

# Visual Diaspora: Palestinian Diaspora narrating the lost Home

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## Recommended Citation

Hala Nassar, "Visual Diaspora: Palestinian Diaspora narrating the lost Home", Global Problem Solving, April 25, 2002, <https://nautilus.org/global-problem-solving/visual-diaspora-palestinian-diaspora-narrating-the-lost-home-2/>

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## v i r t u a l d i a s p o r a s

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Visual Diaspora:

Palestinian Diaspora narrating the lost *Home*

Hala Nassar

### **Abstract:**

The 21st century is characterised by unprecedented human mobility. The number of refugees and emigrants, for example, has dramatically risen over the past several decades. In every part of the globe there are large-scale displacements due to war, forced expulsions of minorities, land expropriation, and economic collapse. According to the United Nations, the number of refugees has jumped from 2 million in 1975 to 22 million in 2001. In the Palestinian case estimates vary of the number of Palestinians refugees displaced from within what became the borders of Israel in 1948. In 1949, the United Nations Conciliation Commission put the number at 726,000; the newly-established United Nations Relief and Works Agency subsequently put the number at 957,000 in 1950[1]. Of this population, approximately one-third fled to the West Bank, another third to the Gaza Strip, and the remainder to Jordan, Syria, Lebanon or farther afield. In 1967, another 300,000 Palestinians fled from the West Bank and Gaza, to Jordan (200,000), Syria, Egypt and elsewhere. Of these, approximately 180,000 were first-time refugees "displaced persons", while the remainder were 1948 refugees uprooted for the second time. Estimates put the Palestinian population at approximately 6.6 million in 1995[2]. Hence, this essay is concerned with how the displaced Palestinian communities remember, narrate their experiences of anguish in exile, and yearning to return home through visual diaspora. My aim is to show how their works contribute to the preserving of

Palestinian national identity and the *Right of Return*. Key Words: *Palestine, Israel, right of return, collective memory, land, narration.*

### **The Backdrop:**

In the light of the current political upheaval in the Middle East due to the Israeli invasion to the West Bank for the purpose of destroying the infrastructure of all that is Palestinian, this essay is somehow timely. The present situation in the occupied territories is taking a drastic course. Apart from continuous seizure of major cities of the West Bank, i.e. Ramallah, Bethlehem, Nablus, and Jenin among others, destroying every aspect of Palestinian civil society, Israel has been demonstrating an invincible military powers mainly targeting Palestinians refugee camps. In part, this constitutes the Israeli long term undeclared agenda to erase the refugee camps. In other words no refugee camps, no memory of past lost home, thus no right of return.

Since the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, Palestinians were dispersed in the neighbouring Arab countries, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon, and individually in the Americas. In spite of a plethora of international human rights and various United Nation resolutions granting the displaced Palestinians the right of return over the last fifty-four years has been consistently denied by Israel and its western allies. The Palestinian *right of return* has always been a central element not only in the Middle East conflict, the but also the Palestinian position throughout the post- Madrid negotiations on refugee issues. The *right of return* is clearly expressed in terms of both the moral claim of refugees to return homes from which they where expelled, displaced, and by reference to a number of United Nations resolutions. The most important of these is General Assembly Resolution 194 (III) of December 1948, which *inter alia* declares that “refugees wishing to return to their homes and lives at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date..”

The Israeli position outright rejected the *right of return* and as a result consistently opposed basing any negotiations on the principles of UNGAR 194. Israeli spokespersons have always argued either that Israel “bears little moral responsibility for the flight of Palestinian refugees in 1948, and/or that a *de facto* “population transfer” occurred as Israel accepted post-1948 Jewish refugees from the Arab world”[3]. In addition, mainstream Israeli commentators are virtually in agreement in their assessment that no Israeli government would ever “countenance substantially changing the demographic balance of the state.. the very *raison d’être* of which is its Jewish character”[4].

A favourable compromise has been put forward on the Palestinian part aiming to bridge the wide gap in official positions mentioned above. Both Palestinian intellectuals and officials have addressed the issue in arguing that a Palestinian *right of return* would be understood to mean a return to *national soil* - West Bank and Gaza- , rather than return to *1948 homes*. Prominent of this position is Ziad Abu Zayyad. He argues that

“one must distinguish between, on the one hand, the right of return as principle, and on the other hand, exercising that right by literally returning to Palestine as a national homeland, and to that

same home, piece of land, or grove which certain Palestinian owned in 1948, as a private individual property"[5].

This view is also supported by Rashid Khalidi's who discusses terms of *attainable* rather than *absolute justice*. Khalidi suggests that while "it must be accepted that all Palestinian refugees and their descendants have a right to return to their homes in principle".. it must be equally accepted that in practice *force majeure* will prevent most of them from being able to exercise this right"[6].

The Israeli responsiveness to such position, especially that of the Likud Party, rejected outright even a Palestinian "return" to the West Bank and Gaza. Arie Sharon, for example; views

"If these people find themselves resettled once again in miserable refugee camps in Judea, Samaria and Gaza, gazing out from them upon their towns and the remains of their former villages, the tension and anger will be enormous"[7].

In view of this, this explains the Israeli agenda to target refugee camps in the diaspora and within the occupied territories over and over again. Massacres of Palestinian refugee camps long precede the recent attack on Jenin. Historically Palestinians have been massacred in 1948 at the village of Deir Yassin[8] to make room and advocate the myth a *land without people to people without a land*. Later on Palestinian refugees have been massacred in Lebanon in 1972, 1982 with Israeli air raids along the years targeting schools, hospitals, and other non-military targets; systematically bombing refugee camps; deporting, dispersing, and ill treating civilian population. Israel has been held directly responsible for the Sabra and Shatila Palestinian refugee camps by the international commission investigating the 1982 invasion to Lebanon. Israel's systematic raids on refugee camps stems from the belief in Rafel Eytan's words "to destroy Palestinian nationalism and institutions in Lebanon would make it easier to destroy them on the West Bank and Gaza"[9].

### **The permission to narrate[10]:**

As for the suffering of the displaced Palestinians whether in the West bank and Gaza refugee camps or in the Arab countries decades of suffering did not deter them from fighting for return. Palestinians who live in refugee camps in the Arab countries are the ones as Rashid Khalidi puts it "who first picked up the fallen banner of Palestinian nationalism after 1948, rebuilt the national movement, and then sustained it with their sacrifices" (Khalidi 1997, 208).

Post- 1948 Palestinian nationalism, Said argues, has had to achieve "formal and ideological prominence well before any actual land has been gained [..], conducted for years in exile and alienation, for years protective, stubborn, passionately believed in"[11]. This earned the Palestinians the reputation to be rejectionists and terrorists, while Zionism is linked with humanism, socialism, liberalism western civilisation in Said's words. Hence, the West has

“Endowed Zionism with a role to play in Palestine along with its own, it has stood against the perhaps humble narrative of native Palestinians once resident there and now reconstituting themselves in exile in the Occupied Territories” (Edward Said, 1994, 256).

As a result of the West denying the historical and lived reality of a Palestinian homeland, Said powerfully argues, “has *revoked* (The emphasis is mine) the permission to narrate the Palestinian experience” (see Said 200, 244). Said powerfully argues that this western denial of the historical and lived reality of a Palestinian homeland “has revoked the permission to narrate the Palestinian experience”. The Palestinian experience in the diaspora and “the narrative of their present actuality”- again in Said’s words- “which stems directly from the story of their existence in and displacement from Palestine, later Israel- that narrative is not [there]”[12]. Nonetheless, part of the struggle for self-determination by Palestinians has been to tell the truth about their experience as Palestinians across geographical barriers. For too long their history has been denied, and this denial has only served to further oppress and deliberately dehumanize Palestinians in Israel, inside the occupied territories, and outside in their diaspora.

Lisa Suhair Majaj, “On Writing and Return: Palestinian- American Reflections”— argues that return, which may be literal or metaphorical, is the core of Palestinian identity and existence. The author discusses the various meanings of return depending on the context. For the Palestinians suffering in refugee camps and barely surviving harsh conditions, return means to their original homes. This in itself might not materialise since their past homes no longer exist. Instead they might be surprised to find out that in the place of their villages and cities, settlements, parks, or recreational areas now exist. Majaj also argues that return among Palestinian- American female writers, is viewed metaphorically. Return “is not simply going back: it is also to go forward; to create a new future from the fragments of a reclaimed past” (Majaj 116)[13].

Other Palestinians in the diaspora have found other ways to assert their right of return. In narrating the collective past they have used, various literary venues, story telling, theatre, dance, film, and personal photographs among other media. In the following sections I will show how displaced Palestinians remember, narrate their experiences of anguish in exile, and yearn to return home through visual diaspora. Thus the paper tackles the Palestinian *right of return* within media of *Visual Diaspora*, by which I mean the use of films, internet web pages, and a personal account, all aiming to reclaim the permission to narrate the Palestinian experience.

*Visual Diaspora:*

*“To write the country*

*as a poem*

*incomplete*

*is the truth*

What also constitutes the output of diasporic communities is the ability to document a past life in the lost homeland. Musicians, painters, poets, writers and recently filmmakers have relentlessly brought to life the Palestinian experience; suffering, exile, resistant, and hope of a defiant Palestinians. A recurrent theme among all these works show how the diasporic communities share the same identity as Palestinians despite the lapse of fifty two years and the different geographical landscape. Looking at their artistic production, one major element that categorises their works is the symbols used to address their collective identity as Palestinians. Another major theme is the symbols used to reflect a unity among dispersed peoples; where the land and the key to it becomes a dominant aspect- more on this will be discussed in the following section. This collectivity paved the way for the new generation of Palestinian women film directors, mostly born and educated in the West, to take the initiative to tell their peoples' stories that they have grown up with through films.

It was only in 1972, some 24 years after the 1948 war, when the first Arabic film *al-Makhdu'un* (The Duped) by Twefiq Saleh tackled the plight of Palestinian refugees. The 110 minutes black and white film is set in 1958, when three Palestinians in Basra, Iraq, decide to travel to Kuwait-each believing he can make a new life for himself there. The three men, from different generations, represent different perspectives on the Palestine experience in the diaspora. Hidden in the steel tank of a truck, the men attempt to cross the border, but encounter a series of delays and fatal setbacks on the way. *The Duped* was based on the 1962 novella, *Men in the Sun*, which was written by the late Palestinian writer, artist, and resistance leader Ghassan Kanafani.

Later on many films were made aiming to document the Palestinian tragedy and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Based on the Palestinian collective memory of displacement, exile, and uprooting the Palestinian documentary film of *Naim and Wadea'* (1999) [15] is seen as a way of fighting back Israeli claims such as Golda Meir's 1969 fiat that Palestinians did not exist historically, had no communal identity, and thus no national rights. For the very first time, Palestinian filmmaker Najwa Najjar documents Palestinian social life in Yaffa before 1948. Najjar dedicating the film to the memory of Naim and Wadea', tells their story as a Palestinian Christian couple, and showing the effect of the catastrophe (termed in Arabic as an- Nakba) and exile on them. Interviewing Jeanne, Mary, and Therese the three daughters of Naim Aazr and Wadea' Agabi, the filmmaker recaptures their parents and their own lost past in Yaffa.

Najjar's film mixes archival footage taken from television clips, Radio Voice, newspapers, and personal photographs, and is narrated by Najar's mother and her two aunts. The beautiful, simple narration starts with telling the story of the late grandfather Naim who owned land near the seashore in Yaffa. "If you take bus number three to go to the sea, north of the seashore is our land," one of the sisters says. The film also shows the family deed to the land upon which Naim wanted with his three brothers to build a residence for the family before 1948. Alas, the war broke out and the dream was never fulfilled. The film narrates Naim and Wadea' as a upper-middle-class family who had a beautiful home in Yaffa. The old house in Yaffa with its coloured tiled-floors and windows, wooden columns, a terrace, is revisited recently by one of Naim's daughters. As Mary manages to enter into her childhood-home, she takes her own daughter, the filmmaker, from one room to another explaining to her what the house once contained. Personal photographs support Najjar's mother claims.

Naim was well off. He was a land surveyor, he owned a car and was educated in College Des Freres. He was also a translator and a writer. The film also shows how the Christian couples in Yaffa attended church ceremonies: First Communion, Christmas Eve, Palm Sunday, and Light Saturday. All demonstrating that Palestinians, even Christians as well as Moslems existed and had a prosperous life before 1948.

In addition, the film brilliantly shows that cultural life, mainly theatre, existed in Palestine before 1948, countering the Israeli narrative that Palestinians only developed a cultural life in the 1970s. The film shows how Naim owned shares in al-Hamra Cinema in Yaffa, where he used to translate plays from French for the local Palestinian theatre troupes. It also shows how Palestinians in Yaffa were aware about the cultural life in the neighbouring Arab countries, which is Cairo. Naim and Wadeea' who took the train to Cairo for their honeymoon, used to go there regularly to attend theatre performances and musical concerts. Once the family been exiled to Jordan, we are told by his daughters how he used to lament daily the loss of his literary work, translations, his huge personal library. A pain he never managed to deal with until his death. And as in Najjar's words "I made the film to reiterate the presence of Palestinians and revive their identity in a city which was erased by the Israelis"[16].

Naim and Wadeea's life in Yaffa changed by a set of crucial political scenes in Palestine before 1948. These events were the increase of Jewish migrants to the country, the Palestinian revolt in 1936, the massacre of Deir Yassin and the declaration of State of Israel in 1948. Thus the film of the personal life of the couples in Yaffa becomes a larger metaphor of the Palestinian, uprooting, and exodus of 1948.

Later in the diaspora, the film captures the life in the refugee camps in the neighbouring Arab countries, the UNRWA, and the personal suffering of Naim and Wadeea'. One of his daughters tells, how when they left as small children, the parents only took clothes to last for a couple of days. The other sisters in the film whose voice-over recount a life of Yaffa in the 1930s and 40's correct each other and say that the mother also took the family pictures and a pair of scissors. In spite of the fact that the three sisters throughout the film correct each other on the exact dates, they remember that once they fled to Jordan they became impoverished. What was to be for a couple of days, ended to be permanent?

It is worth noting here that all Palestinians across diaspora share the same narratives and memories. Regardless where they are now and from which part of Palestine they were expelled, all remember a happy past life in their former villages, towns and cities. All of them recount that when they left they thought it is going to be an "apricot season"; for apricots in Palestine only last for a couple of days. Upon leaving, people took with them their precious possessions; jewellery if they had any, deeds to the house and lands, and most importantly the keys to their homes; thinking of coming back after a few days. Despite these humble narratives of a past life and a lost home have been continuously denied by Israel and its western allies, the film *Naim and Wadeea'* strongly aims to set the records straight. The film based on the collective memories buried in the deep Palestinian experience,

undoubtedly shows how Palestinians existed in what now is Jaffa- a coastal Israeli city- and had been leading a prosperous life. Moreover, *Naim and Wadea'* through telling a story of a past life of a couple in Yaffa, ends up being a story that is told by a whole community. For under colonial rule the collective experience

“Consists of the stories a society tells about momentous in its history, the events that most profoundly affect the lives of its members and most arouse their passions for long periods. This category of events prominently includes wars, revolutions, economic depressions, large scale strikes and riot and genocide as well as the legal proceedings often arising from such upheavals “(Oseil 19).

### **Frontiers of Dreams and Fears**

The American- Palestinian filmmaker Mai Masri, in yet another brilliant attempt, portrays the reality of Palestinian children living in refugee camps both in the diaspora and inside the West Bank. *Frontiers of Dreams and Fears* (2001) traces the life of a group of children and how as they grow up face the bleak reality of their refugee camps. Despite the harsh conditions, the Palestinian children are portrayed as all children, who love, quarrel, fear, but also have dreams. However, their dreams are to go back to their lost villages. Masri in her film focuses on two teenage girls: Manar Majed Faraj, 14, who lives in Dheisha Refugee Camp, near Bethlehem, and Mona Zaaroura, 13, who lives in Shatila Refugee Camp in Beirut. Growing up in different refugee camps, the two girls communicate with each other regularly via internet, and later by writing letters regularly, thus attempting to connect with each other despite of the barriers that distance them. The two girls relationship grow and they finally meet at the wire fence that separates them at the Israeli Lebanese border, due to the sudden withdrawal of Israeli forces from South Lebanon in May 2001. The withdrawal of the troops reduced the borderline to a few feet of razor wire. The film documents scenes of families on both sides of the border, reunited after five decades, hugging and kissing new-borns, exchanging news, photos and letters through the wired fence. The film then shifts to record the meeting between Mona and Manar, thus building a larger but intimate picture of the collective plight of the Palestinian people.

*Frontiers of Dreams and Fears* can be seen as a sequel to *Naim and Wadea'*. The uprooting of the Palestinians due to the establishment of the state of Israel, the diaspora generation in camps or elsewhere all yearn to return. Mona corresponding with Manar asks her to visit her former parents village in Saffouria. Manar, makes a video for Mona and collects dirt and stones and sends it in an envelope for Mona so that she can hold to the dream of return. Manar also manages to convince her own grandfather to take her to their former village, Ras Abou Ammar, outside Jerusalem. The grandfather shows Manar the ruins of his childhood home, which was destroyed by the Israelis in 1948.

Both Manar and Mona live in unbearable conditions--crowded camps, lacking services, with rampant unemployment and poverty. Although in different camps, the girls share a dream of a better life. Still they fear losing the hope of returning home. Masri's film portrays the Palestinian children struggling with their hopes for the future and what it hides for them. They are also afraid that they are going to

end up moving from one exile to another. Both Mona and Manar are members and participants in the cultural centres of their camps. In Dheisha the children learn the dabka the traditional Palestinian dance. In Shatila, the children learn to remember the names of their lost villages. Each of the Shatila children gathers information about their villages, locate it on the map, and by making keys, or holding to the original keys to their homes they march through the crowded narrow alleys of the camp. Thus the key becomes a symbol for a hopeful future for the Palestinian child growing in a refugee camp. Holding to the key, the children hope to return to their homes, in spite of the fear of having a harsh life in a camp.

From the above discussed films, one can notice how both films narrate a past lost life. They also show how physical landscape become key symbols in the Palestinian narrative of the home. An old deed to a house and land, a key, photographs and memory of a past life passed to generations are all part of the Palestinian collective memory of displacement. Moreover, although the films take two different generations of the Palestinian diaspora, the theme of home and return to Palestine is very dominant despite the age gap. Naim and Wadea's daughters narrate their parents lives depending on their childhood memories, while the children of *Frontiers of Dreams and Fears* narrate their lives in refugee camps and their attachment and yearning to go back to a land they grew up hearing about. Thus both films show how collective memory survives in spite of fifty years of exile. In other words, there is a consistency of narrating the lost home, the anguish of exile, and the year to return over time, despite the different geographical exile whether in a refugee camp or in a comfortable home in Jordan.

### **Internet Sites:**

Another way to narrate the Palestinian experience, despite the continuous denial to do so, is the use of Internet. If one surveys the Palestinian Internet sites, and they have been increasing in number recently, they all without exception advocate the right of return. A quick glimpse of these sites, one notices from their titles how they reflect the yearn and the anguish of return to what was called historic Palestine: *Al-Shamal* (Reunion) <http://www.shaml.org/>, *Miftah* (key) <http://www.miftah.org/>, *Al-Awda* (return) <http://www.al-awda.org/> just few to mention; thus giving a collective identity to the displaced Palestinians. All of the Websites are related to Palestinian refugees. For once you click on them, the homepage either has a map of historic Palestine, or a key, or both, thus building a larger metaphor of the Palestinian exodus and the right of return. In form, these sites are mainly informative. They provide maps, statistics, data, locations, and updates on the Palestinian plight and experience. Moreover, they are defying the myth that Palestinian *never existed*. Other sites like <http://al-awda.org/> offers articles, press releases, demonstration tips, activists/grassroots groups, news alerts, archives, and photographs of the Palestinian refugees whether internally or in the diaspora. In the words of Al-Awda, their mission includes:

“the right of Palestinians to return to their homeland, and to full restitution of all their confiscated and destroyed property in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, International law and implementation of United Nations Resolutions which uphold these rights” (al-awda.org).

Most of these websites, although functioning from the diaspora, have offices in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. These websites do not contain chat rooms or have any consumerist nature or function. Another striking Website is *Badil* Resource Centre for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Right <http://www.badil.org/>. *Badil* (meaning alternative in English) is the main link to other Internet sites. Like *Al-Awda*, *Badil* offers maps, right of return networks, images, statistics, press releases, assistance, international law and advocacy on behalf of the Palestinian refugees. The Website also offers voluntary jobs to help the refugees in various camps. *Badil* sits on the cutting edge in its comprehensive and excellent archival material on the status of refugees: a historical overview, the role of the United Nation and durable solutions, and other refugee documents. *Badil* also has a huge list of publication, and publishes its own quarterly magazine *al-Majdal* [http://www.badil.org/Publications/Majdal/al\\_majdal.html](http://www.badil.org/Publications/Majdal/al_majdal.html).

The Internet site *Palestinian Refugee Research Net* [17] <http://www.arts.mcgill.ca/MEPP/PRRN/prfront.html> is by far the most informative one. The website offers a huge archival site put for the use of researchers who are working on refugee issues. The net has a historical background section thus complementing other sites. The Net provides an overview look especially on the status of Palestinian refugees in the Midst of the Peace Process, along with other important key issues. As for the Research material *Palestinian Refugee Research Net* has a large section on research projects, papers, and invaluable on-line documents and books on refugee issues. The *Palestinian Refugee Research Net* is the only web site that has a web counter. It also contains up to date section, press releases, activities and forwarding links that are related to the world of refugees such as the United Nations. The web site also has a section on conferences, dialogues and workshops on refugees that had been taking place all over the world. In addition to this, it publishes the outcome of these activities and updates on the latest political issues concerning the Palestinian right of return.

When it comes to memory of past atrocities committed against Palestinians, the Web site [www.deiryassin.org](http://www.deiryassin.org), is prominent among many others. The Website opens with a picture of Palestinian women and men in a church reading the names of victims of the massacre of Deir Yassin. The Web has a section to tell the history of Deir Yassin, what happened there, who committed the crime, and what happened to the children who survived the massacre in 1948. The site also contains updated issues on remembering Deir Yassin.

Moreover, all the above mentioned sites in advocating the Palestinian right of return base and draw attention to the United Nation Resolution 194 (Issued in 1948), and 302 (Issued in 1949) among other later articles concerning the Right of Return. These websites in general reflect the identity of the displaced Palestinians in various locations, and in a relentless effort keep the collective memory of a lost home and a future right alive in spite the denial of such a right by Israel and its western allies.

## **Photographs:**

The power of the photographs is also used in books to explore, and reflect the tragedy, resilience, and the survival of the Palestinians in the diaspora. The first attempt to recapture Palestinian experience in various and fragmented locations in a very powerful manner is *After the Last Sky* by Edward Said: Photographs by and Jeanne Mohr (1986). Said's brilliant text accompanying Mohr's sharp lens puts before the reader the sorrow, the joy, the misery, the hope, of being a Palestinian alongside his own life as a Palestinian in exile. In narrating the Palestinian experience, Said comments on Mohr's photographs argues "the case to the foreign majority on behalf of a beleaguered, colonised, and silent majority" (Davis 1987, 145).

The power of the visual image in *After the Last Sky*, also undeniably narrates the life of Palestinian refugees in camps scattered in Arab countries. Throughout the book, one cannot escape but to notice how Palestinian homes in the diaspora, decorate their homes with images from their past lives and homes. For example one of Mohr's pictures taken in the house of the former mayor of Jerusalem and his wife, in exile in Jordan one cannot but notice the huge wallpaper/poster of the old city of Jerusalem. Other photos contain objects that remind of previous home: embroidery, a shawl, a picture, an icon, and pottery.

In other words, memory of the past home is not only constructed through narratives of a past life, but also through small objects and reminiscent of home. These small objects come to have resonance in the Palestinian nationalists and the refugee narrative. Said in *After the Last Sky*, provides an "emphatic account of the textures and griefs of Palestinian lives in camps and in numerous exiles in an unresolved condition of despair yet within the proximity to their former land" (Rogoff 2000, 39). On the relics which travelled with them Said says:

"These intimate momentos of a past irrevocably lost circulate among us, like the genealogies and fables of a wandering singer of tales. Photographs, dresses, objects severed from their original locale, the rituals of speech and custom: much reproduced, enlarged, thematized, embroidered, and passed around, they are strands in the webs of affiliations we Palestinians use to tie to our identity and to each other.

Sometimes these objects, heavy with memory- albums, rosary beads, shawls, little boxes-seem to me like encumbrances. We carry them about, hang them on every set of new walls we shelter in, reflect lovingly on them. then we do not notice the bitterness but it continues to grow nonetheless. Nor we acknowledge the frozen immobility of our attitudes. In the end the past owns us" (Said, 1999,14).

Irit Rogoff in her book *Terra Infirma* comments on how luggage is being suspended between an "unrecoupable past and an unimaginative future and bearing the entire weight of those longings" to the point it will not allow any space to reflect on the "textures of life" in the present moment (Rogoff, 39). Therefore in the Palestinian narrative of *right of return* it is always associated to objects; prominent among them the key. The Palestinian refugees holding to objects such as the key, becomes more than symbol to the right of return, it is what sustains them to endure the harsh conditions of the camps they find themselves trapped in.

## **Personal Account:**

The title of the workshop on which this essay was originally parts of it presented, "Visual Diaspora", offers a strikingly appropriate venue for the description of the Palestinian experience. Our lives whether in the diaspora, refugee camps, or under occupation is daily manoeuvred by politics and memory. Our personal, and collective memories are constantly challenged and shaped by western narratives that deny Palestinians statehood. Our daily struggle is to keep breaking the media's attempt who see us as "potential terrorists", "harbouring terrorists" and as a people who not only are "obstacles to Peace" but also threatening "other lives and existence".

I grew up with my mother's stories of her life in what is now called "West" Jerusalem. She was displaced and became a refugee in the old city of Jerusalem. Instead of staying in the family big house in "West" Jerusalem, she found herself with her siblings living in a one room in the old city of Jerusalem. My mother always tell us about her friends, neighbourhood, school, and social and cultural life, which under occupation I never had the chance to witness. Whenever, we had the chance to pass by her house, my mother never ceases to say, "I hope at least they will keep hanging the embroidered crochet curtains, and water this dry Jasmine bush!". My mother never attempted to visit her former house again, for when her own mother tried to do so, she was kicked out and as a result had a stroke from which she never recovered.

Now, in the aftermath of the Oslo Peace Accords of 1993, I carry a Palestinian passport. As a Palestinian, I am not only taken constantly for racial profiling at the airports, but also whenever I apply to a visa the nationality problem never ceases to arise. In Germany I was given residency and labelled "Ungeklärt" meaning "status unclear". There is no country under which I can be registered. I am like the rest of Palestinians who carry a Palestinian Passport is told that I can choose Jordan, Egypt or Israel as my home country. After arguments, which in the end prove to be fruitless, under force I opt for Jordan, saying in the midst of bureaucracy "at least it is the closet one to home".

The issue of national identity even surfaced here at Berkeley while living at the I- House last year, I was put in the Spring Semester resident handbook a visiting scholar from Jordan. When I attempted to correct the error, I was later put under Israel as my homeland. As a Palestinian I also have to deal with various misconceptions, distorted facts, that we are a people who were offered a generous settlement, but who always wanted more, thus the peace negotiations failed. For after all we are labelled as people who do not "seek peace".

This national invisibility reflects "the quintessential Palestinian experience, which illustrates some of the most basic issues raised by Palestinian identity, takes place at a border, an airport, a checkpoint: in short, at any one of those many modern barriers where identities are checked and verified" (Khalidi, 1997, 1). Countless stories show how most unfortunate Palestinians are carriers of travel documents- not technically passports- issued by Egypt or Israel for the residents of Gaza, or by Lebanon for Palestinian refugees residing there, are constantly and forcefully reminded of their identity. Examples are numerous like the one Palestinian who was shuttled back and forth on airlines between an Arab Gulf state and Lebanon for three weeks in 1991 for lacking the proper travel documents and the permission to travel. Khalidi also lists many stories of Gaza Palestinians

stranded in Cairo Airport after being expelled from Kuwait for not having the proper documents to go to either place. The recent example comes from the Palestinians of the occupied Territories who spend days at the Jordan Bridge stranded and cannot go to the West Bank because of curfews or cross to Jordan. This dread with which Palestinians find themselves at borders, Khaldi argues, "means as far as the world, or at least a large part of it, is concerned, the Palestinian identity remains in question" (ibid. 4).

In response to all of this, we remember. It might be individual like a lost home, an olive tree, a Jasmine bush, a small rose garden, and a house warm and full of family members before going into exile. Or collectively remember a past life whether in a village, or in a city like Yaffa and Jerusalem. However, holding to a lost or physically unattainable landscape is in itself a political statement. For by remembering we narrate and consequently we yearn to return, and return is a threat.

Yet return is strengthened in the face of losing our identity, our history, culture and tradition. Palestinian historical and cultural narratives are strongly interwoven in our collective memory and never cease to establish our undeniable rights of a statehood in the world of nations. And as Darwish writes

But I am the exile

[..]

Take me as a relic from the mansion of sorrows.

Take me as a verse from any tragedy:

Take me as a toy, a brick from the house

So that our children will remember to return[18].

To sum up, Palestinians whether in the diaspora, refugee camps, or in the occupied territories, identify and collectively remember in their narratives the lost home. Despite the continuous denial to narrate directly their experience of displacement, they share across geographical barriers and borders the anguish of exile and the yearn to a lost home land. The refugee status in the post-Madrid talks is still lingering and the *right of return* still remains a sticking point in the Israeli Palestinian conflict. Yet a solution is urgently needed to refugees who are currently find themselves in sever conditions and situations than others such as therefugees in Lebanon. In the occupied territories, the Israeli Defence Forces, continuous systematically to target them. Nonetheless, Palestinian films as *Naim and Wadea'*, and *Frontiers of Dreams and Fears* demonstrate how the Palestinians struggle for existence, self determination, and exercising *the right of return* is still alive and passed to generations through collective memory. Thus visual diaspora through the medium of films, Photographs, personal narratives along with the medium of Internet, the Palestinians in the diaspora are still holding to a memory of a lost home and caught in the past by holding to reminiscent of home and objects brought from home. One last word, in spite of the continuous suppression of the Palestinian national identity, especially in the camps, Palestinians nowadays have learnt from the lessons of the past. The Palestinian generation of today, as seen in *Frontiers of Dreams and Fears*, is different from the Palestinian generation of the 1948 *Nakba*. This generation

has learned from the experience of the Diaspora of its grandparents and parents. It is a generation that knows how to read reality, insists on its rights, and is ready to sacrifice in order to remain in the homeland, achieve *right of return* and implement its national project. Although it is impossible to predict under the current circumstances how the Palestinians will respond to seeing its national infrastructures destroyed again, it is obvious that the Palestinians of today are willing to sacrifice to maintain the Palestinian narrative alive despite all the efforts to deny them that right.

### Notes

[1] The Israeli government has in the past suggested numbers as low as 520,000, while Palestinian researchers have suggested up to 850,000.

[2] In 1995, UNRWA data showed some 3,172,641 registered refugees in its "area of operation" (West Bank, Gaza, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon), plus an estimated 335,000 non-registered "displaced persons".

[3] See Palestinian Refugees and Final Status: Key Issues. <http://www.arts.mcgill.ca/MEPP/PRRRn/prissues.html>.

[4] *ibid.*

[5] Ziad Abu Zayyad, *The Palestinian Right of Return: A realistic Approach*. In *Palestine- Israel Journal* 2 ( Spring 1994). P 77.

[6] Rashid Khalidi, *Towards a Solution*. In Centre for Policy Analysis on Palestine, *Palestinian Refugees: Their Problem and Future*. Washington, DC: CPAP, 1994.

[7] Areil Sharon, *Arab Peace Ambush*. Archived on Likud USA

[8] "Early in the morning of April 9, 1948, commandos of the Irgun (headed by Menachem Begin) and the Stern Gang attacked Deir Yassin, a village with about 750 Palestinian residents. The village lay outside of the area to be assigned by the United Nations to the Jewish State; it had a peaceful reputation. But it was located on high ground in the corridor between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem. Deir Yassin was slated for occupation under Plan Dalet and the mainstream Jewish defence force, the Haganah, authorised the irregular terrorist forces of the Irgun and the Stern Gang to perform the take-over". Taken from <http://www.deiryassin.org/>.

[9] Quoted in Edward Said, *The Politics of Dispossession*. 1994, P. 251.

[10] In *Permission to Narrate*, Edward Said argues since the Palestinian narrative has never been officially admitted to Israeli history, except as that of "non-Jews" whose inert presence in Palestine was a nuisance to be ignored or expelled". A socially acceptable narrative „has to have a beginning and an end: in the Palestinian case, homeland for the resolution of its exiles since 1948". *The Edward Said Reader*. Pp.250-2.

[11] *Ibid.*

[12] *Ibid.* P. 250.

[13] Lisa Suhair Majaj, discusses the work of the Palestinian- American poet Suheir Hammad who „pleads for a new future for Palestinians, one that will not simply repeat but make possible a re-

envisioning of the past". *On Writing and Return*. In *Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism*. 2001, Vol.2,no1, pp. 113-26. Here 116-7.

[14] *From Country*. A poem by D. H. Melhem. In *The Poetry of Arab Women: a Contemporary Anthology*. Edited by Nathalie Handal. 2001. P. 2002.

[15] Najwa Najjar, Jerusalem, 1999; 20 minutes.

[16] See *Recapturing the lost past of Palestine*. By Louis Ibrahim. A Special to *The Star*. October 13<sup>th</sup> 1999.

[17] See <http://www.arts.mcgill.ca/MEPP/PRRN/fofognet.html>.

[18] See *The Edward Said Reader*. P 150.

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