body in its wholeness, turn her into a captive of the shadows as her friend Fathia puts it from which she cannot liberate herself (32). The walls of the hammam, which she imagines to be her refuge from the crashing waves of her fragmented reality become the site where trauma keeps being compulsively played out in an attempt not only to comprehend the absence of hope in the darkness of the world she inhabits, but to retrieve a state of an imagined happiness she thinks she has enjoyed as a child when her father and grandmother were still present. The anxiety about the loss of the memory of the absentees triggers the spectral encounters in the novel, particularly between Philistia and Bayrakdar—a ghost of a Palestinian adolescent who she starts to see in the hammam in the same spot the ghost of her grandmother used to appear. Bayrakdar’s father and grandfather fought against the Ottoman Empire and the British Mandate, which resulted in his father’s imprisonment. The creation of Bayrakdar whose life story is very much like hers is a projection of a self that is overshadowed by the language

of the heroic struggle. It is a self that perceives itself as invisible, unseen, and unreal, an extension of the desire of the national Other performing a role, as Philistia says, that is not hers. She remarks: “I imagined that everything I was doing was a role assigned to me in a recurring dream that constantly came to me in my sleep” (21).

The repetitive instances of spectral encounters speak of an estrangement from the self and its familiar surroundings. It is “when home becomes unfamiliar, when your bearings on the world lose direction... when what’s been in your blind spot comes into view” (Gordon 2008, xvi). Bayrakdar, who appears to Philistia as a spectral projection of a self-overshadowed by heroic narratives, resonates powerfully with the ghosted presence of Kashua’s protagonists, particularly Saeed in *Track Changes*. These figures are structured around the impossibility of a redemptive closure. Saeed, for example, erases himself through narrative while Bayrakdar emerges as a haunting of what Philistia is expected to be. Where Saeed writes in order to avoid the unbearable shame of memory, Bayrakdar appears as memory’s residue: a figure who cannot be integrated, buried, or forgotten. Philistia’s affective link to Bayrakdar mirrors Saeed’s fragmented attachment to his past, and in both cases, the self is rendered ghost-like, trapped in a script they did not write.

Like Saeed’s, Philistia’s world becomes a haunted place, a place full of ghosts, unpaid debts and unanswered calls. The ghostly instances in the narrative, the self as invisible, the blurred boundaries between the fantastical and the familiar, raise questions about whether the novel suggests that survival in Palestine and the maintenance of the Palestinian collective project cannot carry on without the danger of madness and detachment from the self. Sustaining the dream is a madness that requires from Philistia and her generation to throw their senses off, “to [get] rid of [themselves],” to “toss [their] senses over [their] shoulder like [they are] throwing [themselves] away, so [they] can sleepwalk through [their] dream” (61). Does the novel suggest that one need to

be unreal, like Bayrakdar, or to live in the “shadows” like Philistia, to be able to cope with recurring psychic wrecking experiences and an unending suffering?

The novel climaxes as Philistia’s fantasised world crumbles down when she spots from Fathia’s balcony that overlooks Al-Junaid prison—a Palestinian prison in the city of Nablus—a prisoner walking near the fence of the prison. This encounter leads to the return of the repressed memory of her father suffering in an Israeli prison. It is the image of a castrated father that she tries to screen by obsessing over the framed picture. The more she tries to forget, the clearer the image of her father becomes: “I ran and ran, and all I could think of was Dad” (7). When her friend Fatima recommends that she liberate herself and leave the village behind, Philistia responds: “And my dad—what would become of him if I left the village behind?” (29). Philistia’s response shows her fear that leaving the village, which symbolises binding social demands and national obligations, would betray her father and the ideal he represents.

Philistia drowns in the silence of the hammam in the second half of the narrative. She vanishes inside herself, in her imagined world in a futile attempt to avoid a confrontation with her “old fears” (17). Yet, they return to haunt her the way they haunt all Palestinians. It is the Palestinian fear of a future in which Palestine will be just “a sign,” merely a “name” referring to a place in its very absence (44). Philistia eventually discovers that “naked bodies” of Palestinian babies and women are at the end never completely naked. They are covered with the little scratches of every disappointment, defeat, and pain inflicted upon them whether by the Israeli occupation or the unjust social demands. No matter how much she scrubs the body, the wound is deeply engraved beneath the visible layer of resilience and resistance. While consoling her friend Fathia who bursts into tears under the shady tree, Philistia looks in the distance and imagines:

A landscape of hacked-down olive trees and heaps of soil like tiny red hills and small people like magical creatures scrabbling about inspecting the damage...An

image popped into my mind: a swollen stomach, cracked with stretch marks. That woman who asked me to scrub her over and over until I rubbed away those lines on her skin. The image of her inflated belly sat in my mind like a rubber beach ball blown up so tight it was close to bursting. (67)

The image of “hacked-down olive trees” is reminiscent of Barghouti’s murdered olive trees. The olive tree as a national symbol of Palestinian *sumud* is lifeless and violently cut down. It is an image of destruction and death that is contrasted with Philistia’s happy dreams at the beginning of her narrative. Enduring such destruction and disruption of life leaves no space for happy memories and lively dreams. Survival requires otherworldly powers; people are no longer human, but tiny magical figures fumbling about through the chaos, helplessly assessing the damage without the agency to restore what was lost. The disturbing imagery of a swollen stomach cracked with stretch marks underscores the damaging effects of traumatic experiences on the self, implied by the stretch marks as permanent scars that require compulsive scrubbing to erase. Just as stretch marks cannot be rubbed away, neither can psychic scars and wounds. They may be hidden underneath layers of clothing, but they will permanently be inscribed on the body and self. Similarly, the image of the inflated belly compared to an inflated beach ball close to bursting conveys the emotional charge of on-going traumatic experiences on a psyche that is on the verge of breaking down. This painful image triggers Philistia’s tears to flow. Yet, as someone who is expected to always be resilient, Philistia escapes again to her imagination and to Bayrakdar’s “radiant face” (68). The ghost of Bayrakdar becomes her “one final remaining spot of joy amid all the arid waste-land” (68). Maintaining such resilience, in spite of the dismal circumstances, is also to tread the terrain of madness.

One of the most important vignettes in the novel is “The Picture Frame,” written predominantly in the epistolary form of letters addressed to her father in prison. It is the moment

when the story enacts a clear reversal back into the reality of Philistia's life, to the traumatic truth that she tries hard to forget. A close reading of this vignette reveals how Philistia's entire journey is no more than a desire to compensate for the castrated father's phallus, a compulsive performance of what she believes her father lacks and desires to have. It is a futile attempt to deny the fact that her father, as she remembers him in the framed picture, is now some unfree man whose skin cells "age and die" (61). The last letter she writes to her father represents the moment the screen of fantasy collapses to reveal the Real of her trauma. She tells her father that she chooses to work at the hammam to be closer to her dreams and her childhood. However, she continues to tell him about her one single dream where she sees herself with him surrounded by the high walls of the hammam, barely able to breathe the dense humid air:

I feel like my senses stop working. Like they switch off. My ears are no longer my ears, my eyes are no longer my eyes, my hands are not hands. My nose is not a nose. When I arrive at work I tell myself I'm throwing off my senses now. Getting rid of myself. I toss my senses over my shoulders like I'm throwing myself away, so I can sleepwalk through my dream... Did I walk all the way for these damp, dripping walls to steal my time? For my life to be taken over by naked bodies. By the memory I've inherited. For my senses to be absent. (62)

The subversive potential the hammam could have carried as a chora-like space and a site of feminine power collapses. It becomes, instead, an enclosed, claustrophobic space that parallels the uterine space of the prison cell in which her father sits. She admits to her father that the hammam gets her closer to him. In there, she imagines herself to be in the same state he is in, surrounded by the "high walls. The humid air that is so dense [one] can barely breathe" (61). The hammam, like the father's cell, is where she can "vanish inside [herself]" (61) and sleepwalk until she wakes up to

the sounds of the water and the smell of humid air that only remind her of the memory she desires to escape. She finds herself, like him, with shackled hands and feet, shouting “I want to bathe in the sea!” (62), the one that neither her nor her father can reach. The water motif that runs throughout the narrative reflects that desperate wish to begin a new chapter, to be baptised anew. However, given the current situation, Palestinians have no choice but to suspend the liberating future vision of the hammam as a “laughter market” (2) and a “garden” of flowers (2) but to see it for what it is, a “humid” prison cell where the time they can “spend asleep” extends. “Is there a life outside the hammam?” she wonders (63). It is a defeatist rhetorical question that refers to the impossibility of currently envisioning or creating a different reality outside the national/political impasse. The world becomes for her “one big hammam, where our senses are suspended” (63).

Bsharat seems to suggest that young Palestinians are left to endure material and symbolic violence inscribed on their bodies, lives and future (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2019, xi), while expected to courageously endure the maiming of their most intimate of spaces, “the sacred relations of body, self, family, and place” (4). *Trees* exposes the reality of what it means to heroically endure the pain of loss, incarcerations and martyrdom; the price is psychically exhausting, particularly when people in Palestine are torn now between “the notions of resilience [that] are political constructs” and “how people live and endure” the brutality of the occupation (Buch Segal 2016a, 469). Philistia questions, melancholically, whether it was all worth it in the end, “to have your time stolen away so far from us,” to be a prisoner in “the darkness of your dream” (62). It is the dream of liberation that has cost her the loss of her father and turned her life into a frightening nightmare. Philistia goes further to even question the memory that she has inherited. She tells her father: “So I walk and walk. Every day I walk in my dreams. I reach out with my hand. I see hands in the distance, dissolving into the wall of the hammam. Your hands. Grandma’s hands, Bayrakdar’s hands” (63). The memory of the absentees is compared to hands that are now “dissolving.” The more she tries to reach out with her

hands to catch those that are vanishing in the walls of time, the more she falls out of hers. It becomes clear that the sense of touch, especially in the chapter “The Picture Frame,” takes up a different meaning from being a way to show compassion and connection with others the way it is in the preceding chapters. It transforms into a projected fear of the possibility of losing one’s sense of self with the waning memory, the one that she tries throughout the narrative to ‘touch’ and emulate in her dreams and at the hammam. Touch provides the illusion of being in touch with a coherent sense of self, which memories of the past reinforce. This connection to a homogenous sense of being is crucial for counterbalancing the continuous suffering and grief that crush future hopes.

The existential and humanist dimension, hence, is revealed to be another coping mechanism which functions in twofold ways: first, it compensates for an unfulfilled desire to annul oppressive Symbolic discourses and imaginary identifications with the Other by tapping into a shared being. Second, the happiness that is derived from living in an imagined pre-Symbolic state masks Philistia’s debilitating fear of collapsing under the pressure of a reality that does not make any sense. Visualising the existence of another world where women and babies dance happily under the flowing water functions in the same way memories of the past do in the novel, and in the Palestinian psyche at large. The state of happiness that Philistia sees in her dreams obscures the father’s absence from home, and his possible psychic injuries.

Philistia’s embittered melancholia and her obsession with recovering a fading memory of an ideal happy past, whether on the historical (Palestinian) or transhistorical (existential) level, turns her into a prisoner of a “long dream” that consumes more than it nourishes. In the last few pages of the novel, reality collapses into imagination until it becomes hard to tell if Philistia has become unreal, a ghost of “usually a real girl who worked at the hammam...” (Bsharat 2019, 86) or if the impossibility of her ‘long dream’ leads to loss of touch with reality, a psychic dissociation required by such an enigmatic reality. The desire for freedom, as the ending of the novel shows, is as

impossible as the ghost of Bayrakdar is. It is a “make-believe” game Palestinians engage in “where the past is immanent, but the present as it were absent cannot carry on without the danger of madness” (Al-Qattan 2007, 198). In its melancholic refusal to offer resolution or catharsis, *Trees for the Absentees* echoes the impasse found in Kashua’s *Track Changes*. Both texts resist redemptive closure. Bsharat’s protagonist, like Saeed, experiences memory as both a burden and a sanctuary. If Kashua’s Saeed seeks in memory a space of narrative control that ultimately slips away, Bsharat’s female protagonist immerses herself in spectral imaginaries, equally haunted by the impossibility of starting anew. In both, memory functions less as resistance than as an inescapable repetition of trauma.

Within the status quo, this desire for new beginnings can only be perceived as part of “a long dream” that seems to be plausible only if perceived in its uncanniness, its ambivalence, its impossible possibility: “...if we didn’t come back out through the door...we might jump from the roof. We might fly. We might pass through the wall...” (86). To achieve her dream of freedom, Philistia has no choice but to become, or imagine herself to be, a ghost herself as the ending seems to suggest. The enigmatic feeling towards reality that Philistia posits throughout the narrative heightens in the last few pages of the narrative when the bar between the Symbolic and the Imaginary, between reality and imagination, sleepwalking and wakefulness, life and death becomes extremely blurred to the extent that Philistia utterly fails to separate between what is real and unreal. She admits in the last scene where she is seen holding hands with Bayrakdar, happily walking the streets of the old city of Nablus that his presence provides a sense of security, a feeling the Israeli prison has taken away from her. She says, “I always felt afraid whenever I walked down here on my own. I used to feel like I was walking over the bodies of dead people and could sense their smell... wanting to stop me in my tracks for some reason...” (85). Fear of the dead reflects her fear of the return of the repressed, the undead trauma that she desperately tries to elude but fails because the

Palestinian collective and individual trauma has no end and cannot be buried, mourned, and put to rest, much like the ghosts of Bayrakdar and Grandma Zahia.

Is There Hope for a Palestinian Futurity?

The novel's strong appeal to a shared humanity disintegrates when the oppressed find themselves caught in repetitious deadlock, forced to re-experience and re-live the viciousness of an ongoing trauma that will not be resolved by the simple act of narration. It is not a trauma that is unspeakable because it is repressed, but one that is brutal and still on-going. The Palestinian trauma is a silence that pierces through the Palestinian body destabilising subjectivity, coherent meaning, and any possibility of moving forward. When Philistia's mother describes her as someone whose tongue the cat has got, it symbolically stands for the collective silencing of Palestinian children and youth at large. It is the silence that replaces the desire to locate a meaningful language, currently unavailable to them.

The novel portrays Philistia's trauma, and that of her generation, as a "crisis of truth" (Caruth 2016, 6), and of finding meaning amidst the madness of life under occupation. Philistia's narrative is a journey, first and foremost, to find closure to haunting questions: How does one cope when that which is to be endured has no end? "Where else can a tree grow" (64), and where can the memory of absentees survive and blossom if both trees and memories are constantly targeted and threatened no matter how hard the women "hugged the trees to keep them from harm" (64), and despite the young men's "tears flowing like rivers" (64)? What option do Palestinians, like Philistia's generation, have in the face of a profound despair and "defeat" (66)?

Despite the bleak circumstances within which the events unfold, *Trees* still offers some critical insights on the possibility of a future even if it is hard to envision it under the present circumstances. In the search for the significance of their being, for understanding the enigmatic destiny Palestinians are compelled to assume, there is a potentiality, the novel shows, to reconfigure

anchoring points that legitimise certain memories, groups, narratives, codes and so on while abjecting and absenting others. Ultimately, and as Philistia tells Bayrakdar, we live in “a reality that wrote its own script, and there was nothing we could do but believe in it” (83). Reality, Žižek (1994) argues, “is never directly itself” but “has the character of a (symbolic) fiction,” an “incomplete-failed symbolization” (13). Similar to Butterfly, Philistia from the onset of the novel refuses to be an ordinary girl, a replica of her cousin “playing our roles as expertly as we could” (15), but insists on having her own world, her own rules even if they, as she says, contradict with everything society deems real or acceptable. In both of her novels, Bsharat highlights how knowledge of the self and of one’s surrounding plays a significant role in liberating the self from oppressive shackles of uncontested truths and the trapping of exclusivist narcissistic ideologies.

Philistia (and Bsharat as such) comes close to tapping into the existential emptiness underlying human psychic life when she describes herself as a “girl who emerges from the wall reaching out into life to play with that void” (63). Emerging from the wall symbolically implies a willingness to break free from the confines of her material reality, and her refusal to be trapped by the uncontested beliefs her society imposes on her as a female subject in a conservative masculine society. Her awareness of the “void” which she is ready to play with indicates an ability to see beneath the fantasies of being into the emptiness—lack of essence revealed on the motionless naked body with closed eyes— that takes shape only through human endeavours and interpretations. If meaning is always deferred, if reality is a “script” then there is still an opportunity for re-writing one’s relationship to the world and to memories of the past—memories of the absentees— and break free from melancholic attitudes and embittered attachments. Grandma Zahia’s influence on Philistia and her washing of dead bodies is seen by her friend Fathia as the cause of all of Philistia’s problems and the reason why “the world still puts [her] on edge” (34). Yet, it is also through her that Bsharat creates a protagonist who sees, despite her grim reality, the possibility of change if one

seeks a kind of knowledge that is not found in the language of national slogans and false promises. It is also a knowledge, although never absolute, that is liberating since it is embedded in freedom and love. As Philistia tells Bayrakdar, “knowledge is love” (49). Through Grandma Zahia, Philistia is able to acquire the kind of knowledge that enables her to perceive the unfixity of the (Other’s oppressive) signifiers, that no meaning is imminently guaranteed, hence the possibility for change, for finding the singularity of her being.

On her way to the hammam for the first time, Philistia contemplates a conversation she once had with Fathia about the unfixity of meaning and how our relationship with the world, people and objects takes up different meanings when contexts change: “An unfamiliar place, a new context and the relationship suddenly feels completely different” (12-13). She elaborates on her relationship with her mother while they are walking in the city of Nablus. She frames their relationship then based on the verb “to walk” making it seem “like we were two women walking along side by side without knowing why” (13). She also comments on their relationship with her father while he is in prison and describes it as an act that acquires meaning only through the signifier “to visit.” When they visit him, it feels like a staged act where a certain connection is created with a mere “portrait of a man” behind bars. She wonders:

Is the connection just the act of visiting him now and then? As far as he’s concerned, we’re just people who come and see him, some young people and a woman called ‘children’ and ‘wife’. And then what? When he gets out, and he comes over to play with us and we play with him, will our relationship still be based on the verb ‘to visit’? Then our house will become a prison too. (13)

These questions are fundamental. If verbs create a certain connection with someone or something, then, going back to the novel’s main question, what happens to the memory of the absentees if the

connection is just the act of ‘remembering’ or “re-living”? What if Philistia chooses other verbs, to respect, to hide, or to cherish, will that then be considered a betrayal of that memory? Indeed, the novel hints at the possibility of shifting how one can productively and creatively relate to the haunting memories of the absentees.

As the title suggests, the novel attempts at opening a window of hope through which Palestinian youth can forge new ways of connecting with inherited memories, particularly when these memories are structured around a spatiotemporal void created by a trauma that has not been relegated to the past. The latter still reverberates in the on-going injustices creating, as Edward Said (1994) argues, the “uncertainty about whether the past really is past, over and concluded, or whether it continues, albeit in different forms” (1). In responding to Philistia’s main question about how to deal with the haunting memory of the absentees, the novel proposes in the denouement a more hopeful solution—one that seeks to quiet the hauntings of the past and of historic memory, albeit still presented within the realm of fantasy and imagination. This can be done through the symbolic act of planting a tree “at the very back of [the] soul” in the “garden” of the heart for each cherished memory (74). In other words, the memory of the lost love object does not have to be renounced for meaning to be constructed. The opportunity to re-write the past is there as long as the past is not foreclosed, as long as it is “an active ingredient of the present” (Ruti 2009, 646). To use Philistia’s words, we do not need to be “aware of its presence”. We need not worry about watering it, yet “it will quench [our] thirst” (74).

Having control over how we use and interpret the past, in addition to self-reflexivity, is the novel’s way of hinting at the possibility of disbanding narcissistic fantasies. On the one hand, Bayrakdar symbolises the undead past that keeps returning—the debt that has not yet been paid for a proper burial of that which disturbs Philistia. On the other hand, he is also the reason for Philistia’s joy. His presence colours her wounded life with a sweet tinge of love and compassion.

Philistia chooses to keep him in her life without having to abandon the real, physically present people in her life. The choice to accept the spectral hauntings of memories carries an ethical consideration given the current socio-political context and ongoing denial of Palestinian trauma and grief. The undead still have a story to tell, a trauma yet to be reified.

The exclusion of the haunting memory of the father and Grandma Zahia from those she chooses to stay with hints at the possibility of a beginning, one that does not look backward to the future. Her choice can be seen as the necessary ‘ethical’ act of repositioning the past into the back garden of the soul. She plants them in the “garden of her heart” without having them obstruct the spatiotemporal flow of the present. Her choice, though still presented within the framework of a vague dream, represents the initial tangible step toward laying to rest the old dream once and for all. The beginning of the fulfilment of the long dream starts when one learns that holding on to a loss that persists into the present should not be psychically consuming. On the contrary, melancholy becomes politically and ethically empowering when it prevents as Gana (2023) argues “historical injustices from sinking or dissolving into oblivion” (32). Melancholy transforms from being “a colonial imposition to a decolonial disposition” (15), from “lethal sadness” to “militant sadness” when it is “anchored in an intellectual foundation” and revolutionary praxis (19-20). Philistia’s “long dream” should begin from the present, from the reality and experiences of the new generation. The past will always be there, yet understood retrospectively, informed and examined through people’s lived experiences. The recognition of the impossibility of re-inventing the past renders the present open for different readings and different possibilities, and hence a more hopeful future, since “what has not yet arrived has not been lost” (Joudah 2013, 184).

Yet this generative reorientation toward the future is shadowed by the implausibility of symbolic coherence or a unified narrative of meaning. This condition is not limited to Philistia’s narrative but one that resonates across all the literary figures explored in this thesis. What unites the

protagonists across all five chapters—Barghouti’s driver Mahmoud, Kashua’s lawyer, Amir and Saeed, and Bsharat’s Butterfly and Philistia—is not the act of resistance per se, but their varied encounters with its psychic limits. While Barghouti still clings to the possibility of ethical beginnings sustained by *sumud*-bound subjects, Kashua and Bsharat, writing from within the debris of these once-symbolic promises, reveal the impossibility of sustaining such a coherent framework. If Mahmoud represents a dying fantasy of Palestinian ethical coherence and selfless commitment, Kashua’s lawyer and Saeed embody its collapse. They are figures caught in the dissonance between what they desire and what they are allowed to be. Likewise, Bsharat’s protagonists do not find refuge in nationalist narratives or in masculine structures of belonging, but instead drift between dreams, metamorphoses, and dissociative affects. Philistia, in particular, embodies a retreat into the Imaginary, mirroring a generation that can no longer differentiate between grief and fantasy, presence and absence. Together, these texts produce a contrapuntal narrative of post-*sumud*: a space in which the symbolic registers of belonging no longer offer clarity, and where the burden of historical continuity gives way to psychic exhaustion, spectrality, and deep ambivalence toward all available forms of meaningful and regenerative appearing.

CONCLUSION

Where Does the Beginning Begin?

Without this non-contemporaneity with itself of the living present, without that which secretly unhinges it, without this respect for justice concerning those who are not yet present and living, what sense would there be to ask the question ‘where?’ “where tomorrow?’ ‘whither?’

Derrida, *Specters of Marx*

The texts treated here shift attention to the new Palestinian reality and an exploration of its post-*sumud* affects: such as alienation, fragmentation, vulnerability and psychic wounding. It is these effects, rather than any politically determined sense of identity, that the authors see as integral to understanding post-millennial complex subjectivity. Reading post-millennial Palestinian writings as post-*sumud* narratives represents both a critique and an evolution of the meaning of *sumud*. The analysis of these texts re-frames, and upends in a way, generations of writing on Palestinian identity, resistance, and survival in a time of profound crisis and uncertainty.

The thesis has highlighted similarities and differences in regards to the ways Palestinians, and particularly Palestinian authors, articulate their multifaceted experiences of oppression and occupation, and how these (collective and individual) experiences have impacted upon their sense of self. The authors complexly intertwine the personal and collective, negotiate the psychological and the social, and challenge identity politics and gendered national thought. While they all share a common desire for freedom and equality, they may differ or overlap in tone and outlook. Barghouti envisions a potential for a messianic upheaval, an emancipatory return to a beginning where Palestinian masses could restore the ethical dimension of the struggle as a struggle for liberation and equality, not for a neo-liberal statehood. Barghouti’s pessimism is coloured by his position as

both insider and outsider, and one of the last writers of the 1970s generation of Palestinian writers. While Barghouti sees and describes the harsh conditions of the present, his narrative remains focused on Palestinian *sumud* aesthetics, wilfulness, *sumud*-bound subjectivities, and selfless commitment to ethical causes. In contrast to Barghouti's admiration of the daily struggles of ordinary Palestinians—their readiness to celebrate life, their sense of humour, their creativity, and wit—Kashua and Bsharat present a quite different dimension that is shaped by their novels' focus on the internal worlds and psyches of their characters.

While Barghouti's narrative presents an image of continuity and future possibilities, Bsharat and Kashua, as native informants, highlight post-*sumud* sensibilities, such as fragmentation, exhaustion, damaged masculinity, compromised identity, and dissociative escapes as part and parcel of the current Palestinian psycho-political landscape. These representational contradictions and different ways of coping confirm the heterogeneity of the Palestinian psychic experience of loss. Although it is one that is collective, shared by a people under the same occupation, it is also individualistic, experiential, and diverse. As Barghouti writes: “even the teeth of a comb are not actually alike” (103). Approaching Palestinian literature as a monolithic narrative of *sumud*, or as a site where a politically determined sense of identity manifests, obscures the diversity, vulnerability, and internal challenges that accompany life under occupation. The pressure to appear collected and psychically unified (I am here also thinking about Gazans under a brutal war) is as inhumane and psychically destructive as the occupation itself.

To acknowledge what is concealed under the discourse of *sumud*, blanket narratives, and unquestioned assumptions does not mean to appear weak and broken. Nor does it imply surrender or betrayal. The demands and expectations for Palestinians to maintain an image of an indestructible people are a real crime that papers over their unarticulated suffering and the individual's limited 'human' capacity to endure total war. What makes these representations

particularly dangerous is that they risk unintentionally diverting attention from the true causes of Palestinian suffering and from the urgency to achieve justice for all. The shift to the exploration of post-*sumud* affects is therefore an ethical step away from these assumptions and representations in order to re-examine, reassess, and actually listen to what the narratives that speak for and about ordinary Palestinians are offering. Perhaps what we all need to reconsider—before uncritically accepting a narrative that transforms ordinary people into superheroes with innate mythical powers able to withstand the impossible—is the fact that endurance is not a choice but an act of survival. Neither suffering, death, poverty, war, loss, nor pain is a choice. Chronic pain and chronic resistance, to use Barghouti's words, without any foreseeable future, is very taxing. Portraying an unbreakable agency and coherent psyches minimises and even normalises people's suffering. I acknowledge that the tendency to romanticize the dignified endurance of suffering, perseverance, patience, and resistance is important to counter reductive stereotypes, yet it is not the way justice is served.

Before celebrating how much Palestinians can endure, it is more important to consider the subjective impasse these expectations lead to. As I have argued, the selected texts uncover two conflicted forces at play: a strong desire to liberate the self from identitarian shackles in pursuit of an expansive definition of self against an unyielding commitment to the continuation of the national dream even after its collapse (Ghana 2023, 289). Rife with desires, hopes, and dreams, as well as a relentless passion for life and living, Palestinians, especially the younger generations, are denied ordinary existence. They are not free to live the way they wish or to become the individuals they aspire to be. The occupation, however, remains the main obstacle towards tapping into the creative singularity of being. It infiltrates all aspects of Palestinian life for the sole purpose of destroying it, forcing Palestinians to confront personal and collective manifestations of pain, suffering, violence, and trauma. These experiences must be amplified for change to hopefully ensue.

Instead of minimizing the devastating effects of the violent and inhumane occupation by magnifying the image of a mythically powerful people, it is more appropriate to continuously demonstrate how these traumatic manifestations permeate all aspects of life. As Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Khsheiboun (2009) argue, this trauma “irrevocably alters the daily reality of those targeted by this violence that spirals out and impacts the body, mind, social networks, economic status, etc” (6). The subjective impasse and the sense of fragmentation that Palestinians in the occupied West Bank, Gaza, and Israel encounter will persist as long as Israeli occupation and its systemic violence and discriminatory practices remain in the room, and as long as we continue to place high expectations on ordinary people who simply wish to live and prosper like everyone else.

Shifting to a post-*sumud* discourse is an ethical decision (unlike Palestinians, we have a choice here) that will allow us to understand the excruciating consequences of a brutal occupation on the Palestinian psyche and ways of life. Delving into the texts, which are mirrors to the unconscious of the Palestinian street, reveals how hope and certainty are eroded from the present, fostering a shift from optimism toward ‘pessoptimism’ and ambivalence. This shift gives way to a persistent question that remains unanswered in Kashua’s and Bsharat’s narratives: Where does the beginning, which Barghouti has anticipated, begin? This is a question that comes to my mind more frequently now as the political situation reaches its worst and the suffering becomes unprecedented. Where is this beginning? Is it in a return to the past, to the crevices of identities; or is it within one’s capacity to reimagine the self, given that change and newness materialize first in our imagination before they become a reality? The authors do not offer any definitive answer. Kashua leaves the question unresolved while Bsharat’s readers are left to navigate dream-like scenarios of imaginative beginnings. The failure to find the desired answer only reflects the current political conundrum, the ruptures, the ambivalences, and the psychic wounding of the self that endures. Amidst the Gaza war and the mounting hatred for the other, would it even be possible for Palestinians and for Barghouti,

had he still been alive, to speak of the certainty of ethical liberatory beginnings? The ambiguity of the situation triggers another problematic question that is often avoided in public discourses, yet is subtly raised in the treated texts: *How much more can ordinary Palestinians and Palestine's new generations endure, especially when nothing seems to change?*

The recurring themes of death in post-millennial texts echo and amplify this profound ambivalence and entrapment, creating an image of a people hanging between two deaths—the physical and the symbolic. Death infiltrates Barghouti's narrative. The West Bank materialises as a desolate place, a hell hole, a holy land where divinity ironically disappears. Kashua speaks of death-like escapes, self-annihilation, loss and defeat; Bsharat's protagonists escape through imaginative endeavours or dissociative defence mechanisms. Yet, all ultimately find themselves confronting that which they had hoped to escape: an (im)possible future. The bleak images of death and escape serve as a reminder of enduring injustices and chronic pain. Perhaps the best example to give here is the story of Barghouti's older brother, Mounif whose unjust death in exile plays a significant symbolic role in Barghouti's two narratives of return. Mounif's death, as Edward Said (2000) describes it in his foreword to Barghouti's *I Saw Ramallah*, was "unnecessary and cruel" (xi). The death was a double cruelty: in exile in Paris people turned away as Mounif lay dying after being beaten and stabbed, left alone before he could take even a step towards fulfilling his dream of return.

The spectral memory of Mounif occupies the symbolic position of the "undead" Palestinians, like Bsharat's Bayrakdar, who hang between two deaths: the biological and the symbolic (Khader 2015). Mounif's compulsive return from the dead haunting Barghouti's narrative is a "deferred death" (Ibid). Denied a basic right to return to one's place of origin, Palestinians are being repeatedly erased, reduced to a "desubjectivized position of disposable surplus subhumanity" (Ibid). Enduring the precarity of life, both in exile and under occupation, which are one and the same, Palestinians are not alive, yet not dead, but suspended in a metaphoric zone between a life

denied of basic human rights and international recognition, and an actual death with a proper funeral. The incompleteness of the scene of liberation, pursued beyond the open ending of each text, persists like Mounif's undead soul and that of all voiceless, marginalised Palestinians. The undead still have a story to tell, a trauma yet to be acknowledged. As Randall Williams (2010) in *The Divided World* suggests, the solution is not a reckoning with the past or the present of the imperial violence but the grounds for real change are established when the world, untarnished by any privileged universality, includes "the mounting dead for whom the law was either a useless means of defense or an accomplice to their murder" (46). Putting these wandering souls to rest requires a truthful representation of their overlooked pain and deep fractures, and ultimately, the elimination of the root cause behind the subjective and political impasse—occupation and oppression.

An Ethical Betrayal? Toward Unchained Belongings

Is it a betrayal, I heard myself time and time again asking while in the process of reading and writing a thesis that upends our understanding of *sumud* as a central pillar of Palestinian identity and resistance? Is it a betrayal when Butterfly and Philistia, Amir, Mahmoud, the lawyer, and Saeed ask to be ordinary people like the rest of the world? Is it a betrayal to re-imagine new ways of being Palestinian, of having an identity that is no longer bound to traumatic memories, nor trapped in a perpetual madness of being, but one that touches the moral human arc of justice?

The question of betrayal is crucial. It emerges in the works of Kashua and Bsharat when their protagonists find themselves trapped between their personal desires and collective demands. The desire to escape, imaginatively and literally, is but a manifestation of a deadlock that they face with the Other, be it the occupation or the collective sociocultural demands. Exposing and acknowledging the psychological toll Palestinians pay for the struggle to continue, and admitting that endless resistance is exhausting, must not be framed as a betrayal of the collective cause. It

only deepens our understanding of the nuances of the fight for freedom and equality that go beyond what is immediately visible. Staying faithful to the ethical and human dimension of the collective cause does not only mean to conform to the dominant narrative, but to uncover and articulate the depth of the Palestinian pain, the open wound that has now become unbearable. It is about time for the imagined beginning sought by each character to become a reality—a beginning where Palestine ceases to be a contingent political cause and becomes a universal human project promising a dignified life for all worthy of its name. It is time to seek Palestine anew, Palestine as it manifests in the freedom of the imagination, and not the architecture of violence. A Palestine that “never was”, as Fady Joudah (2013) suggests, implies openness, invention, creativity, and beginnings. It is time to re-imagine Palestine as a place of future possibilities, yet to arrive and yet to be achieved. It is time to seek it as a beginning, as “a first step in the intentional production of meaning” as Said (1985) envisions beginnings to be (5). Maybe then Palestine can be produced as an inclusive signifier, a word bound to memories yet to be created, to an archive of beginnings. Now is the right time to answer Saeed’s question, “Where does the beginning begin?”. While the past and memory articulations will always be important to remind us why narrating our story is resistance so long as the ghosts of those who suffered injustices are not laid to rest, the past, nevertheless, as Fanon (1986) long realised “can in no way guide me in the present moment” (229). When the search of the self is not, in Bachelard’s (1964) words, “lodged in the houses of the past, it is immense” (183).

The trap of the past—the prioritisation of the collective dream for liberation over individual desires—is, as Barghouti contends, one of the occupation’s most insidious crimes. Resisting the inhumanity of the occupation for Palestinians is necessary as a kind of collective therapy. Adam Shatz (2024) notes that the target of Palestinian resistance as stated by Yasir Arafat in the late sixties “was not so much the Israeli enemy as the wounded Palestinian psyche: violence was collective therapy, a way to create the “new man,” to forge a nation, and to announce the existence

of the Palestinian people on the world stage” (432). Resistance creates the image of the Palestinian as an “aroused fighter” (432), exorcising fears of castration and inferiority. However, when resistance becomes chronic, when liberation and hope feel more distant than ever before, it deprives the oppressed of the right to dream ambitiously and to envision a future beyond the constraints of the status quo. It limits their view of the vast horizon of opportunities, turning their world into what Philistia imagines is to be: one big putrid and humid physical and psychological prison where senses are suspended and dreams are killed.

This prioritisation of resistance and *sumud* as the main aspects of Palestinian identity and subjectivity is no less than a crime because it forces Palestinians to adopt a paralysing outlook at their destiny, as if being Palestinian should always evoke signifiers tied to a traumatic past, historical injustices, on-going violence, and relentless resistance to it. The anger and frustration expressed in post-millennial writing marks the emergence of the beginning of a new Palestinian consciousness. These sentiments reflect an unspoken awareness that the situation they are in is not a fate they are willing to accept. It is a non-verbal ‘No’, a resolute ‘Never’ in response to all the forces that imprison them, both metaphorically and literally, in a desubjectifying zone. It is a way of saying ‘we have had enough,’ marking a beginning of the beginning, the stepping stone toward Barghouti’s anticipated explosion that seeks to break the cycle of repetition, the political stalemate, and compulsive nature of pain and oppression. It is crucial to push forward, imaginatively and creatively, toward a universalist Palestine that encompasses the multi-layered meanings of the self, and in which, to quote Hannah Arendt’s (1968) words, “a universal humanity and genuine, almost naïve contempt for social and ethnic distinction are taken for granted” (41).

Moving forward toward a liberated future is a political commitment to the truth of the cause, its moral dimension, and most importantly, to the identity of the Palestinian as an individual, and not merely as part of a collective resisting an occupation. Barghouti, Kashua, and Bsharat among

many other Palestinian writers express a distinct wish to explore topics beyond politics, trauma, and the occupation when narrating the Palestinian self. As I have shown earlier, the impasse located at the heart of each protagonist's journey would not have manifested had not the desire for re-writing their destiny been part of their daily struggle. The protagonists desire an identity that transcends the ontological state of their existence. Their envisioned identity is one that breaks free, even if only as a force of imagination, from the oppressive structures of their reality. Recoiling to imaginative endeavours may seem at times a mere way to escape the strangulations of the present, and the spectral demands of the past. Yet, as Barghouti reminds his reader that nothing exists outside the human imagination. The seed for real political change, and future becoming is sown when one is allowed to imagine otherwise. Change begins when one can see that "the fictive, imaginative, utopian vision for the future is in fact already part of our present, albeit well-guarded and hidden behind the politics of the status quo" (Hochberg 2021, 11).

The status quo makes it difficult to speak of a viable future outside the works of imagination. Yet, the main conclusion to be drawn from the texts I have engaged with is that a new mode of political becoming, for Palestinians and Jewish Israelis alike, necessitates a new reordering of old structures of the self—one that does not build on any redemptive retrieval of an evacuated traumatic past, but derived from personal, social and cultural experiences and non-redemptive options of being. While the authors do not resolve the tension at the core of their narratives, they succeed in delving deep into the psychic struggles of their characters, to explore the coping mechanisms of survival, and to pave the way for a conception of the self that refuses to fit in pre-given political, social and ideological moulds. They portray subjects who continually envision the myriad possibilities the future holds if the occupation ceases to be. Despite the grim reality, the texts can still foresee the possibility—no matter how dim it is—for a future becoming which can be achieved by incessantly and critically questioning the parameters of reality, or as Saeed puts it:

“what everyone knows but stays silent about”. By doing so, the subjects are already moving away from the hegemony of power, and towards the beginning of the story when Palestine was not a particular identity, but the very site of revolutionary and liberatory praxis.

Writing From the Inside

Finally, I wish to conclude with a personal reflection on the impetus for writing this PhD thesis on Palestine’s post-Oslo and post-millennial generations. The argument put forward in the thesis stems from my deep desire to speak, assess, interpret, and comprehend Palestinian literary voices as a native informant with a perspective shaped by a lived understanding of near-death experiences, fear, wars, and tremendous pressure to stand tall despite what is inflicted on us from birth. It is an attempt to situate my work within the work of many other Palestinian researchers who engage in self-reflexive scrutiny, and critical assessment of our material reality, and interiority. One main objective of writing on Palestinian subjectivity is to show how contemporary Palestinians and Palestinian literary figures re-narrate, critically and creatively, the Palestinian experience and self-representation in non-conformist ways. When we, Palestinians, write about our experiences and examine our reality, we demonstrate to the world, as Said (1999) writes, that we are not “opposite and unequal, always on the defensive.” We, too:

are looking, we too are scrutinizing, assessing, judging. We are more than someone’s object. We do more than stand passively in front of whoever for whatever reason, has wanted to look at us. If we cannot finally see this about us, we will not allow ourselves to believe that the failure has been entirely ours. Not anymore. (166)

Claiming that any analysis is objective would be dishonest. Fanon continually reminded us that no lived experience can be truly objective. As a Palestinian woman, I have come to realise from an early age that my identity inherently shapes the boundaries of my existential reality, how I am

viewed, and which category of human I am expected to assume. This thesis is my limited contribution to the field, an act of representation that does not speak for Palestinians but speaks as a Palestinian. We speak not only to be heard by those who are curious about getting to know Palestinians the way Palestinians understand themselves to be. What matters more, in my opinion, is that we speak to hear our words reverberate in the fractures of a self, hoping to make sense of the senseless, the on-going traumatic ruptures, and the historical-temporal discontinuities.

Like Philistia and her friends, I, too, was born to a world that has never made sense to me and my generation. We were born to memories arrested in time, to stories our grandfathers murmured like fervent prayers in our yet unattuned ears; a self that begged to be free to forge its relation to the world. The more we tried to rebel, to be who we visualised ourselves becoming, the darker the shadow of the disappointment became, blocking the path to hopes and expectations we thought we, with a human identity, were entitled to. The Palestine we learned about in textbooks, in stories, in songs, and old photo albums became a place as foreign to me as the countries I learned about in geography classes whose capitals I memorised by heart. That Palestine became a name that meant nothing more than an abstract knowledge I prided myself in parroting out. That version of Palestine was only animated as an idea whose loss we collectively feared, as if our whole being depended on its preservation. Like Barghouti, we were waiting for Godot, and we thought Oslo could finally be it. Peace could be glimpsed somewhere in the horizon of possibilities and dreams although we all knew too well how dreams in such a place were only delusions, a luxury we could not afford. Oslo proved to be the biggest lie, a mirage to a people thirsty in a desert of death. I was not old enough to understand then that Oslo would become the Nakba of our generation. We thought we could finally be ordinary children in an ordinary place, waking up from childish nightmares triggered by something we saw on TV or a from a ghost story we heard somewhere. We

did not choose bombs, bullets, missiles, drones, blood, death, fear to stuff our reality and our unconscious, our sleep and our wakefulness.

The faith we kept did not relieve the aching pressure of our present reality that only got worse when the second Intifada broke out in September 2000 followed then by many subsequent wars. We were born in war, and now we were reliving more violent ones. The West Bank and Gaza have become the epitome of Fanon's *zone of non-being*, a God-forsaken place! A forgotten hell! A whirlwind of nightmares! Daily images of violence devastate us, reduce us to fragments, shatter our souls. The year 2002, the one Barghouti describes in the opening chapter of his memoir, is a year etched onto my memory and that of every Palestinian, a memory that is echoing once again, as I am writing this conclusion; only this time it is far more catastrophic and tragic. It was not easy for us to understand then, and we still do not, why wars happen, and why us. My young self could not justify the near-death experiences we were and are still forced to live and relive day and night. Sadly, for us, Palestine's younger generations, Palestine has transformed from an idea into a source of our unspoken psychic injuries, our nervous condition.

Not until recently, and only when the global circulation of Palestinian writing and translated texts significantly increased has the world has become more interested in knowing a little more about who the Palestinian is. Digital activism and the effective employment of social media as resistance by Palestinian youth, especially during the war on Gaza, have been playing a significant role in portraying, in English, the real image of Palestine and Palestinians. Over twenty years ago, Palestinians were still an unknown people at the airports of the world, carrying a document of no state, and no country, a cause that has become an Authority. With Oslo, Palestine became the Palestinian Authority, appointed by Israel with very limited jurisdiction to manage the affairs of Israel's unwanted burden. We became a people of an authority who the borders of sovereign states did not initially recognise. We suffered the consequences of their failed agreements. The refugees

continued to be stateless, an X in place of nationality, and in the homeland, we also acquired an equivalent of an X. Palestinians are a people who love life and are so desperate to be allowed to live it. Nobody knows us that way; we are a people who are on the side of life and the side of creation. We did not choose to be headlines; we did not choose to be numbers in the news bulletin; we did not choose to be collateral damage, children of camps, Palestinians of the inside and the outside, the green line, Gaza, the banks, exile. We did not choose to be scattered fragments of a people; we simply wanted to be a people.

While violence continues and war gets uglier, the Palestinian story continues; memory survives; hope persists; and imagination escapes the ugly injustices into a realm in which the possibility of a universal Palestine can be envisioned. A universal Palestine which the Gazan writer and academic Refaat Alareer (2014) beautifully articulates in his introduction to *Gaza Writes Back*. Alareer was killed in December 2023 by an Israeli airstrike, yet his words, and his futuristic vision, have already been written in “the archival imagination of the future” (Hochberg 2021, vii). In his words, becoming Palestine is one that:

dwells inside all of us, a Palestine that needs to be rescued: a free Palestine where all people regardless of color, religion, or race coexist; a Palestine where the meaning of the word “occupation” is only restricted to what the dictionary says rather than those plenty of meanings and connotations of death, destruction, pain, suffering, deprivation, isolation, and restriction that Israel has injected the word with... [which] Palestinian writers—particularly the young ones—capture and materialize in the forms of narratives in an attempt to make sense of the senseless context around them and in search of their Palestine...Palestine is a martyr away, a tear away, a missile away, or a whimper away. Palestine is a story away. (14)

Is there still hope to realise Alareer's vision of Palestine—not as a land belonging to one nation, race, or colour, but a place embracing all humanity, narratives, and dreams? Can emerging generations still imagine alternative futures and new beginnings where, as Barghouti (2012) writes, there exist “uncountable varieties of human striving along the roads of the universe” (184)? Hatred alone, as Fanon (1961) reminds us, “cannot draw up a program” (139), and reducing Palestinians to a “signifier of unnatural monstrosity” (Khader, 2015) will not erase their existence. True progress, the answer to the question of beginnings, lies in mutual recognition, justice, and solidarity with those who have borne the brunt of violence and oppression. Only by confronting these injustices can we transform our stunted present into a future worthy of what might have been—one where occupation no longer robs humanity of its shared potential.

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