Calling the Phoenix: Integrating the Trauma of the Nakba into Palestinian Identity

Ahlam Mustafa AbuKhoti
University of Sydney

In this paper I argue that the Nakba as a traumatic experience has been integrated into collective Palestinian identity through various forms of commemoration. Through arguing that such cultural trauma has been integrated into collective identity, I take part in challenging notions of resilience and recovery as conceptualized within mainstream trauma theories. Through my analysis of Radwa Ashour’s novel Al-Tantoureyya (2010) I show how Nakba as a cultural trauma replaced an identity based on what existed with one based on what has been lost. By doing so I suggest that identities of trauma are not always marked by pathological responses resulting in dysfunctionality and rupture.

Through the last decade trauma theory has undergone a wave of revisionary studies and critical debates concerning established theories and their application. These criticisms were mainly addressing questions of generalized applicability of a specific model which emerged during late 20th century, known as the Yale school, with Cathy Caruth’s and Geoffrey Hartman’s works at its heart – and the appropriateness of using such a model to categorize traumas from outside the Western context1 2. This project is now widely known as Decolonizing Trauma Studies. Postcolonial trauma has occupied a substantial body of works looking into the variant models of trauma possible outside the central tenets of the Yale School’s model. It was not long until literary representations of trauma drew profound attention as they provided a chance for both victims and researchers to expose traumatic experiences that had long been invisible.

The most general definition of trauma describes ‘an overwhelming experience of sudden, or catastrophic events, in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, and uncontrolled repetitive occurrence of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena’3. Trauma is the result of the mind’s reaction to a sudden uncontrollable and powerful event, which causes an acute psychological damage, one that is simplified by a split in the mind or a disassociation from the event, rendering the mind unable to register the wound due to the dysfunctionality of cognition4. This inability to register the event then leads to an inability to represent or speak of it, hence the unspeakable nature of trauma and its negative effect on identity in the aftermath of

4 Lăpugean, Mirela. ‘Speaking About the Unspeakable: Trauma and Representation’ British and American Studies vol 21, 2015, pp 85-91.
the event. Cultural identity refers to the ‘content of values as guiding principles, to meaningful symbols, and to life-styles that individuals share with others, though not necessarily within recognizable groups’. What this means is that cultural identity transcends social division and personal definitions of self. The realization of such identity I look at here relates to Gayatri Spivak’s term, strategic essentialism - referring to the way subordinate and marginal groups put away their local differences in the pursuit of achieving a sense of collective cultural identity, banding them together in political movements and cultural struggles. While Spivak acknowledges the problematic and unstable nature of using terms such as ‘indigenous people’ that lead to dismissing significant differences, she emphasizes that such acts of identity formation (using categories like African, Indian, Native American) perform political roles and do important work. I combine this concept with Stuart Hall’s two axes of Cultural Identity where one represents the constant, fixed, and fundamental, while the other represents the variable, flexible, and peripheral. As I will show through the analysis, these two concepts provide a paradigm for understanding the aftermath of the Nakba as cultural trauma on Palestinians. Quoting Jeffrey Alexander, cultural traumas occur when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways.

Using the Nakba strategically as a constant component of Palestinian identity, transformed this cultural trauma to a powerful unifying tool in the face of social or political divisions caused by other variables composing this identity.

In this paper I engage in both of the above-mentioned definitions of trauma (individual and cultural) to offer new perspectives on interpreting the integration of traumatic experiences into the self as a member of the cultural collective and exploring different interpretations for traumatic ‘symptoms’ such as unspeakability, or reenactment. I argue that in cases of collective cultural traumas the persistence of the catastrophic event/s fuels a will to remember instead of a will to forget. Traumatic pasts can function as a unifying force taking part in replacing the lost community with an imagined glorified identity formed around shared suffering and joint sorrows. I am also aiming to make clear the inseparable relationship between traumatic experiences in contexts of war and genocide, and the political and historical nature of such experiences.

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The Nakba as Postcolonial Trauma

I would like to acknowledge the problematic nature of describing the Nakba as postcolonial, giving the fact that the Palestinian people – unlike other previously colonized nations – are still under Israeli occupation, and that the state of Israel is a colonial power functioning within the paradigm and mindset of settler colonialism. This reality contradicts the ‘post’ in ‘postcolonial’. I use the term ‘postcolonial’ here in the sense of ‘post’ the conventional definition of colonialism, only to be replaced with new forms of neocolonialism. While the Israeli state can be clearly identified as a military colonial power in pure academic terms, it is acknowledged as a legitimate nation-state with little consequences to its colonial policies. Part of this has to do with the political, economic, and cultural pressures it performs within its context in service of a larger imperial project.9

Other aspects of postcoloniality have to do with the nature of the Palestinian experience viewed as an experience of trauma. The term Nakba (catastrophe) refers to the time between 1947 and 1948 when an approximate number of 750,000 Palestinians fled their homes or were forced to evacuate their villages and towns by Jewish militant groups including the Haganah, Igrun, and the Stern Gang.10 The year 1948 marked the establishment of the Israeli state, as the British mandate came to an end in the Palestinian territory on May 14th, 1948. For Palestinians this meant the parallel vanquish and loss of not only their lands as a property of Palestinian people, but also Palestinian society.

The significance of this traumatic experience and its postcolonial nature manifests in two major characteristics: first, while Nakba tends to refer to a specific time frame, it is by no means a singular event. The aftermath of the Nakba which continues to affect Palestinian lives makes it an ongoing trauma that has not yet ended. The year of 1948 was not a pinpoint in history, but ‘a long period of time that began in that year and was disguised in the names of the years that followed’.11 Postcolonial traumas are characterized by their accumulative and insidious nature. Second, the collective nature of this experience is aligned with the collective nature of colonial trauma discussed in postcolonial contexts. The Nakba has become what Pierre Nora terms a ‘site of memory’,12 and a constitutive element of Palestinian identity.13 In this context individual representations of collective memory contribute to the continuity of an established collective identity. The Nakba as a site of memory is not a singular narrative of a specific events, but the sum of all the experiences and stories told by those who experienced the initial event, and those who came after. Therefore, I do not look at personal and social identity here as separated from each other or from the wider field of cultural identity, but rather conjoined and reciprocal; a Palestinian

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identity contains within it the memory of the Nakba on a personal level and a collective one.

In his article ‘Rethinking the Nakba’, Elias Khoury talks about a muteness that has encompassed the memory of the Nakba. Khoury identifies the Nakba as a traumatic experience that is still happening, and its pain not as a memory but as daily life experience. This story of Palestine has not been told, he argues, not because it is not there, but because there is no one to hear it. Rosemary Sayigh, in her critique of the ‘trauma genre’, questions the factors contributing to the exclusion of the Nakba from studies on trauma in postcolonial narratives, and the fact that the few studies mentioning them tend to dehistoricize Palestinians. Such studies approach trauma in Palestinian communities without ever connecting it to the occupier/occupied framework, or the long multifaceted nature of Palestinian suffering. One can only wonder if this is a result of a deliberate act of cultural and historical annihilation. While the facts of the Nakba as ‘ethnic cleansing can no more be neglected or negated after the works of the Palestinian historian Walid Al Khalidy and the works of the Israeli New Historians’, historical investigation shows ‘an active policy designed to erase the memory of the Nakba from Israeli collective memory’.

This study, therefore, contributes to the growing research approaching the Nakba and its aftermath as a traumatic experience that affected and still takes its toll on Palestinian populations. Such an approach gives prominence to the transgenerational and transhistorical aspects of the Nakba as a ‘site of memory’, one where Palestinian identity found its refuge.

**Why Radwa Ashour? Why Al-Tantoureyyah?**

Radwa Ashour (1946–2014) is an Egyptian academic and writer who had a great interest in memory in both her literary works and critical writings. This obsession with memory, as she describes it, was a result of her experiences as a member of the Arab collective during the leftist movement in the 1960s and early 1970s. Her work *Al-Tantoureyyah*, which I will refer to as *The Woman from Tantoura* from now on, was first published in Arabic in 2004, and later translated to English in 2011. While my analysis is applied to the Arabic text, I used the English translation to provide the quotations used in this study.

While Radwa Ashour is not a Palestinian herself, she is familiar with the Palestinian Nakba and its aftermath, simply for the mere fact that she was part of the Arab collective growing up during the time when Palestine was the most prominent cause of Arab nations. But her connection to Palestine expanded to her personal life as she married the Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti and is the mother of the Palestinian academic and poet Tamim Barghouti. I view Ashour’s decision to write a novel about Palestine and the experience of Palestinian people as an expression of herself as a member of this collective. While other non-Palestinian writers did write about

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14 Khoury, ‘Rethinking The Nakba’.
16 Khoury, “Rethinking the Nakba”, p. 258.
Palestine in many works, I find this novel, with its realistic historical narrative and wide multigenerational scope, the most suitable to examine the long-lasting and multilayered effects of the Nakba on the personal and collective aspects of Palestinian identity. This is not suggesting that Palestinian identity is a vague concept, open to interpretation and construction. Rashid Khalidi in his book *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness* warns of such common tropes in relation to discussing modern Palestinian identity after the Nakba\(^{18}\). Finding a representation of this identity in a work of a non-Palestinian highlights the prominence of certain aspects around which this identity is constructed, while at the same time preserving the specificity of what it entails to Palestinians themselves.

*The Woman from Tantoura*, Ashour’s last work of fiction before her passing away, tells the story of the Nakba through the eyes of Ruqayya, a little girl whose life was changed forever by the murder of her father and two brothers, along with the forced displacement of the rest of her family. We follow Ruqayya as she accompanies her mother to Lebanon, where her uncle and his family decided to reside ‘temporarily, until the war is over’, but the temporary transforms into the permanent. We see her getting married, having children, and grandchildren, all while remaining in that state of awaiting. She survived wars (the Lebanese Civil War, the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the War of the Camps), deaths (her mother’s death, followed by her uncle’s death and her mother in law’s death), disappearances (the disappearance of her husband, and the kidnapping of her son), and exile, but she could not survive her memories. Through Ruqayya and her family, we are exposed to the various consequences of the Palestinian diaspora initiated by the Nakba. A more sophisticated depiction of the Palestinian experience is elicited through the different paths Palestinians took or were forced to follow after the events, and how their affiliation and commitment to the cause was affected by the prolonged nature of the struggle. The novel also focuses on Palestinian refugee camps and their role in fueling the Palestinian resistance and preserving Palestinian shared identities. These difficult matters are embedded in a story of human resilience and continued adaptation to repeated traumas, through a long process of internalizing memories and retaining the skill of recollection as an act of survival.

**The ‘Making’ of the ‘Palestinian’**

The story of Ruqayya in *The Woman from Tantoura* functions as a space where the establishment of Palestinian identity after the Nakba evolves and develops as time goes by. If we start by examining the cover of the Arabic copy (fig. 1), it pictures the ruins of a seaside town in black and white, with the blue sea and sky along with a green palm tree being the only coloured portion of the picture. Two people walking on the shore, clearly from past times, give the feeling that it is a photo from a vintage album. This visualization carries the impression that in reality the town no longer exists, and the black and white photo acts as a memento of its vanished presence. Meanwhile, the colored sea acts as a mnemonic anchor that grounds Ruqayya into her land, as they both – she and the sea – intersect with its borders; sea waves run through the shore and Ruqayya’s feet sink into the sand. This image is accentuated by the

endnotes in the text where Ashour states that Tantoura and other villages are part of Palestine and its history, they can be found on ‘any map’. The map that Ashour is referring to here is by nature very ambiguous, since any map of Palestine as it appears in official records would not show the distribution of the Palestinian villages destroyed during the 1948 war period. Her affirmation of the unquestionable nature of such statement reflects the predefined memory Ashour aims to shape and circulate.

(Figure 1. Cover of the Arabic copy of *The Woman from Tantoura*, published by Dar Al Shorouk (2010))

The first chapter of the novel is full of depictions of Palestinian life: Ruqayya playing at the beach with her friends, talking about the sugar spring of sweet water right beside the newlyweds Plaza. She describes the wedding ceremony and recites folk songs:

The wedding spreads over the seashore and expands. It is festive with the women’s trills and ahagiz songs, the dabka circles, the aroma of grilled lamb, and the torches. The call and response of the ataba and ooof songs escape and hover as if they might escape from the men’s chests and reverberate, yes, by God, they escape and hover as if they might reach the Lord above his throne or
fly beyond to nearby neighbors to nearby villages to entertain the residents of the whole coast from Ras Al-Naqura to Rafah.  

While Ashour’s narrative takes place in a context of loss of land, society, and culture, her narrative techniques resort to aspects of everyday life: eating habits, clothes, appearances, language, houses, tools, songs, and celebrations. Her choice to tell the story through what seems irrelevant to the grand narrative of history takes a center position in this scenario. Through these elements Ashour aims to stand in the face of what she calls the ‘manipulation of words’, planting people back into the land to redeem their right of existence and their right of cultural identity, and stand against different forms of cultural and historical appropriation.

Wisal, Ruqayya’s childhood friend, another Nakba witness, mainly acts as the representative of Palestinian heritage; she is often the channel by which we are exposed to aspects of culture and tradition:

As soon as we entered the house I asked Maryam to make us coffee, Wisal said, “put off the coffee, let’s put these things away first.” She rolled up her sleeves and took one of the suitcases he had brought to the kitchen and squatted down beside it and started to take out food she had brought. She handed me three plastic bottles, tightly sealed, containing olive oil, and three others in which she had put olives…oil and olive from our trees, I would take that to Ruqayya even if she was living in an oil press!

By accentuating these aspects of the Palestinian experience, the novel creates an alternative homeland; through preserving habits, cuisine, clothes, accent, expressions and proverbs, this is where a strategic essentialist cultural identity is constructed. This constructed collective identity based on shared culture and memory provides a powerful counterpart to the continuous deprivation of historical rights and lack of ‘authority’ within the international community and official platforms experienced by many Palestinians. Building Palestinian identity around the most ordinary aspects of everyday life also falls under the fixed and constant aspects of identity, one of Hall’s axes mentioned earlier. A collective one true self, hiding inside the many other selves produced and imposed by the colonisers’ policies and means of cultural appropriation; a unified culture that people with shared history and ancestry hold in common. The significance of olive oil and the olive tree, the preparation of Palestinian dishes, the Palestinian Thoub or traditional dress: these components have been transformed from being a result of cultural practice, to a motive that dictates cultural practice.

The ‘battle of the dress’ is the title Ashour gives to an incident where her dear friend Wisal engaged in an act of resistance through counter narratives. When a man approaches Wisal and comments on her Palestinian dress referring to it as Israeli, she goes after the man and makes it clear with both passion and anger that this dress is Palestinian, she made with her own Palestinian hands, and she will not allow Israel to take that from her as it took her village. What Ashour is pointing at here is the ongoing appropriation of Palestinian culture and heritage by Israeli policies and discourses.

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Roger Sheety argues that the cultural appropriation of books, music, art, cuisine and dress have been used by Zionists as a weapon against Palestinians. Sheety highlights the commonly overlooked fact that during the 1948 Nakba it was not only Palestinian lands that were taken over: the Zionist militias looted tens of thousands of books, paintings, musical recordings, furniture, and other artifacts from Palestinian homes, libraries, and government offices.20

When I entitled this section ‘The Making of the Palestinian’ I was not referring to creating something from nothing. What I want to highlight is the deliberate and forceful efforts put forward by Palestinians to create a shared identity with concrete symbols and components; an identity that transcends time and space, and overcomes the limitations of losing the geographical and physical advantage of being able to share a homeland. The aftermath of the Nakba as a cultural trauma, therefore, was a trigger to this positive constructive act of identity formation, opposing the common and assumed pathological shattering of self and identity and promoting a process of resilience that feeds on shared experiences if the trauma and a common aspiration for justice.

Nakba and the Phoenix of Identity

While we examined an aspect of Palestinian identity that was developed because of the trauma of the Nakba, such a notion does not defy the fact that the Nakba itself has been transformed to become another constant marker for what it means to be a Palestinian. And when I use the term Nakba, I do not only refer to the events of 1948, but to the colossal impact and prolonged state of occupation that followed. In Ruqayya’s story, the day she left her village and saw her father and two brothers dead amongst the victims was the day when time stopped. Her life kept going back to that moment, and their ‘ghosts’ followed her as she continued to live. At some point Ruqayya expresses the burden she carries with her, the burden of survival. Why did not she lay dead over there, with those whose lives were taken?21 This initial attitude of shock was reinforced by her mother’s refusal to acknowledge the fact that her husband and sons were murdered. She would not see, she would not listen, and Ruqayya had to hold that truth inside of her until someone else acknowledged it.

Ruqayya was silenced by her mother’s refusal to listen, in a way channeling the dilemma of the Palestinian people as they attempt to make their trauma visible, for an audience looking the other way. This unspeakability is not the result of a break in language, nor an internally developed defense mechanism, but rather an externally enforced reality. If unspeakability is evident in a situation of postcolonial trauma, the possibility of it being a result of an enforced silencing process, whether by negation or neglect, is more likely than not. Resorting to canonical trauma theory and classifying Ruqayya’s loss of words as a symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder would be an easy way out, focusing on her own individual suffering, instead of pointing at the outer circumstances causing it. A silenced voice does not necessarily reflect a problem.

21 The concept of survivor’s guilt occurs in situations when a traumatic, mostly life threatening, events are experienced, those who live to tell the story of the event perceive themselves as being guilty of remaining alive.
with the individual, but rather highlights the crimes of others. For a few months after the initial encounter with the trauma, the protagonist was silenced, literally losing the ability or the will to use language as a means of communication, mirroring her mother’s choice to deny such fact. She only spoke again once she had an ear to listen, to believe her words. This depiction of Ruqayya’s experience highlights the role of collective consciousness and its central contribution in allowing and facilitating the exposure of traumatic experiences through providing a safe space for testimonies.

Another tribute to the collective and transgenerational nature of this trauma is projected through Ruqayya’s dream of Naji Al-Ali. In this part of the narrative Ruqayya is lost between dream and reality. A little boy was sitting next to her. His name was Naji. He too was from Ain al-Helweh Camp, originally from Galilee, and he too was a painter. This continuity and repetition of the story of exile is used by Ashour to indicate the permanency of the Palestinian exile, and the inherited legacy of defiance.

In bed, between sleep and waking, I became confused. I thought, was Naji sitting beside me, or was it a vision in the dream? Would I find him the next morning in Ain Al-Helweh?...Would Naji meet little Ruqayya one day across the wise, or without it?...I will sleep so that I can get up early in the morning and go to the camp, to look for Naji and make sure he is there.

Radwa Ashour attempts to demonstrate how the Nakba is reenacted over and over again, as though the ghosts of those who have died unjustly will continue to live through generations to come. The phantoms Ruqayya speaks of are not a consequence of her unsuccessful mourning of the lost, but the result of the silence in the previous generation; what comes back to haunt are the tombs of others. Reenactment here, as a reliving the trauma, is not a negative value; it is an adaptive mechanism enabling victims to integrate lived experiences in a productive manner. Unlike the premise of canonical trauma theory, these are not symptoms to be deemed pathological, but rather should be viewed as means of historicizing the struggle and keeping its continuing colonial condition vivid. The spectres of the lost are not gone, the phantoms persist; she just learned to accept them and live with them. While the result of traumatization may seem similar through manifested symptoms, not all survivors necessarily share the same fundamental assumptions about identity construction and mental health. Thus, trauma is ‘neither natural nor universal, it is a social practice, as such, is always necessarily located in a particular time and space’.

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23 Naji Al- Ali (1938-1987) was a Palestinian cartoonist, born in Al-Shajarah Village in Lower Galilee. He was known for his confrontational illustrations, critical of Arab regimes and Israeli policies. On the 22 of July 1987 he was shot in front of his office in London, and lost conscious until his death on the 27th of July 1987.
Preserving memories of the Nakba and constantly connecting them to new reoccurring traumas is a form of struggle, in which the will to forget the traumatic event opposes the need to remember as a means of preserving identity simplified by memories of suffering and holding on to the right of return. Ruqayya’s son Hassan pressures her to write her memoirs and recollections of the catastrophe, as well as the implications it had on her life and the lives of others around her, or voice her traumatic wounds as Cathy Caruth describes it. Ruqayya views this request as an unjust obligation; she wonders why she is asked to relive what she spent years and years trying to forget, to push it aside and make it fade away. However, did she really forget? Was she pretending? These opposing forces characterize the complicated nature of Ruqayya’s positioning of herself in a persisting colonial context. Is she inside the struggle or outside? Should her victimization overrule her obligation to resist marginalization and erasure, or should she take the path of a willful forgetfulness?

Ashour adopts a similar stand in her portrayal of memory; in the text, memory is equal to existence as a statement of self-affirmation. Ruqayya’s uncle’s repeated recitation of the same stories of the homeland to his grandchildren, his continued efforts to have them know the Map of Palestine by heart, and his refusal to suspend his testimony– they all perform a political act through recreating the memory of the Nakba and upholding the only reality he knew. Ruqayya herself keeps the key to her family’s home in the village close to the flesh, as it is the habit of most Palestinian women, even though those houses no longer exist. This practice– another form of strategic essentialism – reconstitutes a unity between their present and their past, their ability to keep their identities intertwines with their ability to remember, their testimony is not reduced to oral expressions or written records but extends to the daily repeated habits of unnoticed resistance.

Positioning Ashour’s works as an act of cultural remembering aids to understand the decisions she makes through her work to retrieve and repeat the catastrophic event. This willful remembering, or what Susanne Buckley-Zistel calls chosen trauma and its repeated narratives, helps construct a group identity separate from the identity of the opponent who caused the trauma, and escape the appropriation of one’s culture, history, and existence by the colonizer. 28 It is important to acknowledge this aspect of cultural remembering because Ashour not being a Palestinian and not experiencing the trauma herself transcends the collective through the individual, and the individual through the collective in a reciprocal manner.

The discussion of memory and trauma in Ashour’s takes the form of rationalizing the act of narrative itself and giving meaning to it. It reveals the painful aspects of the process of conscience recollection and how open wounds can never be silenced no matter how long and frequently they are spoken:

How did I bear it? How did we endure and live, how did a drink of water slip down our throats without choking, and suffocating us? What’s the use of recalling what we endured and bringing it back in words? When someone we love dies, we place him in shroud, wrapping him tenderly and digging deep in

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the earth, we weep we know that we must bury him to go on with our lives.

What sane person unearths the tombs of his loved ones. What logic is there in my running after the memory that had escaped, trying to flee from itself? Do I want to kill it so that I can live, or am I trying to revive it even if I die because... because why? I suddenly scream: Damn memory, damn its mother and father, damn the sky over it and the day it was and the day it will be, damn the flies! ...

Let it escape, let it go, may it never return.

Stretch out a sheet as you saw them doing, to cover what you saw throughout the years, and the day of the smell and the flies.

Leave the page blank, Ruqayya.29

While Ruqayya runs away from her traumatic memories, Ashour insists on bringing them back, even if it is through someone else’s voice. At the same time, Ruqayya is not the only subject of remembering; another significant section in the novel features her son corresponding with his brothers reporting the information he had obtained about those violent times and the disappearance of their father. Here Ashour is more interested in the act of remembering as a documenting procedure, and Ruqayya’s failure to narrate, her decision to leave the page blank is overruled by the collective effort to memorialize the Nakba exemplified by her son’s testimony. By incorporating a variety of modes of remembering trauma through intertextuality and narrative voices, Ashour brings the act of collective remembering into realization within the novel itself, which provides a miniature model of the actual process. This aspect of identity adheres to the second axe in Hall’s model, the variable and flexible. Such identities are not a long-lost identification of the self that, once recaptured and recovered, will secure the sense of self, but rather they are the names given to the different ways people are positioned by and position themselves within the narratives of the past.30

Ruqayya’s story functions as a doorway into the Palestinian versions of the historical truth; it is a threshold of memory where there are as many stories as there are people telling them. This idea of multiplicity enriches the experience of the Palestinian collective and accentuates, once more, the power of shared suffering as a unifying force. Instead of resorting to a singular narrative of the events, one that is told through the voice of the narrator, Ashour choses to give way to multiple narratives to coexist even if they are different and sometimes contradicting. This is another way of mirroring the specificity of each Palestinian experience of the Nakba, resulting in fragmentation of collective identity. Yet, unity is achieved through the shared experience of the trauma itself, what has been lost through displacement and social rupture was recaptured through pain and suffering. This is precisely why the Nakba must not be forgotten or overcome. Narrating multiple accounts of the traumatizing experience creates a common ground where collective memories combined take part in shaping the imagined community needed to replace the conventional national identity.

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29 The text refers to the Sabra and Shatila Massacre, which took place in the period from 16th until September 18, 1982. Different sources provide different numbers of victims but it is estimated loosely between 750 to 3500 civilians.

identity-based community. Ruqayya’s visits to the refugee camp emphasizes this. Listening to stories of other survivors Ruqayya is reassured:

When I listen, I am no longer outside the train. I do not jump inside it, because the train I used to express our situation has disappeared. The earth becomes round like and embrace, an irony I do not understand which confuses me, because the elderly women were telling the stories of the theft of the land and of those they lost among their families and children…The story reassures me, in some strange and wondrous way I can’t understand.31

The stories Ruqayya shares with the women create a shielding roundness, they offer her the needed reassurance that she is not alone, her story is not the only one, and her suffering is real. This collective practice of storytelling represents a survival mechanism that is not based on blocking memories of the trauma, but remembering frequently and in detail. The women who told the stories continue to affirm how they will visit each other’s villages once they have returned home. Such a notion might come across as a form of denial and refusal to acknowledge the reality, but with a closer look, we realize that it is utilized to revolt against this fate, which they confound by their mere existence.

The importance of such a notion is to acknowledge that when it comes to the Palestinian exiled populations, the concept of an imagined community formed around notions of difference between nation citizens and others,32 there is an additional other or others within the Palestinian collective.33 In this scenario, the search for an authentic Palestinian identity which drives forces of documentation and commemoration of the Palestinian struggle, can lead to discriminative practices based on levels of “authenticity”. Kathleen Fincham in ‘Shifting Youth Identities and Notions of Citizenship in the Palestinian Diaspora: The Case of Lebanon’ speaks of a form of such authenticity-based discrimination:

As young Palestinians are increasingly being raised in Lebanese cities…the authenticity of these youths’ Palestinianness is being put into question by the Palestinians who remain in the camps. For example, on meeting a fellow Palestinian young woman who had grown up in the Lebanese city of Tyre, one youth from Rashidieh camp said: ‘Is she Palestinian? She is not like us.34

These conflicts within the process of forming a common Palestinian identity make it crucial to adopt the previously mentioned methods of multiple narratives and versions of recollection, to accommodate for the multiplicity of experiences whenever the Palestinian identity is discussed. Furthermore, any discussion of an authentic identity of Palestinians defies the nature of the Nakba as a grand loss of collective wellbeing. The camps’ walls in the life of exiled individuals replaced the ‘borders’ of a nation, and divided suffering in unequal manner between Palestinian populations.

31 Radwa, The Woman From Tantoura, p. 122.
Therefore, highlighting the common suffering and commemorating the Nakba as the source of all suffering is essential to overcome such divisions and unify the collective under this trauma-based constructed cultural identity. In this sense resistance and resilience are to be seen not merely as responses of individuals but more importantly, as part of a communal process of living and working with trauma.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that Al-Nakba in collective memory became part of cultural identity through processes of recreation and integration. These processes took part in reformulating the perception of identity from individual self-unity and completeness, to a collaboration within members of the collective to preserve a traumatic past attempting to stand in the face of injustice and alienation. Radwa Ashour in The Woman from Tantour works towards building up memory-based collective identity revolving around experiences of trauma and suffering. By including different narratives and versions of traumatic memory without trapping them in a single unifying version, Ashour attempts to enlarge the space for the common and constant while acknowledging the specificity of each experience.

Hall’s two axes of identity are evident in this depiction of the Nakba as a traumatic constant, profound (displacement and exodus) and other traumatic tragedies and their representations as variables, specificities (frequent relocations, scattered family members, consequent wars, discrimination, deaths). Ruqayya viewed the day she left her town as a child as the point where time stopped; years passed by but the only prominent presence in her life is, ironically enough, absence. Absence is not only a loss of land or a loss of society; it extends to encompass a larger image: the absence of her father and two brothers who died, the absence of her everyday habits, the absence of her voice, the absence of familiarity, and most importantly the absence of a closure to her suffering. Yet, this rupture and fragmentation functioned as a mothering concept providing a chance for finding an imaginary common ground around which a new identity is formed. This social glue through shared acts of witnessing and remembering creates a feeling of relief and resilience, as it appreciates the varied paths and variant stories as a source of anchoring the trauma of the Nakba into collective memory and its manifestations as part of cultural identity.

For the Palestinian collectivity, denial was not possible; escaping was not a choice because it meant erasure. Just like Ruqayya, Palestinians have a dichotomous existence between the ‘here and now’ and the ‘there and then’. Their actual existence is reliant on their imagined previous ones, the ones most of them now only recognize through their ancestors, and the ghosts of those who were lost, the ‘ghosts of those who died too suddenly and violently to be properly mourned, possess those who are seeking to get on with the task of living’35. This mnemonic fever is a counter attack on amnesic impulses threatening to consume memory itself.36

Trauma here is foregrounded as both an act of bonding, and a political statement of rights. Witnessing and telling stories about the past not only provides resilient empowering inspirations for other survivors, but also makes it possible for

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them to use their pain as a fuel to fight for a better future. Nevertheless, such an effect of storytelling and witnessing is not always guaranteed, especially in a situation where the political overshadows the humanitarian. In that sense, victims can only attempt to narrate their experiences in the hope of finding someone to listen and use their stories as a transformative tool to achieve justice, reconciliation, and peace.