

“Exilic Narrativity”: The Invisibility of Home in Palestinian Exile

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*To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it
“the way it really was” ... It means to seize hold of a memory as it
flashes up at a moment of danger.*

—Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller: Reflections on the
Works of Nikolai Leskov”

As our storytellers weave their identities across multiple geo-political communities and borders, the memories of the past are recovered in their narratives. This configuration is formed out of past and present images from their everyday cultural practices and lives, and links the palimpsest of Palestinian cultural identity to that of diasporic history. Such narrative-memories, however, do not strive towards articulating the past as self-identical, “the way it really was.” Rather, the past within those memories is constantly modified. These transformations occur primarily because such memories are regularly unleashed at “a moment of danger,” a moment of being nullified. In this article, I aim at reading this “moment of danger” through the visual narratives of Palestinian exile.

Importantly, the histories of (de)colonization, liberation movements and diasporas around the world have long destabilized essentialist notions of homogenous identity. Nonetheless, observing the contemporary history of world politics, we still witness the stubborn persistence of different cultural-political expressions of the unity at the heart of identity. Take for example the problematic ways such notions appear in today’s context of the so-called “War on Terror,” especially its main political idiom of “us” verses “them.” The concept of diaspora, however, not only complicates such essentialist notions of unified identity, but through its ability to forge new post-essential, post-geographical and post-cultural realignments, it also helps decipher the fault lines of ethnic, religious, class and gender homogeneity on which such notions are based. This critique of homogeneity primarily emerges from the migratory frame of reference that the concept of diaspora signifies, grounded as it is in geo-political (im)mobility beyond the nation-state lexicon

and its multi-linguistics. Such a migratory frame of reference compels us to take into consideration both voluntary and involuntary intercultural processes of (im)mobility, particularly when accounting for the construction of cultural identities and the ways in which they are perceived, activated and articulated.

In his article, “By Birth Or By Choice?” (1999), Edward Said puts forward a similar migratory impulse that characterizes the everyday experience of the Palestinian people whose recent history of forced deterritorialization and exile since the 1948 catastrophe (*al-nakba*) made it possible for them to take on “the choice of being Palestinians” for the purposes of political struggle and resistance. This argument that Palestinian identity is a “becoming by choice” rather than a “being” does not contradict Rashid Khalidi’s thesis that one can discern a distinct Palestinian identity that goes well back in history through the culture, civil society, and political rhetoric (Khalidi 177–209). Rather, the point, for Said, is that Palestinian identity “by choice” can be interpreted first and foremost as an active political – cultural commitment to be Palestinian. Such an active commitment is not only directed at the establishment of statehood, but to the more significant cause of ending injustice and liberating Palestinians into an identity that is capable of assuming its position, like all other identities and without exception, within contemporary history. This notion of identity as becoming by choice is what I refer to as “active identity.”

Through analyzing the visual narratives of *al-nakba* in Palestinian cinematic representations, I attempt to study a Palestinian aesthetic domain that still remains under-illuminated. And as a work on visibility, this article writes and un-writes Palestinian identity in its negotiation of the rigorous boundaries between home and “not-home” or exile. The object of analysis is a Palestinian cinematic narrative, the film: *Al Makhdu’un* (*The Dupes*, Saleh, 1972). With the phrase “Palestinian cinematic narratives,” I do not mean a cinema that is exclusively made by Palestinians. Rather, I am referring to a cinema that is to a large extent preoccupied with the question of Palestine. By taking on this film, I will probe its visual characteristics both in relation to Palestinians’ loss of the homeland in the past, and to the Palestinian diaspora’s struggle to establish narratives of home and identity in the present of exile. First, I examine this film as a mirror of self and other through which narratives of the lost homeland as well as its history of subordination are constructed against the backdrop of exile. Second, I elaborate on these narratives in the film in terms of their mode of storytelling and focalization with special attention to their aesthetic affects – the ways they activate narratives of Palestinian cultural identity in relation to the concepts of home and exile.

“Exilic Narrativity”: Exile as a Deadly Other

In contemporary culture, the relationship between cinema and exile is perhaps more complex than ever before. While modern technology of both artistic expressions and warfare enables a multifaceted theatricalisation of destruction and loss, the “cinematic”

remains an aesthetic medium that sets out to transform the experience of migrancy and displacement, by turning exile into a force of creativity, and by turning a linguistic and cultural no man's land into a fertile soil. This is possible primarily because cinematic narratives, through their various devices, are capable of substantiating that behind the historical and statistical data of war and displacement, there are human beings and personal stories. In other words, cinematic narratives are capable of pointing out that the exilic experience is no longer something that *just* happens to someone else, in some distant place, but that it is a constitutive, albeit brutal, cultural phenomenon of our reality.

Egyptian director Tawfiq Saleh's *Al Makhdu'un* (*The Dupes*) articulates the question of Palestine, not only through invoking the tragedy of the lost homeland (Palestine), but also by screening the discursive effects of such loss on Palestinian cultural identity within the reality of exile. The film unravels this question by means of the stories of the three main characters – Abu Qais, Assad and Marwan – who represent different generations of Palestinians attempting to escape the poverty of the refugee camps to find employment in Kuwait. As an adaptation of Ghassan Kanafani's masterful novella *Rijal Fi Al Shams* (1962, translated into English as *Men in the Sun*, 1978), the film stages the struggle which these three Palestinians undergo in their arduous attempt to escape their impoverished and hopeless lives and to build a future in exile. The characters' journey to search for a material security in exile is alluring but unreachable as they suffocate in an airless water tank at the Iraq-Kuwait border. Both the story, the journey it tells, and the characters' lives end up on the garbage heap.

Although the film (*Al Makhdu'un*) operates within the boundaries of different cinematic genres, it still uses storytelling as an aesthetic device that produces its narrative. The discussion of genres and the categorical distinction between them is a prominent discussion, not only in cinematic theory, but also in other domains; the most popular among them literary theory. My analysis of this film departs from a narratological, rather than generic point of view. Therefore, in my analysis of *Al Makhdu'un*, I will focus my discussion on the narratological relationship between the multiple ways of storytelling within the film and the stories that are told. Conceptualizing the multiplicity of modes of telling this film deploys is significant in that it allows us to understand Palestinian exile as a compelling experience signifying place disorder and fragmented living. In this experience, the exiled subject is caught between a much desired home and a denied accessibility to it. Such a conceptualization also helps us to theorize a particular narrativity through which the stories of exile can be read.

This is what I call an "exilic narrativity." By "exilic narrativity" I mean a narrative-building through fragmentation in terms of place, self and other. This exilic narrativity, I contend, represents a specific instance of migratory aesthetics and it is noticeable in the fragmented sequence of storytelling of most narratives of exile. Such a fragmentation can be seen, for example, in *Al Makhdu'un*'s narrativization of Palestinian exile through multiple fictional and documentary images and voices. As a result of this

fragmentation, a “drifting” mode of storytelling takes shape. This mode of telling introduces “drifting storytelling” as a tool suitable for narrating a mobile event like that of Palestinian exile. Such a “drifting storytelling” can be seen in the film’s constant shifting (in images and voices) between the past of the lost homeland and the present time of exile. Time and space, then, are both set adrift to mirror an experiential “truth” beyond the fiction – the documentary divide.

It is precisely through this analytical understanding of exile and its “drifting storytelling” within the interconnected realms of space, time, language, memory and the everyday experience that *Al Makhdu’un*’s narrative moves from the realm of representation into that of theorization of exile. This shift, from representing into theorizing, enables us to understand exilic narrativity within a mode of reading that systematically accounts for its drifting in terms of memory and its temporality against linear time. Through this mode of reading, the film can be seen not as a representative of a migrant experience (Palestinian exile), rather as a “migratory aesthetic” which theorizes such an exilic experience. This reading of the film as a “migratory aesthetic” is an “affect-based” one that opens up a specific discourse which takes into consideration the multiple forms of storytelling an estranging experience like that of exile effectuates in the present. At the heart of this reading lies the transition from colonial other to self as other, which becomes possible in exile.

Al Makhdu’un’s intense drama is set in a highly charged and awkward space, shaped by the characters’ death in the blistering desert. Thus, the film represents the tormented realm of a Palestinian diasporic consciousness that has been living amid the plight of exile for more than half a century. The epic theme, and the cataclysmic ambiance extremely condensed into this film of 107 minutes, makes it a distinctive Palestinian exilic narrative. Moreover, it is one told through multiple voices and perspectives. Such multiplicity of telling not only allows the three stories told within the film to transmit historical details and personal memories, but also to revive Palestinian cultural memory both by conveying the ordeal of loss and exile and by offering empathy to the exiled Palestinians. The stories of the film range from Abu Qais’s memories of the homeland he left behind and of his one month old daughter (Hosna) who died due to emaciation after the family was forced out of its village, to the story of the teenage boy, Marwan, who sets off on a hazardous journey into the unknown in order to support his impoverished family. As such, the melodramatic aspects of the stories within the film give voice to the voiceless exiled Palestinians both individually and collectively. Individually, because these aspects construct a plausible space wherein each one of these exiled characters could exist (live and die) as individuals. And collectively, by means of the thematic nexus of the stories and their storytellers as particular narratives of Palestinian exile told by exiled Palestinian subjects.

At the beginning of *Al Makhdu’un*, the camera descends from the sky and the mid-day blazing sun down to an empty desert. This image is accompanied by sentimental

Arabic flute music as the names of the film crew roll on the screen. While on the lower part of the screen we see what looks like human skeletal remains of someone who obviously died in this desert, on the upper side of the screen, the camera zooms in on a figure that is coming from a distance. As the camera moves to receive him, the image of the skeletal remains slowly disappears and is replaced by the image of a seemingly exhausted man with a white scarf covering his head and carrying a small sack on his shoulder. Just before we are able to take a closer look at the man's face and make sense of him, the following lines pop up on the screen:

*And my father once said:
A man without a homeland
Will have no grave in the earth
And he forbade me to leave [travel].*

Like many stories, the story of *Al Makhdu'un* has a storyteller who announces it. This storyteller, one of the narrator's several possible manifestations, is materialized through these lines which announce the story of the film. The conjunction "And" with which the opening sentence of these lines begins is more than a paratactic sign, a common style in Arabic language. It is also a sign that carries with it a temporal signification related to the linguistic dynamic of the sentence itself; that is its relationship with the sentence that precedes it and that which follows. What precedes this sentence, however, is absent and invisible.

From a narratological point of view, the invisibility of what precedes the opening sentence is a significant element that reflects on the larger story, and even on the film itself. Such invisibility turns into a demarcation which situates the film as a narrative beginning at a specific temporal point that does not coincide with the beginning of the whole story. In other words, the beginning of the story is missing – it is drifting somewhere before the dangling "And," and at the same time, the present of the story we will see in the film immediately starts after reading the words "my father once said." It is the story of exiled men "without a homeland," who will have "no grave in the earth." In spite of their father's warning not to "leave" the homeland, they still take on the journey, and now we will see the story of how they perish in exile; a foretold destiny of doom precipitated by their ignoring of the father's vision.¹

In one sense, by exposing its beginning through such a vision of exile as a deadly place, the film focalizes the homeland – the other side of the binary opposition – in a way that allows it to stand as a privileged place. Yet, in another sense, by doing so the film also complicates any straightforward relationship between place and time. The fact that the beginning of the film foregrounds the father's gloomy vision of exile allows the construction of exile as an empty place from a temporality of before that predicts an after. The construction of exile as a void gives it its material presence as

a specific place, yet such a construction does not entirely compose the temporality of the narrative of this place. In the film, the temporal composition of exile (and its narrative) is not at all foregrounded through the father's vision. Instead, the film radically questions the meaning of this vision. That is, the film questions what is envisioned (exile) discursively both in terms of how successful the travelling of the characters is, and how endurable the environment of exile.

In order to answer these questions, the film itself is compelled to take on the journey. It has to accompany the characters in their journey, and even become a traveller precisely like them. This is the mirroring of self and other I mentioned before. The film's travelling can be seen in the sequence of images, following the opening statement, through which the camera begins to track sideways to bring into view an oasis wherein the exhausted figure travelling (Abu Qais) could rest. The moment Abu Qais enters this oasis, he takes the white scarf off his head, and throws himself into the shade of a tree with his face on the ground. The shade of the tree, however, does not relieve Abu Qais from his trip, rather it opens another gate through which he (as well as the film) continue travelling; this time backward into the past.

While Abu Qais is facing the ground, he hears the sound of his heart beat. Immediately after, Abu Qais begins to recollect a similar scene from the past in which he is lying down in the shade of the trees of his field in the homeland, and chatting to his friend. When Abu Qais asks his friend about the sound, his friend answers: "it is the sound of your heart. You can hear it when you lay your chest close to the ground." Abu Qais shrugs off his friend's answer, and challenges him with another question, by asking: "And the smell, then?" When his friend does not provide an answer, Abu Qais grabs some ground in his hand and begins to sniff it and says:

Every time I sniff the ground, I seem to smell the scent of my wife's hair after a cold bath. The same smell. The same freshness. The same moisture. This moisture comes from yesterday's rain. But yesterday it did not rain. It could not have rained. Have you forgotten where you are?

As this statement suggests, Abu Qais's identification with the homeland not only takes place through romanticizing it in his projection of it onto the figure of a woman, but also through a (human) materialization of this homeland. Such materialization primarily emerges through the articulation of the romanticized figure of the homeland by means of the senses (hearing, smell and touch). As a result, the homeland encompasses the substance of Abu Qais's life through which his identification with it is formed as an unspoken existential bond.

Moreover, it is precisely through these senses that Abu Qais is brought back from his recollections into the present. It is only when he smells the ground that Abu Qais realizes that the "moisture comes from yesterday's rain" and that "it could not have rained [yesterday]," and therefore he must be in the wrong place (exile). The image on the screen corresponds to Abu Qais's realization in that, immediately after these

words, we see him back in the oasis; this time not in the shade of the tree, but in the blazing sun of exile. This event, Abu Qais's transfer from past into present and from the shade of the homeland's trees into the blazing sun of exile, becomes symbolic of his overall transition from being a Palestinian peasant "with" a homeland into a homeless exiled "without." Such symbolism not only characterizes the film as a Palestinian exilic narrative, but it also focalizes Abu Qais as an exilic subject who embodies a memory that travels between multiple places (homeland and exile) and multiple times (past and present). The voice that tells this is also split. At the end of the monologue Abu Qais changes from first-person to second-person discourse. He can no longer "be" a unified person when the realization of exile hits him.

By Way of Travel: Memory Contexts

Abu Qais's realization that he is in the wrong place, in exile rather than in the homeland, leads him through a long recollection from the past through which his journey of dispersion is revealed. In the oasis, having momentarily regained consciousness, and still holding the ground in his hands thinking that the moisture must be from rain, Abu Qais's eyes begin cruising around until they finally settle down on a river. Abu Qais suddenly recognizes this river as the *Shatt Al-Arab* waterway in Iraq. He learned this one day when he was sneaking from the window watching his son (Qais) in the class of Ustaz Salim, the teacher from Jaffa who taught in the village's school. The moment Abu Qais identifies the river as the *Shatt Al-Arab*, Ustaz Salim's voice takes over as we see him teaching the village's kids about the river and asking them to repeat after him: "When the two great rivers, Tigris and Euphrates, meet, they form one river called the *Shatt Al-Arab*, which extends from just above Basra ..."

The story of Ustaz Salim not only serves as a plausible explanation of Abu Qais's sudden recognition of the name of the river, but it also allows the viewer a glimpse of the lives of the Palestinians before *al-nakba* both as simple peasants and as a people who were apparently unaware of the tensions building up to the catastrophe. This becomes obvious in the following scene where the men of the village, including Abu Qais and Ustaz Salim, are sitting in the headman's reception-room, smoking the water-pipe and chatting. When one of the men asks Ustaz Salim if he is going to lead them in the prayers on Friday, Ustaz Salim immediately answers: "No, I am a teacher, not an *Imam* (a religious cleric). I cannot lead the prayers." When the headman asks him to clarify his answer, Ustaz Salim admits that he "does not know how to perform the prayers." The men of the village, puzzled and shocked by Ustaz Salim's answer, turn their eyes to the headman, who bursts out: "What do you know, then?" As Ustaz Salim is rising to leave the room, he says: "Many things. I am a good shot, for example. When they attack you, wake me. I, who knows how to shoot. I can be of some use to you then." Again, as in the opening lines, a voice from the past proleptically evokes the future.

In the following scene, the military attack on the village begins, and thus confirms this prolepsis. We see Ustaz Salim defending the village – together with another man of the village who later appears in the film as Abu Al Khaizaran; the driver who smuggles the three main characters in the film through the desert. As we see Ustaz Salim is shot and dies, as Abu Al Khaizaran is running to help him, Abu Qais’s voice comes in to comment on his death. Without seeing his face, we hear Abu Qais saying:

God rest your soul, Ustaz Salim. And may he bestow upon you his mercy.

Undoubtedly, you must have been among God’s favorites, when he made you give up the ghost, Ustaz Salim, before the Zionists occupy the land. God must have loved you – may his mercy be upon you. You stayed over there, Ustaz Salim. Is there any divine bounty more glorious?

As this statement suggests, for Abu Qais, the death of Ustaz Salim appears as a fortunate happening; even as a glorious “divine bounty.” Ustaz Salim is fortunate because his death took place “before the Zionists” occupied the land, and so he was saved from living under the occupation and enduring what Abu Qais, like all other Palestinians who survived *al-nakba*, is experiencing in the present.

This statement is followed by a sequence of images, a mix of archival footage of *al-nakba* combined with a single fictive image, exposing what Abu Qais’s family and the rest of Palestinians are going through in the aftermath of the catastrophe and what Ustaz Salim has been spared, thanks to his death “you stayed over there.” While in the archival footage, we see images of the Palestinians’ forced dispersion of their villages and towns, their tents, their settling in the refugee camps, their hunger, and their dependence on the United Nation’s aid – without which they would starve – in the fictive image, we see Abu Qais’s wife and son as members of that group of Palestinians.

The use of archival footage of *al-nakba* in the film not only gives a sense of pastness to Abu Qais’s story, but it also situates the film rigorously beyond the divide between fiction and documentary. Moreover, it foregrounds the film’s own discursivity as a “traveller.” As a “traveller,” the film, like its character (Abu Qais) who is recollecting his memories of the past, also has a memory. The film’s memory is composed of past images – preserved in archives – and is recalled by the insertion of this old filmic material. Conveying its memory in and through archives, the film seems to emphasize a particular conception of memory; one whose functionality is foregrounded in terms of archives as witness. Within such a conception, memory functions in different ways; both as a resort and as a harvest (consequence) in the interminable phases of flux. Memory, in this sense, appears as no more stationary in the limited space of filmic archives than it is in the labyrinths of our brains.

This is consistent with psychological theories of memory. In his book, *Searching for Memory: The Brain, the Mind and the Past*, Daniel Schacter argues that within the human brain, memory can function at different levels and that multiple interactive processes are required in order to experience memory. To enshrine and recall this

experience, in addition, is inextricably associated with the contexts, or what Schacter calls “cues for memory,” in which memories are recalled and to the contexts in which those memories were previously formed. In other words, memory not only appears as a specific “imprint” of the past to which we constantly resort when needed, but it can also be seen as a consequence that is temporally constituted in the present and that is performed both in response and through the processing and incorporation of “cues of memory” (or its contexts). It is precisely through such a cognitive-functional conception of memory as archival witnessing that the psychoanalytic notions of the (un)trustworthiness and (un)reliability of memory open up the possibility to see memory as a useful and continuously accessible process of disruption, rather than as an already distorting faculty. This is possible because these notions of memory (untrustworthiness and unreliability) are ultimately cognitive-functional notions themselves that are primarily related to the subject’s emotions and desires (Schacter 70–80).

Seen from this perspective, memory in the archival footage becomes a good reader that fills the temporal gap between past and present by marking the absences of the past’s events. The film’s use of archives, then, seems to suggest that the temporal nature of memory changes over time so that its experience shifts accordingly from the mnemonic to the contextual wherein memory is generated, reduced and conflated. Thus, rather than being a faculty which misappropriates (misrepresents) the past, memory represented in and through archives becomes a cultural – historical process that regularly interrupts (and at the same time is interrupted) in order to compose the temporality of the present exile. In this sense, the archival footage not only suspends the story told by the film (the deadly journey of exile), but it also interrupts the viewer’s evanescent memory of the story within the film (Abu Qais’s story). This interruption is facilitated by the archives of *al-nakba* which mystify as well as synthesize historical information so that the contexts within which the exilic subject’s memory is formed, enshrined and recalled can be unveiled. Moreover, this interruption of the viewer’s memory does not only occur on the level of the narrative and its focalizing subject, but it also takes place in the film on formal levels such as the movement of the camera, angles and framings. Such an interruption is evident in the shifting from Abu Qais’s story to the archival footage.

Consequently, the viewer’s activity of meaning production shifts from the fictional images of the film (Abu Qais’s story) to the reality referenced as it happened outside but determining the narrative of the film (the archives of *al-nakba*). This shift between inside and outside the narrative introduces yet another splitting of causality. The events “truthfully” presented in the memory images of the archives are both disconnected from the fictional story of Abu Qais by generic incompatibility, and presented as the cause of the character’s present state. Thus, the archives as witness, which interrupts the fictionality of the story told by the film becomes a bearer of its referentiality; a reference itself that validates such fictionality by exposing both its narratological and its historical contextual

latency. This effect is emphasized by the fact that this “witness” (archival footage) itself is interrupted by being juxtaposed to the single fictive image of Abu Qais’s family; an image that functions as a thematic and temporal reminder of the story within the film.

Through this reminder, Abu Qais’s family not only becomes an allegorical figure standing for exiled Palestinians, but also the memory of this family is articulated in terms of a particular history that exists in the context of *al-nakba* and its archives. Travelling between past and present and between fictional and archival images, the film not only processes memory in terms of its contexts, but also transmits the narrative of Palestinian exile in terms of its origins (*al-nakba*). It is precisely through the film’s travelling between its own historical memory (archives) and that personal one of its subject (Abu Qais) that the contexts of memory become signs that not only frame the subject’s memory in relation to the lost place, but at the same time trigger his storytelling of exile as a split of subjectivity.

Exile: By Way of Telling

In the film, the idea that exile is a place wherein subjectivity is split does not appear only in terms of the characters material travelling into exile where we see them aimlessly wandering in the desert, but also in terms of the shifting from individual into collective voices. This can be seen in the film in the way in which the individual narrative of Abu Qais is opened up and probed to its limits so that the other characters’ stories (Assad and Marwan) within the film can be introduced as a further explanation of the story of loss and exile told by the film.

In order to do so, the film is compelled to travel back from its own realm of memory (historical archives) into the memory of its speaking subject. Later in the film, we see Abu Qais wandering between the olive and the cactus trees of the homeland where he further elaborates on the death of Ustaz Salim:

God rest your soul, Ustaz Salim. You stayed over there. And thereby, you saved yourself all that misery, and have spared your white hair that shame. If you had lived, Ustaz Salim, and if you were drowned in poverty, as I am, would you have done what I did?

In this address to the dead man from the past, Abu Qais reiterates that Ustaz Salim’s death was a fortunate happening, primarily because his death saved him the misery of becoming a refugee suffering the shame of losing the homeland. At the same time, Abu Qais questions whether the impoverished lives of Palestinian refugees, their poverty and their dispersion would have forced Ustaz Salim to act similarly to what Abu Qais is doing now, leaving the homeland. Through this question, Abu Qais questions his own decision. The moment he asks this question, we see him walking in the blazing sun of the desert where his mind drifts forward and backward once again as he begins narrating, in detail, the misery and the humiliation Palestinians experience since they lost their homeland.

In a relatively long scene, Abu Qais not only recalls how Saad – his neighbour in the refugee camp who returns from Kuwait with a fortune – convinced him to undertake

the journey, but he also reads the Palestinian plight in terms of its larger politics, Arab politics in particular. While Saad is talking to the men and women of the camp about his successful adventures in Kuwait, he turns to Abu Qais and asks him “why don’t you go there, Abu Qais?” Confronted by this question, Abu Qais does not give an answer and instead a series of other questions echo in his head:

Why don’t you go there? What are you waiting for? Are you still unaware that you lost your trees, your house, your youth and your whole country? What did you expect? Talks ... Talks arguing nonsense. They have sold you and bought you again ... you have the Zionists before you and the traitors behind. You are in between [the hammer and the nail]. Haven’t you got it yet that all this is useless? They want you to remain a beggar with a drooping head. They want to make sure that you never raise your voice. That you quarrel instead of striving together and claim your rights. It is a fact. Whoever survived the bullets of the Zionists, dies in humiliation. And whoever survives both is a victim of the traitors and plotters. Wouldn’t it have been better you had died like Ustaz Salim ... Why don’t you move on ... What are you waiting for? That fortune should fall on you from the roof? But do you have a roof yet? No roof, no house. They brought you and told you live here and you stayed. A year later, they said that room is too big for you. Let us have half of it. And you made a partition with blankets and jute. What are you waiting for? Your baby, who is going to raise him? Who is going to feed him? Why don’t you go and find work to recover what you have lost?

Set in the form of the split subjectivity infiltrated by “you” and “they,” this passage not only points out the miserable circumstances which the Palestinians experience in the aftermath of the loss of the homeland. It also criticizes the passivity of Arab regimes and Arab leaders toward the Palestinians. Such a criticism is clear through the portrayal of the Arab governments as “traitors” who betrayed the Palestinians, “they have sold you and bought you again.” This criticism is supported visually again by means of archival images that proclaim the “truth” of the fiction. While Abu Qais is uttering these words, archival images of Arab leaders such as King Hussain of Jordan and King Faisal of Saudi Arabia are shown. We see images of them gathering and discussing the Palestinian plight in the Arab league and other organizations. These images are instantly juxtaposed to images of Palestinian suffering and exile. It is in this sense that Arab leaders’ discussions become, like Saad’s fictional exhortations, “Talks ... Talks arguing nonsense,” something that does not relieve the Palestinians.²

Immediately after this scene, we see Abu Qais and his wife talking to Saad who tells them that “just beyond the Shatt lie all the things that are denied you.” When Abu Qais asks his wife what she thinks, she answers: “Whatever you say,” and nods in a supportive manner. It is only then that we see Abu Qais looking up at the blazing sun as he leaves the oasis. Later on, we see him negotiating the cost of the trip with the smuggler who warns him that the journey is not easy, and he asks for fifteen dinars as a price. When Abu Qais proposes to pay him ten dinars instead, the smuggler

turns to Abu Qais and says, “we don’t force you to do it [the journey].” At this point, and in the same scene of the smuggler, the film interrupts the story of Abu Qais as we see the smuggler asking for a similar charge (fifteen dinars) from someone else, the young man Assad, who also, like Abu Qais, wants to be smuggled into Kuwait.

As he is bargaining with the smuggler, Assad finally agrees to give him the fifteen dinars he is charging, on the condition that the smuggler will only get the money after the end of the journey. The smuggler refuses, and tells Assad what he said to Abu Qais before, namely that he did not force him to take the trip and that if Assad does not accept his conditions, he should leave him alone, “Get out, and don’t stop before you are on the main road.” The moment Assad hears these words “the main road,” his mind drifts back into the past as we see him wandering on the road and lost in the desert.

This way, his reasons for taking this journey are exposed. We see Assad, like Abu Qais, as a Palestinian who is victimized and whose situation forces him to leave his home. Moreover, we see him as a young man whose life cannot become any worse than it already is. He is involved with the resistance movement and therefore persecuted by the authorities. In order to solve his problems, Assad decides to escape the land and to make a new start in Kuwait. Unlike Abu Qais who clings to the mirage of exile, yet hesitates before taking on the journey and doubts that the reality of exile will live up to its expectations, Assad is completely convinced that leaving the homeland is the best solution for his problems.

When Assad turns to his uncle to borrow the money he needs for the trip, his uncle warns him in the beginning that he should not be too optimistic about his trip to Kuwait because many people have gone before him and “came back empty-handed.” Soon after, however, Assad’s uncle changes his mind and decides to give him the money:

[uncle says:] All the same, I will give you the fifteen dinars. But remember, these are my last. [Assad says:] Why give it to me since you are sure I’ll never be able to refund it? [uncle:] Do you know why? [Assad:] Why? [uncle:] You don’t know why? Because I want you to start even in hell. So that you can marry my daughter.

The moment Assad hears his uncles’ motivation for lending him the money, he realizes that his uncle wants to buy him for his daughter “just as one buys a bag of manure for one’s field.” When Assad – agitated by his uncle’s proposition – complains to his friend about his uncle and asks him whether he should marry his cousin “just because her father read *al-fatihah* – the first Sura of the Quran, customarily recited at the conclusion of an agreement – when we were born the same day,” his friend answers:

No doubt he believes it’s destiny... Why should you sell yourself? Why do you grab those fifteen dinars in such a way? Stay here, Assad. It’s your place. Don’t run away ... Do you think of running away at every difficult step? ... Stay with us. Why should you sell yourself?

Despite his friend’s appeal to him to stay in the homeland and face the problems rather than run away from them, Assad is determined to take on the journey – even if it meant that he has to “sell” himself – as we see him taking the money from his uncle.

After this scene Assad cuts a deal with Abul-Abed, another Palestinian from the camp, who takes the money from him in advance, swears by his honour not to betray him, and later on smuggles him across the Jordan-Iraq border and abandons him on the way in the desert.

At this point, the film returns to the present where it left off, as we are brought back to the scene where Assad was bargaining with the smuggler in Iraq. This return is not a ploy to continue with Assad, but to introduce the story of the teenager, Marwan, who also bargains with the same smuggler and even threatens him – in case the smuggler does not accept the five dinars he is offering – that he will report him to the police. The smuggler, then, becomes angry and slaps Marwan on the face and kicks him out of the shop. As Marwan runs away crying, he meets Abu Al Khaizaran, who appeared earlier in the film fighting with Ustaz Salim. Abu Al Khaizaran tells him that he is also a Palestinian and that he agrees to smuggle him to Kuwait for five dinars on the condition that Marwan should not tell anyone that he charged him five dinars only, and also to help him find other people who want to go to Kuwait. When Marwan tells Abu Al Khaizaran that he knows someone who is staying with him at the hotel (Assad), Abu Al Khaizaran says that he also knows someone who used to be his neighbour in the village where he lived in Palestine (Abu Qais).

Only at this point do the different story lines come together. Soon after, the four of them meet and discuss the details of the trip. Abu Al Khaizaran tells them that he has to go to Kuwait since he works there, and that he drives a truck in which he can smuggle them in. He also tells them that the truck belongs to a rich Kuwaiti man and that is why it does not get checked at the border. All they have to do is to hide inside the empty water-tank “for six or seven minutes” on the Iraqi border and a similar amount of time on the Kuwaiti one. When Abu Qais shows his doubts about the safety of the journey, “This is a dangerous business. Maybe we die,” Abu Al Khaizaran smiles to him and asks him not to worry since “I am the one who drives ... the leader.” When the men are finally convinced, cut the deal with Abu Al Khaizaran and agree to depart the next day, Abu Al Khaizaran turns to Marwan and asks him if he knows anyone in Kuwait. When Marwan says that his brother works there, Abu Qais asks why Marwan, then, has to go and work in Kuwait instead of going to school? It is only then that the film travels into the past once again as Marwan tells his story. In the following scenes, we see how Marwan’s brother stops sending money to his family after he gets married and how he sends letters to Marwan telling him that it is his turn to leave school and take responsibility, “dive in the pan.” We also see how Marwan’s father, struggling to feed his wife and five children, divorces his wife for no reason and runs off to marry Shafiqqa, the rich handicapped woman who lost her leg during *al-nakba* – and leaves his kids, forcing Marwan to take on the responsibility of supporting the family.

These stories within the film, ranging from Abu Qais to Assad to Marwan, not only reflect a wide scope of suffering through which Palestinians experience exile, but at

the same time these stories portray the multiplicity of the narratives of the loss of the homeland during *al-nakba*. Such multiplicity is emblemized in the three stories both through the subjects' ages and order of appearance from old to young as a way for composing the larger story told by the film. Each of the three stories is exposed through analepses that are connected ultimately, albeit differently, to the same event, the loss of the homeland. All this takes place while the three characters are encircled within the present of exile. As a result, this exilic present becomes an integral part of the storytelling itself. In this sense, exile, like memory, cannot be understood and analyzed without its contexts: that is, both the contexts in which exile is experienced in the present and the contexts from which it previously originated. It is precisely through such entanglement between exile and the multiple and fragmented stories within the film that the story it has told becomes an instantiation of exilic narrativity.

Death By Heat: Exilic Time

Immediately after the exposition of the characters' stories is completed, we return to their actual journey in the desert, the closing part of *Al Makhdū'un*. The journey towards Kuwait is riveting and emotional. This journey is presented through different short scenes all of which lack synchrony except for the first one (the beginning of the journey). The first scene of the journey – where we see Marwan and Abu Qais sitting on the roof of the truck and Assad sitting next to Abu Al Khaizaran chatting – primarily serves to expose yet another story within the film, that of Abu Al Khaizaran.

In this scene, Abu Al Khaizaran is talking to Assad and mockingly comparing the one hundred and fifty kilometre journey to “the path which God promised his creatures they must cross before being directed either to paradise or to hell.” Assad replies that they entrusted him (Abu Al Khaizaran) with leadership and it is up to him to take them to heaven or hell. When Assad asks Abu Al Khaizaran whether he has ever been married, Abu Al Khaizaran quickly answers with a question: “why do you ask?” and immediately begins telling his story. Through Abu Al Khaizaran's story, not only are we reminded of Ustaz Salim's death in the story of Abu Qais where Abu Al Khaizaran was present, but also we see a “latent” continuation of that story from the perspective of Abu Al Khaizaran. Shortly after the death of Ustaz Salim, Abu Al Khaizaran is injured while defending his homeland and stripped of his manhood. When one of the doctors, while he is on the operating table screaming that he “does not want to,” tells him that losing one's manhood is better than dying, Abu Al Khaizaran screams “No. It's better to be dead.” It is through Abu Al Khaizaran's preference of death over life “without manhood” that his view resembles that of Abu Qais who also sees the death of Ustaz Salim as a fortunate happening which prevented him from living on “without homeland.” This scene connects both characters' perspectives on loss through which the first's preference of death over life “without manhood” becomes a synecdoche for the latter's preference of death over life “without homeland.”³

Also, through this scene Abu Al Khaizaran is focalized, like Abu Qais, as a victimized Palestinian who deserves sympathy. However, the viewer's sympathy with Abu Al Khaizaran – unlike that with Abu Qais, Assad and Marwan – remains only partial. This is so because in the following scenes of the journey, not only do we see him as a man who sacrificed his manhood for the homeland, but through his actions we see him also as a man who lost the “morals of manhood.” Throughout the journey, he keeps describing himself as someone whose goal in life is to collect money: “All I want is money, and when I have money I want more and more.” Moreover, in general he acts like a man without morals. In one of the scenes, while the men are resting after they crossed the Iraqi border, and after Abu Qais, Assad and Marwan barely survived their trip in the extremely hot and airless water tank, Abu Al Khaizaran grabs the water-skin attached to the truck and starts pouring it into his mouth and then with the rest of the contents starts washing his head and his whole body without offering any to the dying men. It is because of such actions that the viewer withdraws sympathy from Abu Al Khaizaran's character. Such lack of sympathy with this figure, I contend, functions to complete the story told by the film through which his character (and story) becomes an allegory of those Palestinians who rather than staying in the homeland, prefer to leave in search of material security in exile. Such allegorization is facilitated by the temporal structure of the scenes that compose the context (the journey in the desert) within which Abu Al Khaizaran's story is revealed.

As I suggested above, the remaining scenes of the journey lack synchrony. To paraphrase Mieke Bal, when a scene lacks synchrony, ellipsis often becomes prominent (Bal 105–07). This is what happens in *Al Makhdu'un*, time is compressed. Unlike the first part of the film, where all the characters are given enough space to return to their past in the homeland, in the final part (the journey) ellipsis occurs in the characters' present signifying that there is no time to go back to the past. During the journey, instead of the characters going into the past by means of memory acts, the past itself erupts in the present as we hear the voices in the characters' minds and see images of their past pop up on the screen. This scarcity of time not only interrupts the progression of Abu Al Khaizaran's story – we only see how he lost his manhood, but what we don't know is how he travelled into exile like the other three characters – but also the journey itself is presented in an accelerated manner as if the film itself seems to be running towards its ending.

Such a scarcity of time becomes most visible in the film's ending. Abu Qais, Assad and Marwan, tired and barely able to stand, go into the lorry's tank for the second (and final) time doubting that they would come out of it alive as Marwan declares: “We all lost it.” At this point, Abu Al Khaizaran tells them to set their watches and that this time it would not take him more than “seven minutes.” While Abu Al Khaizaran is rushing into the empty border checkpoint, he is suddenly held up by the officials on the border. As he repeatedly shouts “I am in a hurry,” the officials keep ridiculing him by asking him about his secret mistress in Iraq (the dancer girl Kawkab).

In the officials' room, while Abu Al Khaizaran consults his watch indicating that he has already lost four minutes, the camera keeps shifting between the inside of the room where he is being delayed and the outside where the truck with the men is standing. We hear the three men inside the tank knocking, yet the sound of their knocking never reaches anyone, no more than it has for the past fifty-eight years since *al-nakba*. Finally, as Abu Al Khaizaran finishes his papers, after he promises to introduce the officials to his imaginary mistress, he consults his watch again to ascertain that he is indeed late and that it took him more than seven minutes (fifteen minutes). Driving out of sight from the border, with the men inside the tank already stopped knocking, Abu Al Khaizaran stops the truck after awhile, and goes to check on the men. When he opens the burning hot tank, he finds the three of them dead.

The scarcity of time in this scene is manifested through the use of watches. These watches give access to exilic time, by indicating that time in exile is both moving rapidly (from four to fifteen minutes) and at the same time the suffering is endless. They also suggest that there is time in exile, yet it is never enough. Through their death, such vision of exilic time becomes exemplary of the characters' short lives in exile. For Abu Qais, Assad and Marwan, life can possibly begin in exile, but it is a life that is not to be lived and not to be continued. This is simply so because it is a life that is planted in an airless environment under the blazing sun. This sun brands the three of them with pain as it acts as a "decoy" implanted in time: one that can make a day of their lives seem like a year, yet also one which shortens the time they have to live.

In *Al Makhdu'un*, after Abu Al Khaizaran finds out that Abu Qais, Assad and Marwan died, he continues the journey alone in total silence. Without uttering a word, he stops on the way to Kuwait, carries the three bodies off the truck and abandons them on the garbage heap. On the screen, while we see Abu Al Khaizaran walking back to his truck and driving away, the camera slowly brings into view the three bodies laying next to each other. This image is accompanied by the same sentimental music with which the film began. More importantly, the moment the camera brings into view the three bodies on the garbage heap, it begins scanning them and moving forward until it reaches Abu Qais's hand which is in the shape of someone who is holding his fingers on the trigger; symbolizing resistance. It is only then that the same lines with which the film started pop up on the screen once again:

*And my father once said:
A man without a homeland
Will have no grave in the earth
And he forbade me to leave [travel].*

Ending the film with these lines brings back the father's vision of exile. Between the first and the second quotation of the lines, the film has travelled in order to discover

their meaning. Moreover, through the images of the characters' dead bodies as well as Abu Qais's fingers as if on the trigger, the film seems to suggest that it has understood what the father's vision "have no grave in the earth" means and therefore it subliminally evokes in the image of the trigger, the choice of staying in the homeland to work in the resistance instead of "existing" in the desert of exile.

Yet, in another sense, the repetition of the beginning in the ending, particularly through the use of the same sentimental music and the father's vision, can also be read in narratological terms as a device that characterizes "drifting storytelling" in the film. The death of Abu Qais, Assad, and Marwan signifies that the stories embedded within the film also lost their storytellers. This loss, however, is compensated by the fact that the film itself turns into a "travelling storyteller." This compensatory shift is achieved primarily through the silence of Abu Al Khaizaran as well as the camera's movement forward, which replaces the movement of the ones who died. In this sense, circularity and movement stand for endless repetition and retrovision. In other words, as much as the closing images in the film represent the ending of the story it has told, these images could possibly also be just the beginning of another story of the lost homeland.

The story of this lost homeland is constructed by multiple storytelling. Perhaps to be a Palestinian in exile, then, is the condition of constantly travelling to the outside with that which is inside oneself. The place of the lost homeland is exchanged with the stories of its loss and the aptness of "drifting storytelling." These exilic stories, represented within and told by *Al Makhdu'un*, exist, like their storytellers, on an exilic juncture between the factual and the fictional, between the archives and the acted scenes, and between documentary and fictional cinema. It is through this dialectical "in-between" viewing position that the three exiled men in the film together with the viewer are perpetually left with the visibility of the lost home and at the same time, most significantly, with the invisibility of exile as a new home.

The invisibility of exile as a new home is a focus of most contemporary Palestinian narratives of *al-nakba*. The details of the relationship between exile and the Palestinian subject vary from narrative to narrative, but how these details alternate and effect Palestinian cultural identity in the present remains a critical question in those narratives. In my analysis of *Al-Makhdu'un*, I have discussed how reading exilic narrativity, as an instance of migratory aesthetics, is constantly grounded in a "drifting" mode of visual storytelling between multiple fictional and documentary images and voices. In this drifting the voice of the exilic subject is given a vision appropriate to his/her journeys in the desert of exile.

Endnotes

1. M.H. Abrams defines paratactic style as: "... one in which the members within a sentence, or else a sequence of complete sentences, are put one after the other without any expression of their connection or relations except (at most) the noncommittal connective, 'and'" (Abrams 304–05). On the storyteller as a specific version of the narrator, see (Bal 16–77).
2. In fact, the film was banned twice in Egypt and in other Arab countries for its criticism of Arab regimes articulated in this scene. See a description of the film on <www.arabfilm.com>.
3. Some critics read this story – Abu Alkhaizaran's loss of manhood – in terms of the Palestinian loss of the homeland as a "national defeat that is experienced as castration" (Amireh 753).

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