

MEMORY, EXILE, AND IDENTITY: A STUDY OF GHADA KARMI'S *IN SEARCH OF FATIMA*

Disha

Assistant Professor
PG Department of English, A.S. College Khanna

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the interconnected themes of memory, exile, and identity in Ghada Karmi's memoir *In Search of Fatima: A Palestinian Story* (2002). Through an analysis of Karmi's autobiographical narrative, the study explores how personal and collective memories function as powerful tools for preserving Palestinian history and cultural identity in the aftermath of displacement. The memoir offers a poignant account of Karmi's childhood in Jerusalem, her family's forced exile during the Nakba of 1948, and her subsequent experiences in Britain. By tracing the impact of exile on the formation of individual and national identity, the paper highlights the ways in which memory becomes a site of resistance against historical erasure and cultural dislocation. Furthermore, it examines the gendered dimensions of displacement, emphasizing the role of Palestinian women in sustaining cultural continuity and collective remembrance. Ultimately, the study argues that Karmi's memoir transforms personal recollection into a broader narrative of Palestinian resilience, demonstrating how memory serves as a means of negotiating exile and reclaiming identity.

Keywords: Life Narratives; Identity; Memory; Exile; Resistance; Palestinian Literature

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The research argument of this paper centers on how Palestinians women forge their lost identity by recounting their life stories. The present study is an attempt to reveal the politics of documenting their lives and to show, how through the process of recording their life stories, they narrate the alternate history of Palestine from female point of view. The study will be centered on the exploration of various themes and structures of the resistance in the selected works of Ghada Karmi.

INTRODUCTION

Ghada Karmi is a distinguished Palestinian-British academic, physician, and writer, renowned for her critical examinations of Palestinian identity, gender, and social justice. Born in Jerusalem in 1939, she and her family were displaced during the 1948 *Nakba*, leading to their relocation to London. In her literary works, Karmi delves into the complexities of Palestinian women's experiences, particularly the dual impact of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and gendered oppression. Karmi's writings not only critique patriarchal norms within Palestinian society but also celebrate the resilience and resistance of Palestinian women in the face of occupation and displacement. She has several texts to her credit, including *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* and *Married Another Man: Israel's Dilemma in Palestine*. Beyond her literary contributions, Karmi has held significant academic positions, including research fellowships at the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Exeter and the Royal Institute of International Affairs. Her scholarly endeavors have centered on Middle Eastern politics, Palestinian history, and the experiences of migrants and refugees. By recording their life stories, the female writers not only narrate an alternative history of Palestine but also resist the traumatic impacts of the Palestine-Israel conflict, reconstructing their lost identities through such narratives. This project investigates how the depiction of

individual experiences of Palestinian women contributes to the construction of a collective representation of history and identity for the entire community.

PORTRAYAL OF MEMORY, EXILE AND IDENTITY IN SELECTED AUTOBIOGRAPHY

Life writing takes a very particular niche in this literary convention. Memoirs and autobiographies enable the Palestinian to regain control over their narratives, providing a response to the viewpoint of historical suppression by offering a personal account. The literary genre of life writing brings together personal experience with the world history and highlight the falsity of the distinction between the personal and the historical. Personal memory is not offered as subjective recollection itself but as another kind of knowledge of history that complements and challenges the main stream narratives. Palestinian writers use life writing to declare the validity of lived experience as an important source of knowledge about the national history.

In addition, the autobiographical narratives allow the writers to answer questions of identity, belonging and continuity amid the displacement. It makes memory a key organizing principle that enables writers to rebuild the lost spaces, revisit their formative moments, and bargain their fractured identities. It is in autobiographical forms of Palestinian literature, then, that memory, identity, resistance and preservation of culture will find a dynamic space. By telling stories, authors maintain a relationship with a home that is geographically unreachable but constantly remains in lingo, imagination, and memory.

The recurring themes of Palestinian life writing are diaspora, exile, memory and national belonging. These themes are not theoretical abstract concepts but lived realities that have a significant influence on the narrative voice, structure, and form. The Palestinian autobiographical stories are a result of the circumstances of forced migration, chronic displacement, and the permanent lack of a homeland. Therefore, this makes life writing a practice of remembering over erasing and storytelling is a way of preserving personal and collective histories amidst loss and fragmentation. The Palestinian memoirs often show that Diaspora is not a transitional experience, but a sense of complete incompleteness. The author presents the lives that were led between several borders, languages, and cultural situations, with the specific feature of a prolonged negotiation between the past and the present. The spatial and temporal dispersion creates discourses that do not follow a linear order, as the existence of diaspora is turbulent. In these texts exile is not just the physical but also the emotional and psychological estrangement. Even returning moments are mostly conveyed as highly ambivalent experiences since the landscapes recalled are not the same as what they are. The homeland, which used to be pictured as a place of belonging turns out to be alien, and it shows the trends of exile on identity and perception. Memory is one of the primary narrative tools where Palestinian authors revive their lost homes, childhood spaces, and social worlds which have become inaccessible due to the history. Autobiographical narratives tend to be formatted by fragmented memories, flashbacks and contemplative periods that replicate the disjunctions of the displacement itself. These narrative techniques provide authors with the freedom to flow between various time periods, focusing on the continuation of the past in the present.

This article is devoted to the textual analysis of autobiography of Ghada Karmi that reflect a broad range of the Palestinian experience influenced by exile, displacement, return, and occupation. Her life narrative does not simply tell her own personal life history, but are also literary realms in which the shattered lives of Palestinian experience are recalled, understood, and told.

Ghada Karmi's two volumes of memoirs, *In Search of Fatima: A Palestinian Story* (2002) and *Return: A Palestinian Memoir* (2015), chronicle the life story of a young woman who strives for creating her own unique identity in the historical background of war. In *In Search of Fatima*, Karmi divides her story into three parts: "Palestine," "England," and "In Search of Fatima." The memoir begins with her childhood in Jerusalem in 1948, a year marked by the Nakba, when her family was forced to flee their homeland. Karmi's portrayal of this traumatic event from the perspective of a four-year-old girl provides a unique lens through which to understand the personal costs of political upheaval.

The title refers to her childhood nanny, Fatima, who symbolizes the lost Palestinian culture and traditions that Karmi's family left behind. Through Fatima, Karmi reflects on the struggle to maintain cultural identity in exile. The symbol of Fatima embodies the Palestinian culture and traditions. Throughout the text, Karmi reflects on the symbolism of Fatima, representing the lost homeland and the struggle to maintain cultural identity in exile. The prologue of the narrative is about Ghada's loss and displacement from home and Palestine. The epilogue adds Ghada's displacement from her dog Rex, a symbol for her life in Palestine. The epilogue employs the third person singular pronoun for the character. The use of the third-person singular pronoun in the epilogue adds a layer of distance, highlighting the alienation Karmi feels from her past. The third part of the autobiography, "In Search of Fatima," narrates Karmi's visit to her homeland in 1991. This journey is not just a physical return but also an emotional and political reckoning with her lost Palestinian identity.

In her poignant recounting of a traumatic childhood experience, the author delves into a night that would forever alter her perception of safety and innocence. She begins her narrative with vivid recollections of that fateful evening:

On the night of January 4, 1948, three days before Christmas, we went to sleep as usual. It was raining heavily with occasional bursts of thunder and lightning. Fatima was staying with us that night and was sleeping on her mattress on the floor of our bedroom. Suddenly, at some time in the night, I awoke from a deep sleep and found myself in the middle of a nightmare crashing with thunder and lightning. For a few seconds, I could not distinguish dream from reality. The bedroom seemed to be full of strangers until I realised that they were my parents. There was a tremendous noise of shattering glass, shootings and explosions which seemed to be coming from our back garden. (01-02)

The author's vivid portrayal of that night not only encapsulates the immediate terror experienced by her but also highlights the profound psychological impact of such traumatic events. The disorienting blend of dream and reality reflects the mind's struggle to process overwhelming experiences. This narrative serves as a poignant reminder of how deep childhood trauma can infiltrate one's consciousness, leaving indelible marks on memory and perception. It underscores the importance of understanding and addressing the long-term effects of childhood trauma, as they shape not only individual lives but also collective histories. The epilogue of the book poignantly captures her return to her childhood home in Jerusalem, a place she had been forced to leave in 1948. She writes, "And there it was. The one with the brick red roofed veranda, our house without question...On the wall a plaque that read Ben Porath."

The image of the "Ben Porath" plaque on her childhood home serves as a powerful emblem of the Palestinian experience of dispossession and exile. For Karmi, the house is

not just a physical structure but a symbol of a lost homeland. Her visit in 1998 underscores the enduring pain of displacement and the complexities of identity for Palestinians who have been uprooted from their ancestral lands.

The Second Part of the narrative titled “England” probes into the complexities of identity and belonging as a Palestinian refugee in postwar Britain. Her narrative vividly portrays the emotional and cultural dissonance she experienced between her family's steadfast adherence to Palestinian traditions and her own yearning to assimilate into English society. This excerpt from the book encapsulates internal conflict:

The taboos about sex, food, and drink I had been taught were all part of what I saw as a war on the body... So extreme were my feelings that I wanted to dissociate myself completely from what my family stood for. I could see no possible compromise between their positions and mine. And since I put it all down to their Arabness, I rejected that too and all Arabs along with them.”(305)

Her mother starts wearing a caftan after their exile. The radio becomes a constant object in the story which the mother plays to listen to Arabic songs after their displacement occurred. Whenever her mother noted deviations from Palestinian culture or musical preferences, she makes it a practice to correct her children. The narrative reveals that the Palestinian Arab origins were very zealously maintained by their mother. She refuses to bargain with the English culture due to the fear of losing her Palestinian identity, try to convert her home into a microcosm Palestine. This part underscores the profound identity dilemma faced by Karmi, where the cultural practices and values of her Palestinian heritage became symbols of oppression in her eyes. Her rejection of these elements signifies a desperate attempt to forge a new identity in a foreign land. Karmi's narrative highlights the psychological toll of displacement and the struggle to reconcile multiple cultural identities, offering a poignant reflection on the challenges of assimilation and the quest for self-definition in the diaspora.

The Third Part of this narrative titled “In Search of Fatima” explores the political activism of Ghada where she embarks on a profound journey of cultural reconnection. This section delves into her efforts to reclaim her Palestinian identity in the face of displacement and the enduring impact of the Israeli occupation. After years of living in exile, Karmi returns to the Middle East, seeking to rediscover her roots and understand her place within the Palestinian narrative. Her journey takes her to Lebanon, where she engages with Palestinian refugee communities. However, she finds herself estranged, as her Western upbringing and education set her apart from those she hoped to connect with. This experience underscores the complexities of identity and belonging for diaspora Palestinians. Disillusioned by the political landscape and the challenges faced by Palestinians, Karmi becomes an active voice for her people. She criticizes the self-deception of many Israelis who justify actions that she views as oppressive. Her activism is not just a political stance but a personal mission to honor her heritage and advocate for justice.

Ghada outlines that she was devoted to Fatima as a child. Fatima was like a mother figure in her childhood life. She would even eat with her. This affinity and devotion of the writer to Fatima during childhood is the factor that transforms the character of Fatima into a symbol. The stereotypes associated with economically backward *Fellahin* community generated the feelings of shame in the identification with Fatima. But the writer notices that the *Fellahin* also had been seen as symbols of "tenacity, simplicity, and

steadfastness", which made Fatima a symbol of Palestinian people and culture. She writes:

And people believe that it was these qualities which saved them from the disintegration in the refugee camps after 1948 where so many of them were sent and still remain to this day. In the immediate aftermath of the expulsions from Palestine, they showed themselves steadfast and stoic, especially the women. Having worked all their lives in the home and on the land, these women soldiered on in their tents in the same way. (60)

The author also gives very vivid and accurate portrayal of Palestine's gender dynamics in the text. Karmi's selective referral to Women Organizations and her mother's involvement suggest gender politics movements where some women discarded the veil and helped imprisoned individuals prior to 1948. The way the character depicts gender through her dialogue suggests that Palestinian culture shows reduced bias against women. The political involvement of women was seen very natural during 1930's of Palestine. Her account implies the gendered discrimination she had faced in Damascus, was not prevalent in Palestine.

CONCLUSION

In her quest for identity, Karmi realizes that she does not need to choose between her Palestinian roots and her British nationality. Instead, she embraces a dual identity, finding strength in both aspects of her heritage. This realization allows her to live authentically, honoring her past while engaging with her present. Karmi's narrative is a testament to the resilience of the Palestinian spirit and the enduring quest for justice and identity amidst displacement. Ghada Karmi uses her cosmopolitan background to present Palestinian rights with deep commitment even though she appears self-contained. She retains two distinct personas because she has completely embraced the British lifestyle while maintaining strong Palestinian patriotism and skills to communicate Palestinian interests to British audiences. The autobiographical texts from Karmi deliver an exceptional viewpoint about the Palestinian political situation.

REFERENCES

1. Almassri, Juliana J. J. "Forced Migration: The 1948 Palestinian Refugees." *Hadtudományi Szemle*, vol. 16, no. 1, 2023, pp. 5–15. <https://doi.org/10.32563/hsz.2023.1.1>.
2. Al-Saleh, Asaad. "Displaced Autobiography in Edward Said's *Out of Place* and Fawaz Turki's *The Disinherited*." *Arab Studies Quarterly*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2011, pp. 79–95. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41858652>.
3. Amiry, Suad. *Sharon and My Mother-in-Law: Ramallah Diaries*. Granta, 2005.
4. Flapan, Simha. "The Palestinian Exodus of 1948." *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol. 16, no. 4, 1987, pp. 3–26. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2536718>.
5. Hamamra, Bilal, and Asala Mayaleh. "Code-Switching, Memory and the (Im)Possibility of Return in Ghada Karmi's *Return: A Palestinian Memoir*." *Changing English*, vol. 30, no. 2, 2023, pp. 156–67.
6. Harlow, Barbara. *Resistance Literature*. Routledge, 1987.
7. Karmi, Ghada. *In Search of Fatima: A Palestinian Story*. Verso, 2009.
8. ---. *Return: A Palestinian Memoir*. Verso, 2015.

9. Korel, Niyazi. *Representations of Exile in Palestinian Fiction*. 2013. Eastern Mediterranean University, Master's thesis.
10. Norris, Jacob. *Land of Progress: Palestine in the Age of Colonial Development, 1905–1948*. Oxford UP, 2013.
11. Masalha, Nur. “Remembering the Palestinian Nakba: Commemoration, Oral History and Narratives of Memory.” *Holy Land Studies*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2008, pp. 123–56. <https://doi.org/10.3366/E147494750800019X>.
12. Qabaha, Ahmad Rasmi. *Exile and Expatriation in Modern American and Palestinian Writing*. Springer, 2018.
13. Radley, Kurt René. “The Palestinian Refugees: The Right to Return in International Law.” *American Journal of International Law*, vol. 72, no. 3, 1978, pp. 586–614. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2200460>.
14. Said, Edward W. *Reflections on Exile: And Other Literary and Cultural Essays*. Granta Books, 2013.