

HOMEcoming AND ALIENATION IN MOURID BARGHOUTI'S *I SAW RAMALLAH*

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ABSTRACT

This research paper proposes to examine the ideas of Exile and Resistance in the Life Narrative of Palestinian writer Mourid Barghouti's *I Saw Ramallah* in the backdrop of Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The project explores how the microscopic depictions of the individual experiences can help in the construction of a macro level representation of history and identity of the entire community. This also attempts to examine the specific contours of the concept of Resistance which emerged with its distinct features in the Palestinian Memoirs/ Autobiographies with the formal establishment of the state of Israel in May, 1948 that resulted in the expulsion of million of Palestinian from their homeland.

Keywords: Palestinian Literature; Resistance; Life Narratives

Research Objectives

The present study aims to examine the representation of exile, displacement, memory, and identity in Mourid Barghouti's *I Saw Ramallah*. It seeks to explore how the two authors employ autobiographical writing to narrate personal experiences of loss, separation, and belonging while simultaneously reflecting the collective history of the Palestinian people.

INTRODUCTION

I Saw Ramallah (Arabic, 1997; English translation, 2000) is a significant Palestinian autobiographical work by the renowned Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti. As Barghouti's first prose publication, the memoir has attracted considerable critical attention since its appearance and had gone through six reprints by 2009. The work received the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature and has been translated into several languages, including English, Spanish, French, and Italian. Commenting on the memoir, Sabah A. Salih highlights its remarkable capacity to evoke a range of contrasting emotions throughout the narrative journey. According to Salih,

Barghouti does not seek to determine political right or wrong; rather, as the author himself states, "My measure is aesthetic" (43). Consequently, the memoir offers readers something distinctive: an elegant and evocative language that appeals to the senses. Through his narrative, readers encounter both sorrow and joy, despair and hope. They witness ordinary moments of Palestinian life as well as the realities of occupation. Alongside depictions of checkpoints, settlements, and displacement, Barghouti presents a landscape whose beauty continues to endure. For him, Palestine is not merely a geographical territory but also a living culture that deserves to be experienced and understood in depth (Salih 496).

Barghouti was born and raised in Deir Ghassanah, a village situated approximately twenty-six kilometres northwest of Ramallah. After completing his secondary education, he moved to Egypt to study English literature at Cairo University. In 1967, while he was nearing the completion of his Bachelor of Arts degree, he learned that Ramallah had fallen under Israeli occupation. This event marked the beginning of a prolonged period of exile, preventing him from returning to his homeland

except for a brief visit in 1995. Throughout his career, Barghouti worked and taught in several countries, including Egypt, Kuwait, and Hungary. Widely celebrated for his poetry, he was awarded the Palestine Prize for Poetry in 2000.

The memoir reconstructs the author's life against the backdrop of the 1993 Oslo Accord between Israel and the Palestinians. The agreement facilitated limited Palestinian self-governance in parts of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank and created conditions that enabled Barghouti's return to Ramallah after nearly thirty years of displacement. His exile had begun with the Arab-Israeli War of 1967. Furthermore, the Israeli government's family reunification regulations of September 1993 made it possible for him to obtain permission to visit Ramallah, despite its continued occupation. *I Saw Ramallah* is therefore an account of this long-awaited return, narrated in language that retains the lyrical quality of poetry. Even after three decades, however, Barghouti was permitted only a temporary visit and was denied permanent residence in his birthplace. Living under the persistent reality of exile and separation from homeland, he recounts his experiences with both emotional depth and poetic sensitivity. Avi Shlaim describes the memoir as an "intensely lyrical account of the poet's return to his hometown" (2004). The poetic character of the narrative enables Barghouti to weave together memories, reflections, and images from different stages of his life.

His experience of exile presents a perspective distinct from that of an individual who voluntarily leaves home and later returns. Instead, Barghouti writes from the position of someone forcibly separated from his family and homeland for decades. He recalls the anguish of being unable to reunite with relatives who remained on the other side of the border following the events of 1967. Consequently, his return is neither triumphant nor celebratory; rather, it underscores the painful reality that a displaced person may become only a visitor in his own homeland. The narrative begins with his crossing of the bridge connecting Jordan and the Palestinian territories. Within the memoir, this bridge assumes symbolic significance, linking the past and present and representing the fragile connection between memory and reality. As Barghouti approaches the crossing, he vividly conveys feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, nostalgia, and anticipation. He wonders how his homeland will receive him and whether he will even be permitted to enter.

The bridge scene encapsulates the fears shared by many Palestinians who face uncertain entry into their homeland. Waiting for permits and approvals, they are confronted with the possibility of rejection at any moment. Barghouti captures this uncertainty in a series of anxious questions:

I look at the body of the bridge. Will I really cross it? Will there be some last-minute problem? Will they send me back? Will they invent a procedural error? Shall I actually walk on that other bank, on those hills displaying themselves in front of me? If I am not allowed in, will I be able to go back? (Barghouti 10).

These questions remain unanswered until permission is finally granted or denied. For Palestinians whose homeland remains deeply contested and politicized, return is never guaranteed. By drawing readers into these moments of hesitation and doubt, Barghouti enables them to experience the emotional uncertainty of exile firsthand. Reflecting on this aspect of the memoir, Asaad Al-Saleh comments

I Saw Ramallah seeks to move beyond the state of exile and expose its aftermath, especially when the displaced person is back in his or her homeland.

When Barghouti revisits his family home, memories of his birth and childhood return to him. Standing in the room where he was born, he remarks: "Here my mother gave birth to me. Here in this room, I was born, four years before the birth of the State of Israel" (Barghouti 56). Yet rather than diminishing, his sense of estrangement deepens during his stay in Ramallah. Al Saleh further writes:

The memoir portrays exile as a condition that “cannot be altered even if the return to the homeland is politically offered and physically materialized.

In the chapter “The Village Square,” he observes that the people he once knew have aged and that a new generation now occupies the social space of the town. At the same time, he recognizes that he himself has become unfamiliar to them. Years of exile have altered both his identity and the community’s perception of him. The person who left decades earlier is no longer the same individual; his perspectives on family, gender, politics, literature, and culture have evolved considerably (Barghouti 85). He wonders whether his people still remember him, only to conclude that they cannot be expected to do so. Through the memoir form, Barghouti explores exile as a deeply traumatic and enduring condition. His narrative suggests that even if physical return becomes possible, the emotional and psychological losses caused by displacement can never be fully repaired.

CONCLUSION

Palestinian autobiographical writings may broadly be classified into three categories: works by writers residing within Palestine, writings produced in exile, and narratives emerging from the Palestinian diaspora. The text examined in this study primarily belong to the second category. Mourid Barghouti embodies the experience of prolonged exile and displacement. Their autobiographical narratives differ according to their respective social, cultural, economic, and political circumstances. These historical events like establishment of Israel, 1948 and 1967 wars of Israel and Palestine and ongoing Palestine Israel conflict function not only as memories of loss and displacement but also as powerful foundations for the construction and preservation of Palestinian collective identity.

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