



Return to/through Postmemories: ‘Araba qadīma bi-satā’ir (2011) by Ġassān Zaqtān (research paper)

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Return to/through Postmemories: ‘*Araba qadīma bi-satā’ir* (2011) by Ġassān Zaqtān

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ABSTRACT

This paper scrutinizes return narratives in Palestinian fiction with a specific focus on *adab al-‘ā’idīn*, a term referring to literary works by Palestinian authors who returned to their homeland after the Oslo Accords of 1993. Testing Hirsch’s conceptualization of postmemory, the paper conducts a close reading of the novel ‘*Araba qadīma bi-satā’ir* (2011) by Ġassān Zaqtān (1954), with references to his essay “Nafī al-manfī” (1997). It argues that *adab al-‘ā’idīn* raises critical questions about the memory-trauma nexus in the Palestinian experience, highlighting Palestinian literature’s active role in shaping and producing memory processes, and positing return journeys as key dynamics for the reverberation and reworking of trauma across generations. After discussing the challenges of applying postmemory to the Palestinian case, Zaqtān’s return is situated as both personal and collective. The close reading then unfolds across four interconnected sections addressing respectively: the need to repair fragmented memories on personal, collective, and historical levels; the overlapping of physical, remembered, and imaginary spaces through the trope of ghosts; the affective dimension of family transmission; narrative reflexivity as potentially healing in the face of return’s (im)possible closure.

KEYWORDS

Ġassān Zaqtān / Palestinian literature / Postmemory / Return / Trauma

1 - Introduction

Although return is central to Palestinians’ claims to nationhood, it has garnered little attention from Arabic literature scholars compared to exile and diaspora. This research gap is particularly evident in studies on Palestinian fiction,¹ which investigated return mainly in its interlinkage with resistance, for instance in the works of Kanafani [Kanafānī] (Harlow 1987). If such an angle is crucial to grasp how literature becomes an arena of struggle, it can result in a narrow understanding of return. First, it fails to

¹ Analyses of return in Palestinian poetry are more numerous. See Sulaiman (1984).

notice how return invokes other concepts, such as memory, absence, home, trauma, identity, and materiality; second, it sets an implicit, dichotomous understanding of return and exile (Khalil Habib 2011; Sa'di 2015), overshadowing that what truly is at stake is the right to self-determination; third, by fixating on “physical” return, it overlooks its affective, emotional, and psychic dimensions.

Recent scholarship began addressing these limitations, but some blind spots remain. For example, Ebileeni (2022:142) effectively debunked the existence of a national narrative of return and highlighted the discrepancies between diasporic visualizations of homecoming and actual arrival in Palestine. Yet, he did not pay particular attention to a body of literature pivoted precisely on return: *adab al-‘ā'idīn*, meaning “returnees’ literature”.² This term refers to literary works by exiled Palestinian intellectuals who were able to return to their homeland following the Oslo Accords of 1993, understood as a historical rift and «existential threshold for the Palestinians to face their lasting loss of places and spaces» (Al-Shaikh 2020:36). Academic works on *adab al-‘ā'idīn* remain scarce and attend primarily to the bearings of the socio-political scenario upon literary works (Darraj 2008; Al-Osta 2015) or to its distinctive stylistic, thematic, and narrative features (Alaili 2015). Departing from these studies, my paper observes how these return narratives spill over the strictly literary domain and help unpack the concept of Palestinian return, demonstrating that it is not only physical and political, but also emotional, narrative, and – most importantly – unresolved. It argues that these multiple facets emerge chiefly by looking at the memory-trauma nexus, which literature shapes over time and across generations. To this end, the paper asks: how does *adab al-‘ā'idīn* represent the interrelation between return, remembering, and trauma? What insights does it provide into the tension between remembering and forgetting, but also continuity and fragmentation? How does it depict and perform the resurfacing of memories of dislocation on a personal and collective level?

To address these questions and show how Palestinian literature elucidates the relationship between memory and trauma, I conduct a close reading of *‘Araba qadīma bi-satā’ir* (*An Old Carriage with Curtains*), a novel written in 2011 by Ghassan Zaqtan [Ġassān Zaqtān], with references to his essay “Nafi al-manfi” (“The Exile’s Denial”), published in 1997 in the literary magazine *Al-Karmil*. These two writings restage return and perform it aesthetically, as they are both inspired by Zaqtan’s personal journey to Palestine in 1994 after twenty-seven years of exile. *‘Araba qadīma bi-satā’ir* is a fictionalization of the author’s journey to Zakariyya [Zakariyyā], the village where both of his parents were born and evicted before his birth. Born in 1954, Zaqtan did not witness the Nakba as a «founding trauma» (LaCapra 1999:725): his memories of Zakariyya are the-

² It is worth pointing out that this term is not a self-designation. Its scholarly circulation began with Al-Osta (2015).

refore entirely mediated through family anecdotes and photographs. In the novel, this is mirrored by a plot toggling between the protagonist’s first visit to Zakariyya while being hampered multiple times by Israeli border controls; and his mother’s musings on what the village looked like before she left. As for “Nafī al-manfī”, it displays greater temporal proximity to Zaqtan’s homecoming – three years against the seventeen years between 1994 and 2011, when the novel came out – and thus conveys a rougher picture of the author’s conflicting feelings upon return. This gains in relevance if one considers that the essay appeared in a special section of issue 52 of *Al-Karmil*, “Hal kunnā hunā” (“Were We Here”), which hosted testimonial accounts of Palestinian returnees. Examining the two texts together allows for an understanding of how the same events can be reworked across time and different media.

Particularly important for capturing the peculiarity of Zaqtan’s return narrative is Hirsch’s (1993; 1997; 2008; 2012) conceptualization of postmemory, put forth to observe how second generations rely on imaginative investment in order to “remember” events preceding their birth. Though the lack of closure of the Nakba – which marked the ethnic cleansing of more than 750.000 Palestinians, resulting in a mass displacement and in the destruction of more than 450 towns and villages – defies the application of postmemory *stricto sensu*, I argue for this concept’s analytical potential to grasp the ramifications and reactivation of trauma across generations.

2 - On the challenges of testing postmemory against the Palestinian experience

Before turning to Zaqtan’s novel, a necessary methodological clarification must be made regarding postmemory as an analytical lens and how I harness it. Postmemory was conceptualized by Hirsch to define the relationship that children of Holocaust survivors develop with personal, collective, and cultural traumas preceding their birth. Having not witnessed these events first-hand, their experience is entirely mediated, besides being characterized by emotional connection and generational distance. If the assumption underlying Hirsch’s theorization is that the traumatic event is in the past, this does not hold valid in the Palestinian context, where settler-colonial violence is ongoing and «second and third generations of post-Nakba Palestinians, although they have not experienced this originating moment (1948), are still “inside” the event» (Saloul 2012:13). This explains why postmemory, after being used by Abu-Lughod (2011) for the first time, encountered mixed responses: most Palestinian and other regional scholars referred to it only to debunk its relevance (Aboubakr 2019:107; Salam & Mahfouz 2020:8; AlAmmar 2021:66). Conscious of this fundamental difference, in this article I neither “import” postmemory nor reject it altogether: rather, I aim to test its limits, showing how the Palestinian case uncovers its blind spots while also pushing for a conceptual update. In particular, Palestinian literature exposes how authors who experience a col-

lision between postmemories and memories rework it into a creative output. In the following paragraphs, I outline in more detail the challenging and innovative character of my analytical move.

The Nakba is simultaneously a constitutive and ongoing predicament (Khoury 2012:263; Sayigh 2013:56), embedded in a settler-colonial context where «invasion is a structure not an event [...], elimination is an organizing principal [*sic*] of settler-colonial society rather than a one-off (and superseded) occurrence» (Wolfe 2006:388). The continuity of trauma is not, however, per se unique to the Palestinian case: Milich pointed out (2015:299) that it regards the prevalence of «Arab societies with a violent history which can be traced back to the respective beginnings of European colonization or indeed even further», showing to what extent Western theorizations fall short in accounting for trauma as «a permanent characteristic of a life, an emotional experience and a reality that has become normality». What is specific to the Palestinian experience is how present traumas build on and trigger the aftershocks of past ones, making trauma not only continuous but also incremental and commonplace (Jayyusi 2007). As Palestinian psychiatrist Jabr argued, its multi-compound character provokes an escalation where ongoing threats harm «the integrity of the social fabric».³

Despite these challenges, there are also some merits in exploring how postmemory is (mis)fit to the Palestinian experience. First, it can illuminate the “receivedness” and reworking of trauma across generations, as well as its impact on memory practices. As asserted by Sibilio (2019:16), postmemory allows us to observe how the effects of inherited trauma elicit affective, psychic, and bodily responses, all the while carrying a high mnemonic charge. This lens hence spotlights the latent traumatic component encysted in present traumas, akin to ever-glowing embers. In return narratives, in particular, postmemory helps to grasp the resurfacing of memories upon return. Second, testing postmemory can yield insights precisely because it is a disruptive analytical move. The jarring juxtaposition it provokes – between the Holocaust and the Nakba – can expose the universalizing and exceptionalizing treatment reserved to the former. By doing so, similarly to what Bashir and Goldberg (2019) did, it invites to move beyond dichotomous thinking.

All things considered, a conscious employment of postmemory sharpens our understanding of the interlinkage between Palestinian cultural memory and trauma. Despite and through its limitations, postmemory helps us understand how, in the Palestinian context, memory becomes not only pervasive but also embedded in enduring, trans-generational, traumatic ripples where present and past are indivisible from one another. It hence provides an insightful lens to «conceptualize contemporary memory practices that are structured, though not determined, by a past history» (Saloul 2012:3).

³ <https://shorturl.at/T6W3q>. Last accessed 25/02/2025.

3 - Between national and personal aspirations: the stakes of remembering

As hinted earlier, Zaqtan authored ‘Araba qadīma bi-satā’ir, overtly drawing upon autobiographical material. The following subsection charts his return trajectory, which sits on the cusp between national and personal aspirations. Its purpose is to emphasize that, while the Oslo Accords affected the experience of all Palestinian returnees, «each author is inevitably guided by distinct geographies, temporalities, imaginings and frames of reference, which ultimately determine their relationship to Palestine» (Brown 2017:2). The two intersecting imaginaries of return that emerge – national and personal – feed one into the other and imply coming to terms with a partial return. The Palestine Zaqtan knew has been fragmented by the Accords, while Zakariyya – of which little is left – is now part of Israel. To where exactly is he returning, then?

The Oslo Accords marked a watershed moment in the ongoing process of fragmentation of the Palestinian territory, forcing Palestinians to once again reconfigure their collective identity. Though framed and televised as a peace process, scholars agree that the Accords were grounded on a stark power asymmetry.⁴ As Parsons (2005:90) put it, in exchange for being recognized as a negotiating partner, with the Accords the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) agreed on «acceptance of Resolution 242 with all its pitfalls, de facto acceptance of Israel’s apartheid legislation in the occupied territories, a commitment to make the PLO responsible for Israeli security». This territorial compromise strengthened, formalized, and institutionalized the occupation, causing the «Bantustanism» (Lionis 2020:66) of the Palestinian Territories into areas A, B and C. In this context, the PA proved incapable of translating the diversity of Palestinian experiences into a singular national project, too absorbed as it was in building a bureaucratic apparatus and suppressing local dissent. It is under these circumstances that Zaqtan returned, recruited by the PA with a view to revamping its institutions. These political conditions rendered his return extremely conditioned: it could only take place within heightened power asymmetries, increasing mobility restrictions, and a fragmented geography. This explains why not all exiled intellectuals agreed to this modality of “homecoming”: as another returnee asserted (Khader 1997:85-86), deciding whether to return or not was an «emotional and verbal workout», with some longing to go back to Palestine «as one awaits *laylat al-qadr*, the night of Ramadan when it is said that the gates of heaven fly open», while others firmly refusing because they saw no genuine commitment to Palestinian self-determination.

Hope, nevertheless, was extremely short-lived: the reigning atmosphere was one of abandonment, disorientation, and disillusionment, with Palestinians envisaging col-

⁴ Unless otherwise specified, the material in this section is drawn from Kimmerling and Migdal (2003).

lectivity only as a «community of sufferers» (Abu-Manneh 2016:157), turning either to religious fundamentalism or to privatized forms of alienation. For Zaqtan, the transition from ideal to real meant that nostalgia merged with resentment: after settling in Ramallah [Rām Allāh], where he soon became a cog in Arafat's centralizing and securitarian machinery, localistic dynamics started playing in too. Palestinians of the “inside” (*min al-dāhil*) branded intellectuals like him as the “Tunisians”, wealthy Arafat cronies responsible for the Palestinian defeat who had enjoyed a lavish life in exile and now imported moral corruption to Palestine (El-Sakka 2006:101). This further strengthened the differences among returnees, whose trajectories already varied according to political affiliation, class, generational belonging, birthplace, family provenance, and reasons for exile. In addition to this, each returnee came with their own “cultural baggage” from the host countries where they had resettled, mirroring the history of a «literature-of-a-nation that for most of its history was subjected to a mode of exilic non-territorial nationalism» (Abu-Remaileh 2021:96).

Zaqtan's return represents one of the multiple personal histories that shaped and were shaped by the collective aspirations surrounding the Oslo Accords, with *Araba qadīma bi-satā'ir* as the fictionalization of this return experience. What is particularly striking about this return novel is that it is centered neither on Ramallah, where Zaqtan worked after the Oslo Accords, nor on Bayt Jala [Bayt Jālā], his birthplace. The novelist concentrated instead on his visit to Zakariyya, his parents' native village, located in the district of Hebron [al-Ḥalīl]. He had never been to this village, and little was left of it in any case: as we read in Khalidi's comprehensive study (1992:224-26), Zakariyya was first subjected to attacks in mid-January 1948 and then occupied on 23 October 1948, until its approximately 1180 inhabitants were evicted on 9 June 1950. What compelled him, then, to hinge his novel upon a village where he had never been before? Why does Zakariyya matter for his return experience?

To address this question, outlining some autobiographical coordinates can be of help. Born in Bayt Jala in 1954,⁵ Zaqtan grew up amidst overpowering family memories of his parents' displacement. After his birth, he would then resettle with his family to al-Karama [al-Karāma] refugee camp and from there to Jordan, where he pursued his studies in Physical Education and began publishing poems. As a member of the PLO, after that he started moving across various cities – Beirut, Moscow, Damascus, Cyprus, and Tunis – before finally returning to Palestine after the Oslo Accords, where he served as Director General of the Literature and Publishing Department at the Palestinian Ministry of Culture in Ramallah. Zaqtan's interest in Zakariyya could be interpreted as a claim over his origins and as an attempt to revive a silenced memory, with the village becoming a mnemotope (Assmann 1992:33) – a powerful mnemonic trigger encysting

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emotionally-laden memories. At the same time, Zakariyya is also the site where his imaginative and affective recollection can “take place”: through projection, he can creatively appropriate, update, rewrite, and transform memories of the dislocation. This makes his inherited memories «anything but absent or evacuated», but «as full and as empty as memory itself» (Hirsch 1993:9). Zaqtan’s return to Zakariyya, therefore, was not merely a matter of physical relocation: it entailed a redefinition of his relationship with Palestinian collective identity, and of his own self within a shifting political, social, cultural, and emotional terrain.

The two intertwined imaginaries described above – the national and the personal – are reflected in *‘Araba qadīma bi-satā’ir*, where the entanglement of family, cultural, and collective memories demonstrates how «collective wounds of a culture can emerge in specific narrative and artistic forms» (Saloul 2012:6). In what follows, these biographical and historical tensions are traced in their narrative rearticulation through close reading.

4 - Return to/through Postmemories in *‘Araba qadīma bi-satā’ir*

Zooming in on *‘Araba qadīma bi-satā’ir*, I now deal with Zaqtan’s aesthetic, linguistic, and narrative choices. The close reading I propose is divided into four sections, each exploring a different but interconnected aspect: section 4.1 “The need to repair: assembling personal, collective, and historical fragments”; section 4.2 “Space and embodiment: haunting memories”; section 4.3, “Family transmission and the role of affect”; section 4.4, “The (im)possible closure of return: self-reflexivity as a healing process”. While the primary focus is on *‘Araba qadīma bi-satā’ir*, section 4.3 specifically addresses “Nafī al-manfī”. Sections are structured in such a way as to make excerpts telling springboards for exploring how literature both represents and challenges the idea of return. Excerpts from the novel are therefore not cited as illustrative examples but attended to inasmuch as they “speak back” to Hirsch’s conceptualization of postmemory and allow us to critically test it. In this sense, my approach is informed by Bal’s (2002:45) understanding of close reading as a practice concerned with allowing texts to «check the thrust of an interpretation, and to divert and complicate it», so that they «enrich both interpretation and theory». Through my analysis, I aim to throw light on the complexity and specificities of the Palestinian experience, and to ask questions which, from literature, spill over into the social and political realm.

4.1 - The need to repair: assembling personal, collective, and historical fragments

Hirsch introduced the concept of postmemory in 1993 (1993:8), and over the years developed a keen interest in the aesthetics it engenders. She saw it fueled by a peculiar drive: «the need not to just feel and to know, but also to re-member, to re-build, to

re-incarnate, to replace, and to repair» (Hirsch 1997:243). Following her intuition, in this first section, I investigate how *‘Araba qadīma bi-satā’ir* portrays the complexity of this «postmemorial work» (Hirsch 2012:33) in the Palestinian experience, which invokes not only deep-stored family memories transmitted across generations, but also a historical trauma to which there is no demarcation. We see an example of this in the first chapter, “No Visitors Today”, opening in medias res with the protagonist making his way through the winding roads of Wadi Qelt [Wādī al-Qelt], a valley stretching between Jericho and Jerusalem. As the protagonist heads towards the Monastery of Saint George, he explains that his curiosity in the topographical genealogy of the valley has begun when searching for his mother’s village, Zakariyya. While he summons memories of earlier “presences” of the place such as Canaanites, King Solomon, early Christian communities, and Byzantines, his return is situated within the folds of multiple historical layers. And so, his return becomes motivated by a personal, family, and collective quest: a veritable identity search to understand where he comes from and who he is

وصل إليه ذلك الإحساس الذي اعتقد انه فقدته منذ وقت طويل، بأنه يتجول في ذكرياته نفسها، وكان عليه أن يعيد ترتيب هذه الذكريات وكاناتها تحت الضوء الذي وهبته إياه تلك الرحلة، وبدا الأمر وكأنه يستعيد ببطء شديد مقتنيات قديمة كان فقدانها يشوش ذكرياته وينسلها مثل حصائل قش. (Zaqtan 2011:16)

A feeling came back that had long disappeared. He felt again he was journeying in his own memories. He felt he had to return to these memories, to give them some arrangement. The beings the journey gave him, he could bring them back. Intensely and slowly, he brought back his old, overlapping belongings, the things whose absence had discomposed his memory and pulled it apart like a straw mat. (Zaqtan 2024:13)⁶

The motif of repair appears prominently: the protagonist seems obsessed with the necessity and difficulty of sorting through a multiplicity of memories that spring up abruptly. In this messy endeavor, he is trying to manage, arrange, and make sense of heavily emotionally charged memory shards. This “eruption” has to do with the senses (*al-iḥsās*), which cause deeply stored memories to resurface despite the rational willpower mustered to hold them down (*i‘taqada*). In Arabic, this is manifest in the sentences where the protagonist is not in the subject position: literally, “these feelings came towards him” (*waṣala ilayhi ḍalika al-iḥsās*) and “it was upon him to rearrange these memories” (*kāna ‘alayhi an yu‘īd tartīb ḥadīhi al-ḍikrayāt*), suggesting that he is either hit by colliding memories or assigned with the duty of ordering them. This is why, in

⁶ All the English excerpts from *‘Araba qadīma bi-satā’ir* are taken from Wilder’s (2024) translation.

spite of the concentrated and painstaking attitude he exhibits (*buṭ’ šadīd*), his attempt is fraught with approximation. The emotional surge of this recollection is amplified by the action of time, which clouds, muddles, and blurs (*yušawwiš*) the task of arranging (*tartīb*) memory fragments. The concept of repair travels through the novel and sheds light on what we might call ‘the semantics of *re-*’: memories that appear and re-appear, and the consequent need to re-visit them, re-sort them, re-arrange them. The pressing nature of this postmemorial work is conveyed by the quick succession of expressions with the verb ‘to arrange’ (*tartīb al-riwāya* 2011:15; *tartīb haḍihi al-dikrayāt* 16; *yurattib kull haḍihi al-ašyā’* 19). The novel also insists on the resurfacing of memories without the protagonist having any control on when, where and how this happens (*dūn an yantabih* 2011:29), such as when he affirms: «On the road, stories began to appear surreptitiously, things he imagined were long forgotten appeared in reborn voices, gestures and sounds» (Zaqtan 2024:26).

This fragmentation resonates with the metaphor employed by Raczymow (1994:103) to articulate his experience as a child of Holocaust survivors: memory had burst like a balloon, and he was now occupied in «sewing scraps together [...] a hypothetically endless task, an impossible task [...] consisting] in presenting the scraps in all their diversity, in their disorder, in their dispersion, in a kind of diaspora». In Zaqtan’s novel, the protagonist is similarly engaged in piecing together scattered remnants of his story, his mother’s story and the multi-layered history of Zakariyya: once a Palestinian village, now part of Israel, forever “immortalized” in his and his family’s memories. The recollective eruption of memories signals the incessant effects of a personal and collective fracture, «a location always tucked away, under and within the folds of history, a lesion within memory» (Jayyusi 2007:108). On the level of aesthetics, this results in a search for an aesthetic reinscription that could account for ongoing historical, geographical, collective, and personal losses. As literature registers and reconfigures this «aesthetic of loss» (Rahman 2015:10), the need to repair becomes an inherently polysemous motif, underscoring the importance attached to memory in the face of an unfolding trauma.

4.2 - Space and embodiment: haunting memories

If, whilst heading towards Zakariyya, the protagonist sought to repair a multi-layered fragmentation, upon arrival in the village the stakes change. Through projection and mediation, a comparison is staged between ideal and real. The protagonist confronts «the veil of mystery» (Hirsch 1998:424) shrouding Zakariyya and attempts to recreate a sense of familiarity with the place, seen only in photographs. The village thus becomes a place on the edge, in a liminal space where corporeality intersects with imagination. It is in this in-between space that Zaqtan introduces the trope of ghosts, which I read as reminders and harbingers that Palestinian trauma will haunt him fore-

ver. By this, I do not mean that they are a metaphorical presence: on the contrary, they are a structural manifestation of the unresolvedness of trauma, what Gordon (2008:195) described as «seething and lingering (presences) of what seems over and done with, the endings that are not over». In my analysis of these haunting presences, I hence offer an alternative to Abdelrahman's (2023) interpretation of ghosts in Palestinian literature, which she viewed as «active agents of their own and their people's liberation»⁷ reviving the vigor of resistance. In my reading, I stress instead the ambivalent torment they cause, making the protagonist's return an ongoing process and not an endpoint.

An excerpt from Chapter Three helps me to further unpack this point. The chapter is entirely dedicated to the epic, folkloric, and historical origins that the protagonist's relatives attribute to Zakariyya. Chapter Two had closed off with an account of the protagonist's crossing of Allenby Bridge, with vivid details of the long queue before the security inspection at the gate. This wait builds up tension and anticipation for what awaits him on the other side: his first visit of the village:

وصل «زكريا» متأخراً، و«زكريا» اسم قريته المحتلة منذ العام 1948 هناك ولد والده وولدت أمه، وثمة صورة باهتة لا تفي بشيء، كانت في أحد أدراج البيت، صورة معذبة، تتلخص مهمتها في إسناد كل تلك الروايات التي تتراكم في منزل العائلة، طيف بعيد من أشجار حرجية، وفي أقصى اليمين أشباح لبيوت منخفضة، هذا تقريباً كل شيء، ولهذا، ربما، بدت منهكة وباهتة ومغلقة على صبرها العجيب، ليس من السهل أن تكون مهمتها بهذه القوة.
(Zaqtan 2011:25)

He arrived late to Zakariyya, his village, occupied since 1948, where his father and mother were born. Somewhere in a drawer inside the house there was a faded, tormented picture that redeemed nothing, but which kept in place the stories that amassed in the family home. The picture showed a distant spectre of forest trees, and the ghosts of houses at the far-right edge of the frame. This was all it contained. It looked tired, faded, closed; nonetheless, it asserted some incredible forbearance.
(Zaqtan 2024:15)

The bodily encounter with the village immediately strikes a memorial chord and the protagonist journeys back in time and place, to the drawer where the picture was stored (*aḥad adrāġ al-bayt*). The adjectives utilized to describe the picture are extremely revealing: it is «faded» (*bāhita*), but also «tormented» (*mu'addaba*). From inert and tucked away in a distant corner in place and time, the picture becomes endowed with an active grip on the protagonist. It also acquires a ghostly quality, which goes unnoticed in the English translation: for instance, «faded» (*bāhita*), meaning “faintish” and “ghostly”, adds an ethereal tint to the picture. This is strengthened by «tormented»

⁷ <https://shorturl.at/URspp>. Last accessed 06/03/2025.

(*mu‘addaba*), which could be read “tormenting” (*mu‘addiba*) in the absence of indications in the Arabic on the passive or active voice: the picture is thus simultaneously “agonized” and “agonizing”. The adjective «faded» is reprised some lines later, this time accompanied by «tired» (*munhaka*), also translatable as “tiring” in the absence of cues on the passive or active voice, and «closed» (*muḡlaqa*), which represents the picture as irremediably inaccessible. This ghostlike imagery grows more intense when the geography of the photograph is described in more detail, showing how the remembered picture of Zakariyya has superimposed itself onto the actual place and overpowered it with its emotional poignancy. Trees and houses become shrouded in an evocative aura: trees appear to him as «a distant spectre» (*tayf ba‘īd*) and houses as «ghosts» (*ašbāḥ*). The Arabic terms used here – respectively spectre (*tayf*) and ghost (*šabaḥ*) – are particularly insightful: if the former is the standard term to describe a ghost and stresses its looming character, the latter is more akin to a fleeting apparition. This choice of words conveys how the protagonist’s memory and imagination is tested upon arrival to Zakariyya: ghosts flash up making him unsure about what he is witnessing, but there is also something eerie and ominous about them.

The semantic ambiguity conveyed by these textual nuances is far from trivial, as it illustrates how the past interrogates, evokes, and ultimately dominates the protagonist. Such is the peculiarity of Palestinian postmemory: unlike other contexts where the past charges the present with emotional poignancy, here it is the present that triggers, evokes, manifests, and magnifies the past. In this perennial oscillation between past and present, ghosts become agents of temporal collapse: unrestrainable, explosive, disturbing, distant yet lying in ambush. Ghosts are domineering over reality itself and signal an unresolved tension merging fascination with torment. By doing so, they hint at the complex condition of Palestinians, akin to a spectral immersion: paradoxically trapped in the search for a way out, yet swallowed up by an ever-present trauma.

4.3 - Family transmission and the role of affect

Hirsch’s conceptualization of postmemory stirred other scholars to assess the way in which transgenerational memory functions. For instance, in relation to second generations, van Alphen (2006) underscored that, if their parents’ memory works indexically – to an event, the beginning, corresponds a memory, the result – they internalize traumatic events through affective transfer. These events, rooted in non-representational memory, manifest themselves across non-verbal and non-cognitive responses, through «physical symptoms without the involvement of indexical memory and outside of conscious awareness» (Atkinson 2017:126). Taking these considerations further, in this section I investigate how affective transfer structures return narratives and generate a commitment to remember. Through an excerpt from “Nafī al-manfī” and references to Zaqtan’s novel, I argue that inheriting the traumatic effects of the Nakba, while also

having direct memories of its unfolding, originates a peculiar “pedagogy of memory”.

“Nafī al-manfī” revolves around Zaqtan’s passage through the Rafah [Rafah] Border Crossing to reach Zakariyya. As he leaves exile behind, he finds himself in a growing state of confusion and feels he is betraying his personal Andalus (Zaqtan 1997:144). The essay reflects this internal tension and his affective entanglement with the trauma of his father,⁸ constituting a fitting example of second-generation testimony being «shaped by the child’s confusion and responsibility [...] and by the consciousness that the child’s own existence may well be a form of compensation for unspeakable loss» (Hirsch 2008:112):

النسيان أو المسامحة قراره هو، وهو لم يفعل ذلك. ليس لي، إذن، أن أنسى أو أتسامح إنما أنا حمولته وتماديه في العيش. لم يعد هناك من يملك الحق في النسيان، هو فقط وقد مات، وليس لي إلا أن أحمل نعمة التذكر وبلواه، إلى أبد الأبد. (Zaqtan 1997:145)

He had the choice to forget or to forgive, and he did not do either of the two. So as for me, I cannot forget or forgive either, because I am his burden and his prolongation in life. Nobody has the right to forget. He is just dead, and all I can do is carry the good and the bad of his memories, forever and ever.⁹

Zaqtan’s words are a claim of affiliation, positioning him as the link between his father and what remains of his village. The terms he employs attests to a self-assigned duty to remember or, rather, not to forget: words like «his burden» (*ḥumūlatuhu*) and «his prolongation» (*tamādihu*) imply that the family’s dignity depends upon him, the designated custodian. The imperative of remembering is strengthened by the contrast with his father, who had a choice (*qarāruhu*) while he does not, and by the expression «forever and ever» (*ilā abad al-abadīn*), which evokes holy texts formulas. All these elements suggest that traumatic transfer “leaks” across generations: Zaqtān is both expected and expects himself to protect an otherwise forgotten story. In ‘*Araba qadīma bi-satā’ir*’, too, remembering comes with an inherited responsibility: when the protagonist arrives in Zakariyya, he realizes that, with both his dad and his uncle dead, «no one was left to remember all these things» (Zaqtan 2024:15). As long as the village is remembered, it matters to someone and it exists, but there is nobody left but him to do so. This is why he feels a strange fascination with the Canadian author of Iraqi Jewish origins Naïm Kattan: him, too, is the designated custodian of an otherwise forgotten past. The two are united by a «partnership in confusion» (Zaqtan 2011:71).

These texts reveal Zaqtan’s understanding of oblivion as a practice integral to

⁸ His father Khalil Zaqtan [Ḥalīl Zaqtān] (1928-1980) was a UNRWA teacher, poet, and activist.

⁹ My translation

settler-colonialism, whose «final goal is not only the elimination of Palestine and Palestinians but also the elimination of that elimination» (Gana 2023:vii). Seen in this light, these writings are an example of how Palestinian memory serves as “countermemory”, for they work against distortion and omission through active remembrance (Slyomovics 1993). On a more personal level, they point to Zaqtan’s «wounded identification» (Abu-Lughod 2011:128): “wounded” because it reveals a lesion traversing generations, and “identification” because his father’s decisions have fully become his and there is no room for self-contestation. The «obsession with memory loss» and «the burden of a past that is not fully understandable» (Sibilio 2018:259-60) illuminate what I call a “pedagogy of memory”: a way of “learning to remember” that unfolds across generations and through narrative and affective processes. This pedagogy is future-oriented – it sets an example for the generations to come – but also largely dependent upon the past – it is handed over from generation to generation. This pedagogy informs how Zaqtan was taught to feel about his family memories, how he learnt to express his feelings towards the collective history of Palestine, and the role he understood as his in the preservation of Palestinian cultural memory. This, however, entails a risk: that of having one’s experiences «displaced, even evacuated, by those of a previous generation» (Hirsch 2008:107), even more so when remembering on behalf of a dispossessed people. Grasping the position of anxiety and self-responsibility from which Zaqtan writes is of paramount importance to foreground the humanity of Palestinians’ anguish. As the next section demonstrates, it is this vulnerability – internalized and affectively borne – that can open paths of communal healing.

4.4 - The (im)possible closure of return: self-reflexivity as a healing process

Ongoing escalations in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict¹⁰ prompted scholars to reformulate their take on postmemory. The same Hirsch¹¹ contended that «the acknowledgment of vulnerability rather than demands for inviolability and permanent security would entail a pedagogy that engages with memory relationally». Taking up her suggestion, in this section I examine how Zaqtan’s novel makes memory a site of generative vulnerability and relationality. This is connected to the experience of return: longed for and anticipated with much impatience, it remains «a process of searching [...whose] force derived precisely from its lack of resolution, the simultaneity of promise and disappointment» (2002:263). I show how the lack of resolution of return is not a purely negative condition: when the protagonist displays awareness of the ongoingness of his search and shares it with the reader, storytelling is foregrounded as a potentially hea-

¹⁰ Though the most common phrasing is “Israeli-Palestinian conflict”, like Brown (2017:8) I swap terms to draw attention to the symbolic primacy of Israel suggested by this formulation.

¹¹ <https://rb.gy/yswjmt>. Last accessed 19/04/2025.

ling springboard and literature as a medium of solidarity.

The ongoingness of return appears clear from the protagonist's arrival to Zakariyya, when he does not hide his disappointment:

هذا كل شيء، تقريباً، فكر أثناء العودة إذا ما كان كل هذا ضرورياً؟! [...] ! بدا الأمر غريباً وقاسياً وممتلئاً بالتحامل.
(Zaqtan 2011:28)

During his return, he thought about whether any of this was necessary. [...] It all seemed strange, cruel, full of prejudice. (Zaqtan 2024:17)

The verb in the past tense «seemed» (*badā*) endows the adjectives that follow (*ḡarīban*, *qāṣiyan*, *mumtali'an bi-l-taḥāmul*) with a tentative nuance, as if words inevitably fell short of expressing what he feels. He has reached the realization that Zakariyya «is neither quite the place that was left behind, nor is it the place one can return to, but one that only exists as a place of a longing that is foreclosed» (Saloul 2012:40). From here onwards, the feeling of incompleteness starts dominating the protagonist's interiority and understanding of return:

كانت حياته تأخذ منحى وحيداً، أشبه بسلسلة من ال «عودات» غير المكتملة التي انبنت على «عودة» وحيدة لم تنجز
بعد، العودة التي تبعث بعدم اكتمالها نحو كل الأشياء مثل قدر لا نجاه منه. (2011:74 Zaqtan)

His life seemed to inflect into isolation, a series of incomplete returns, all built on a single return that was never accomplished, pressing its incompleteness against everything. He had been pursued by a void which was his inescapable destination. (Zaqtan 2024:50)

It is the first time in the novel that return is described as empty, though semantically interlinked terms (*nāqiṣ*, *fāriḡ*) had been already employed in relation to Zakariyya, an «empty carriages with old, dusty curtains (...). Its absence diffused through life, evaporating everything» (Zaqtan 2024:29). Here, the void he feels – literally a “lack of completion” (*adam iktimāl*) – generates a condition of inescapability (*lā naḡā'h min-hu*). The idea that return is inherently incomplete is reinforced by the structure of the novel, which mirrors this emotional loop. For example, the scene set by the checkpoint of Chapters Two is repeated in Chapters Nine, Twelve, and Eighteen. Because every time the focus is on a different aspect – the ennui of Israeli soldiers, the practices of submission forced onto Palestinians, the physical description of the family in line – it is only as the chapters unfold that we grasp this repetitive pattern.

Interestingly, though the protagonist turns inward upon realizing that return is unresolved, in the novel this self-reflexivity creates a shared space of reflection with

the reader. In this interpretation, I differ from Robin’s reading (2003:329), according to whom self-reflexivity stands for the ethical necessity to detach oneself from the inherited traumatic event. Instead, I read it as a token of authenticity meant to foster a sense of solidarity with the reader and open a breach towards a mitigation of solitude. Examined from this angle, self-reflexivity is crucial in the protagonist’s effort to present us with something «unfathomable, hard to describe, elusive, almost but only almost indescribable», thus sharing «with the reader that it is difficult but important to give a name to something which comes close to defying description» (Wild 1998:95). A double shift is performed here: on the one hand, the protagonist acknowledges the ambivalence of return and lays it bare in all its contradictions. On the other hand, by striving to render his multi-compounded disappointment narratable, he invites readers to look with him at his return and calls them to perform an active and healing role (Bal 1999:x–xi) in a space of commonality and intimacy. This marks a shift from witnesses to «with-nesses» (Sosa 2014:153): in this «humanizing transactive process», «the survivor/testifier is able to reclaim her or his position as an interrelated subject» (van Alphen 1997:165) and readers become co-bearers of his vulnerability. The emotional transparency of Zaqtan’s novel, therefore, is not merely symbolic, but attests to storytelling as a site of ethical and political solidarity. This is particularly crucial for a people who have been constantly exposed to historical erasure, as it implies the trust that, upon laying claim, someone will listen and legitimize the voice of Palestinians.

5 - Conclusions

Reading Zaqtan’s work through the prism of postmemory revealed how Palestinian literature registers and performs trauma. In particular, it foregrounded how literary narratives mirror, resist, and respond to a return experience that exceeds mere physical homecoming because it remains unresolved. In Zaqtan’s negotiation of the collision between postmemories and memories, literature emerged as a vital medium to work through the “presentness” of trauma, but also to fuel collective understandings of the past and gesture toward a reimagined future. In the structure of my analysis, I tried to mirror this dynamic: the first three sections concentrated on what the trauma-memory nexus provokes, while the final one turned to how the ongoingness of trauma is transformed into a relational and potentially healing space. Further research from this angle could help move beyond Palestinian literature solely as testimony or resistance, to appreciate instead how it facilitates solidarity through creative outputs.

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