

## **Living between memory, war, and daily life**

**Rola (Hamed) Abu Zeid — O'Neill**

Department of Sociology, UCC

---

My memory has betrayed me, and slowly I am losing it. I fear the black day when I find myself without any memory, just a body ... that wanders in the streets and forests ... until a hunter finds it. I, who fought the windmills, lost my memory and turned into nothing, exactly nothing. He [the hunter] will take me to the house where I was born and hand me over to my family ... He'll go to his family and tell them about an old man who lost his memory and pompously proclaim, "If I hadn't intervened he would have been eaten by the hyenas." We shall be eaten by the hyenas if we lose our memory. We shall be eaten by the hyenas.

(Natour, 2003: 19)

This paragraph written by the widely acclaimed Palestinian writer, Salman Natour, in one of his significant play about memory, as he tried to show the trauma of the Nakba for Palestinian society. His writing reflects many of the deep seated emotions embedded in Palestinian memory. I remember watching the play in Haifa in July 2004. Natour performed the role with his wonderful acts and movements. His play raised a lot of thoughts in my mind, especially when he started mentioning his granddaughter, Salma, and the stories that he told her and will tell.

These Nakba (Palestinian Catastrophe) memories and stories, especially for the first and second generations, are often underpinned with feelings of fear, loss, humiliation, and insecurity. They relate to the year 1948 as a demarcating event in their lives. Simply, their lives were turned upside down in that year. Therefore, the Nakba is a key to Palestinian collective memory and national identity from 1948 until today.

### **What is the Nakba?**

The Nakba (Palestinian Catastrophe) is the disaster that befell the Palestinian people in 1948, after the Jewish forces (subsequently Israeli) embarked on a massive operation of ethnic cleansing that aimed at ridding Palestine of its indigenous population, in order to find a nation-state for the Jews. As a result of the 1948 Arab-Israel war, many Palestinians became exiles in the surrounding Arab countries and abroad, where they remain until this day, usually as stateless, temporary residents. Estimates of the number of refugees fleeing

or expelled from Palestine in 1947-48 are around 714,000. Constantin Zureiq was the first to use the word “Nakba” in reference to the events of 1948. For him, “The defeat of the Arabs in Palestine is no simple catastrophe (Nakba), nor an insignificant, fleeting evil, but a catastrophe in the full sense of the word, an ordeal more severe than any suffered by the Arabs in their long history of ordeals and tragedies”. Why we need memory?

As a third generation Palestinian citizen of Israel, I belong to the generation that came into this world after the dismantling of military rule that the state of Israel forced upon its Palestinian citizens until 1966. This military rule prevented all citizens from leaving their villages or towns without specific permission. My generation did not really experience Israel’s wars against the Arab countries in 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. However, the beginning of my political life and awareness began in 1982, when I was just 10 years old. That was when I participated with my grandmother in demonstrations in my hometown of Nazareth against the Lebanon war and the Sabra and Shatila massacre, and we faced Israeli police violence and harassment with our bodies. As a child I could not forget this event; until today the events of that day are indelibly etched in my memory. It seems as if they happened only yesterday.

After my grandfather passed away in 1991, my grandmother took upon herself the task of telling us, her grandchildren, about the different roles she undertook when my grandfather was in jail for his role in the resistance to the Zionist colonization of Palestine. Since I was a child, both my grandfather’s and grandmother’s stories have been the seeds of my growing political awareness. They told us what happened during the Nakba period, especially in our hometown Nazareth. Both of them lay in front of the trucks that came to take Nazareth’s citizens to the Lebanese border in the north. In this way, they and others, prevented Nazareth’s citizens from being evicted in July 1948. My grandmother told us about the time when they hosted refugees, from other villages and towns who came to Nazareth, in their small house with a garden in the middle of the city centre. Some of these refugees became Internally Displaced, while others became refugees in neighbouring Arab countries. We, their granddaughters and grandsons, were excited to hear these stories.

Therefore, I believe that memory is an important political and historical tool that secures the place, the nation’s history, and the homeland. Losing memory means losing national identity. The fact of being out of “place”, out of “time”, out of the hometown ,makes forgetting, mixing, or losing these memories easier, especially in that many of the Nakba generation are passing away, taking with them their stories and testimonies.

## **What is memory?**

Collective memory has recently become a central focus in different fields of research. This research focuses on the social, political, historical and feminist literature and its relation to collective memory. This research also concentrates on the role of remembering

and on the commemorative narratives of the Nakba's survival inside Israel in general, and on the lives of Palestinian women in specific before and after 1948. Although we are using the term "collective memory", this "collective" is constructed from the various "individual" narratives, autobiographies and testimonies that are transferred from one generation to the next. These memories differ from each other, according to the person's class, education, village origin, and village hosting shelter.

This research focuses on the personal experiences of the Internally Displaced Palestinian (IDP) women from the first generation, within the context of the social and political changes that have taken place in their lives over the last sixty three years. Furthermore, this research is trying to link these memories and reflections to the second and third generations of IDP women.

## **Memory is a battlefield**

Our memory is reflected upon and affected by different factors that erase or distort these memories. Over sixty-three years of displacement and living in a "new" place, having children and grandchildren, experiencing life's daily difficulties, worries and happiness, are all factors that reflect and affect the memories of the first generation who experienced the Nakba. Furthermore, the second and third generations were not born in their original villages. They only have "heard" their parents' and grandparents' narratives and memories. I know this from my own grandmother with her stories over the last ten to twenty years, and the missing parts or differences to these same stories when I ask her to tell me about her experiences from those days. It is not an issue of fiction, creation or lies; it is simply a reflection of the years, from the effects of losing her husband, from sickness, or sometimes simply from not talking about the past.

Conditions of exile and memories of the past have had colossal effects on the social, religious and political life of IDPs in Israel as dispersed inhabitants. What are those social consequences? To what extent have integration or assimilation policies affected those Palestinians living in shelter Palestinian villages and towns in Israel? How does the socio-political history of their village form their modern collective history? Is it "real", "invented nostalgia", or "reinvented history" that dominates their imaginations and their discourse as well?

The testimonies of IDP women in Nazareth and Akka (Acre) districts, who were interviewed over the period 2008 to 2011, taught me how these women experienced the expulsion process. They experienced the Nakba through the many roles that they played as women (mothers, wives, etc.). As women are often the emotional centre and power (source of strength) in the family, they often found themselves having to simultaneously manage their own anxiety while caring for others. They had to cope with their loss of land and tradition. Possibly the most important issue was the loss of economic resources, which impacted on their lives and their self-confidence. They were taken from their traditional

environment and lifestyle, without the aid of new knowledge or skills, or any other support to help them manage their new life, which was devastating. The re-settlement into an unfamiliar life has left many IDP women depressed and unhappy, with deep feelings of loneliness and worthlessness. Most of the women I interviewed expressed anger towards the Israeli state which deprived them of their homes.

## What we can do?

I feel it is important, especially in academic research, to investigate the past when we are studying collective memory. Here, I would like to refer back to the Palestinian writer Salman Natour. His writings help to keep our memory alive, disproving Ben Gurion (the first Israeli prime minister) when he said that “the elderly (Palestinians) will die and the youth will forget (the Nakba and their national identity)”). This is one way of constructing collective memory, especially in that many Palestinian authors and novelists chronicle these traumatic events, utilizing the names of destroyed villages and towns which were demolished during the Nakba war, depicting their inhabitants’ struggles and stories, and their “moving” to new shelters. In this way, we can remember and keep the Palestinian names for the places that were replaced by Hebrew and Jewish names. Therefore, these writings are a very important resource for our collective memory as the Palestinian minority citizens of Israel, especially for the younger generations who have grown up in a different reality, a reality of a so called “democratic” state.

The state of Israel has attempted through systematic policies, especially through the educational system, to create a new nationality of Arab Israelis, through the excision of the Palestinian narrative from the curriculum. Nevertheless, Palestinian citizens of Israel continue to commemorate the Nakba in a variety of ways, through the formation of village societies, visits to destroyed villages, and public lectures, all in order to keep the flame of Palestinian collective memory alive in spite of Israeli attempts to deny their history and their rights.

Third year PhD research student in the Department of Sociology, UCC, under the supervision of Dr. Kathy Glavanis-Grantham. I am especially grateful to my supervisor Dr. Kathy Glavanis-Grantham, Dr. Isis Nusair (Denison University — USA) and various Non-Governmental Organizations in Palestine and Israel, mainly the Association for the Defence of the Rights of the Internally Displaced (ADRID), Women Against Violence (Nazareth), and Tufula Center (Nazareth) for their critical comments and suggestions. Finally, special thanks to my partner, Jack O'Neill, and our son, Bisan, for their support.