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# Mourid Barghouti's *I Saw Ramallah*: The Impossible Return of the Displaced Autobiographer

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**Abstract:** This article examines and problematizes the idea of return in the autobiography of Mourid Barghouti's *Ra'aytu Ram Allah (I Saw Ramallah)*. After thirty years of living in Egypt and Budapest, Barghouti returned to his hometown Ramallah in 1996 for a short visit that composes the core of his text. I investigate how Barghouti's text unveils the Palestinian exile as a permanent state, but also as a challenged, resisted, or accepted the process of shifting people and places over time. By re-examining this autobiography within the frame of reading it as a displaced text, (or "displaced autobiography") I show how *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. I also explore how the author's return to his original place invokes the memory of a remote past, inviting a buried or forgotten selfhood. I argue that by recalling this past, which occurred before displacement, a displaced autobiographer like Barghouti attempts to "fix" Palestine as a land for the people who have memories and history in it.

**Keywords:** Mourid Barghouti; *I Saw Ramallah*; exile; displaced autobiography

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## 1. Introduction: The Dislocated Autobiographer and His Locale/s

Allow us to see in the faraway lands  
What beauty they have  
For the immigrant's eye fears looking deeply into beauty.  
Let's reside and depart just for desire's sake to stay or to move away

Mourid Barghouti, "Desires," one of his Arabic poems.

In his autobiography, *Ra'aytu Ram Allah* (Arabic 1997, English 2000, as *I Saw Ramallah*, which is the source of all quotations), Mourid Barghouti attempts to construct a life narrative informed by questions, doubts, and reconstructed belonging to Palestine. This homecoming was only possible, due to the 1993 Israeli-Palestinian Oslo Accords. Though largely considered as a failed enterprise without improving the human rights status for Palestinians (Shoaibi 2019, p. 100), the Oslo Accords allowed the establishment of the Palestinian self-government in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Barghouti was hardly witnessing a repatriated return, and his postcolonial return allows him reflection on what he saw in Ramallah, recording his experience in a poetic and novelistic style. Barghouti's exile, which started during the Six-Day War in 1967 until 1996, creates the absence necessary for someone like him to revisit his people, places, and not only his past, but also his present. There is an implied high level of awareness that it is extremely difficult—perhaps impossible—to return to the life of his hometown and, by extension, to return to Palestine as a homeland. He expresses the dilemma of being unable to reunite with his family after the war, a situation that caused him to stay in Egypt for more than three decades.

On 10 September 1967, the Israeli cabinet passed a law that allowed family unification in the Occupied Territories. However, over the years, Israel has changed its application of this policy. According to B'Tselem (2015), The Israeli Information Center for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, in 1973, "Israel began to deny almost all requests for family unification. In 1993, Israel granted partial recognition to the right to family unification for spouses, but simultaneously imposed a restrictive policy that in fact compelled prolonged separation" ("Implementation of the Family Unification Policy"). This policy continued to be in effect until 1995 when population registry was transferred to the Palestinian Authority. Barghouti took advantage of the reunification policies and went back to Ramallah, but he is still not allowed to become a resident of his former homeland. Experiencing denial of reclaiming his country and continuous exile, which can be deeply traumatic, his sentimental writing about such experience can count as trauma therapy. Like other returnees, such as Asian Americans returning to their countries, his autobiographic narrative puts him along with those who "by narrating the past, they transform it from an unspeakable specter to a usable counter-memory that anchors them and memorializes the past in ways that are personally meaningful" (Chu 2019, p. 40). Barghouti tries stoically to normalize his exile by creating intimacy with other places. This normalization is hardly the norm within the human being's established sense of longing and belonging.

This text also flirts warmly with the possibility of creating a different (not essentialist or traditional or even nationalist) conceptualization of the idea of a homeland. The temporary return to this homeland allows the reader to have an insight into the author's homeland as the author lived it—not as an idealized or romanticized abstraction. Barghouti treats his return to Ramallah poetically; the places and the people whom he visits inform his memory and observations to depict a unique situation where the return is hardly victorious or joyous, but still meaningful that it merits sharing with readers. In my reading of Barghouti, his text seems to both reflect on his dislocation and the places he had left behind, which creates fluid and changeable displacements that make the return impossible. I treat him as a displaced autobiographer, following the subgenre of "displaced autobiography" which I have previously coined to designate Palestinian narratives that illustrate the overlap between personal experiences and the creative expression reconstructing them. As these narratives emerge from "the forceful geographical, cultural, and physical shuffling of people and their identity from one place to another" (Al-Saleh 2011, p. 88), Barghouti's text represents the lack of a settled place, which allows the author to move freely in his narrative from one place to another, giving the reader a fortunate of recollections that only displaced autobiography can capture.

Mourid Barghouti was born in 1944. When he writes about seeing his house again, he reflects on the date of his birth: "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 2000, p. 56). Coming from one of the largest families in Palestine, he was raised in a village called Deir Ghassanah, which is located twenty six kilometers northwest of Ramallah. He finished his secondary school education in Ramallah before leaving to study English literature at Cairo University. Just as he was about to get his B.A. degree in 1967, he received the news that Ramallah was occupied by Israel. Since then, he was not allowed to return to his homeland, except for a short period of time in 1995. Following his trip to Ramallah, Barghouti published *I Saw Ramallah* in 1997. Barghouti taught in Cairo, Kuwait, and Budapest where he was exiled from Egypt for seventeen years for political reasons. He is a well-known poet who won the Palestine Prize for Poetry in 2000.

*I Saw Ramallah*, Barghouti's first prose work, has received increased acclaim since its publication, and it has been reprinted six times as of 2009. In the same year, the book won the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature, and is now translated in English and other European languages, including Spanish, French, and Italian. Written by a poet in a poetic style, the book has been immediately and enthusiastically received as a new addition to the tradition of writing about Palestine. It is an unmatched journey back to Palestine written by a displaced autobiographer. Sabah A. Salih praises the book for its ability to invoke contradictory, yet powerful, emotions as we follow such a journey:

Barghouti, a well-known poet, does not write to argue who is right and who is wrong. As he himself puts it, 'My measure is aesthetic' (p. 43). The result is that what we get from

Barghouti we don't quite get from the other authors: [A] graceful language that engages all of our senses. We cry but we also laugh. We are sad but we also are happy. We see Palestinian men and women eating a meal or listening to the poet read from his poetry. We also see Israeli border guards, feeling bored and out of place, but relatively at ease with the Palestinians. We see Palestinian land being steadily disfigured by settlement activities. But we also see a green that 'speaks in twenty languages of beauty' (p. 37). For Barghouti, however, Palestine is not just about land; it is also a culture that the reader needs to be taken deep inside, and it is a journey worth taking. (Salih 2004, pp. 496–97)

In 2009, a sequel in Arabic with the title *Wulidtu hunak, wulidtu Huna* appeared, and was translated as *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here* in 2011. In this more fragmented, equally warm, and slightly politicized text, he records taking his son Tamim, also a poet, to Ramallah. The son is introduced to his family, country, and, at one revealing point, even to the Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. The leader receives several sympathetic pages from for the humiliating treatment of Arafat by the Israelis before his death in 2004. In *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here* there is less reflection on the place than in *I Saw Ramallah* probably because Mourid Barghouti is *distracted* by the presence of his son not only in the journey, but also in the text itself. Yet, his passionate connection with son and the Palestinian people adds more impactful effect to the text that takes us to Ramallah with fresh telling.

## 2. Seeing Place through Writing

In *I Saw Ramallah*, Barghouti delivers a touching story of reunion to the same readers of his poetry, Arabs or non-Arabs. An Al-Jazeera network program called "The Book, the Best Companion" hosted Barghouti and his translator Ahdaf Soueif in 2003 (Al-Haroub 2003). The host, Khaled Al-Haroub, introduces the book by stating its significance as an autobiographical narrative about the exiled people recorded by the impressions of the return. "As for the Western readership, *I Saw Ramallah* presents a rare humanist picture of the Palestinian whose humanity has been destroyed by the wild media outlets" (Al-Haroub). Barghouti's book has gained popularity, which has already crossed the borders of Egypt and the Arab world, and became widely read in many languages.

After trying too hard to theorize about Autobiography as a contractual pact, Phillippe Lejeune argues that it is a failing effort to give a completed "formula of autobiography" (Lejeune 1989, p. 30). *I Saw Ramallah* is clearly an autobiographical narrative, even though it was acclaimed at one point as an "intensely lyrical account of the poet's return to his hometown" (Shlaim 2004). The poetical aspect of it gives space for various images, well chosen to narrate many glimpses of his youth up to his trip to Ramallah. Autobiography, in general, is not meant to be a complete cycle of one's life, as it would take "a lifetime to record a lifetime" (Marcus 2015, p. 259). It is a text that contains the elements that Elizabeth W. Bruss contends an autobiography must have to operate. For Bruss, the autobiographer creates a situation that requires three types of value: Truth-value, where the author's narrative is compared with other documents and occasions as evidence of consistency; act-value, which demonstrates the performance aspect of the narrative as shown by the character in the text; and identity-value, where the roles of author, narrator, and protagonist conjoin with "the same individual occupying a position both in context, the associated 'scene of writing' and within the text itself" (Bruss 1980, p. 300). Barghouti's narrative matches these value components as it replicates some major events that many fellow Palestinians faced, characterizes certain subjects involved in these events, and contextualizes individuals with a shared sense of identity.

The visit to Ramallah starts with crossing the bridge from Jordan to Palestinian territories. This bridge becomes the physical representation of the connection between the past and present image of Ramallah, as well as a former and current perception of the land. When the displaced person becomes a visitor of his or her homeland, he or she tends to reflect on both how far and how long they have been in diaspora, assessing the change that exile incurred on them and the people they left behind, as they become once again, the new but temporary community for the visitor. As such, being the first step in the path of the return, the bridge functions significantly in this text as in other autobiographical texts, where there is a trope that shapes the act of autobiographic writing. In fact, I consider the act of return itself in this autobiography to be identical to blindness in the seminal

autobiography in Arabic literature by Taha Husein, (1889–1973). As rightly argued by Fedwa Malti-Douglas, in his case it was blindness that “operates as a type of discourse (in the Foucaultian sense) through which the autobiography is conceived and articulated. It is a special vision through which various aspects of the text manifest themselves. It affects the nature of the narrator, and is both central to the act of writing and operative in the creation of a special type of rhetoric” (Malti-Douglas 1988, p. 16). The return is in fact the reason we have the text in the first place

As a condition that Barghouti conveys in his text, exile enables us to see and experience the uniqueness of his story. It is not like the story of someone who leaves home as a young person and returns later to see it changed. From the very beginning, where Barghouti describes approaching the bridge, the text brings into focus feelings, such as fear of not being admitted, nostalgia evoked by seeing the bridge again, and anticipation of what the rest of his homeland will look like. He shows the reader how the returning Palestinian feels when arriving at the entrance of a country or waiting at an outlet for visas or travel permits, fearing that he or she might be sent back from where they came, even if they are returning to their own homeland. Not knowing if entrance permission will be granted or not, so many questions rush through the person’s head: Will I be allowed admission? Will the border authority ask me to go back to where I came from? If I am not allowed in, will I be able to go back? Such questions are not answered until the visa or permit is granted or declined. These questions echo a desperate Palestinian situation that has been unwelcoming to those who think of coming back, where the land is suffering from divisions with “bypass roads, filled in with settlements, and periodically locked down by a sophisticated closure regime. Unready and unwilling to confront colonization and unable to deliver adequate development or progress on the nationalist agenda, the legitimacy of the PA and the Oslo framework that had delivered it were steadily corroded away” (Parsons 2005, p. 198). Exile imposes more questions and concerns on the traveling Palestinians in addition to the onus of being stateless or returning to a state with such unpleasant political conditions.

When Barghouti describes his townspeople in the chapter entitled “The Village Square,” he expresses the realization that they have grown old and that a new generation is now emerging. In addition, he feels sad that he too has become unfamiliar and foreign to them. The years of displacement changed his image in their eyes. Unlike the former person that they knew, he has now different views “on the concept of family, on women, on sex, literature, art, [and] politics” (Barghouti 2000, p. 85). When he is among them, they think of the young Barghouti only, unaware of the workings of time and place on estranging him to them, as well as to himself. Barghouti asks: “Do my people remember?” and he instantly and silently answers himself: “In any case, they are not required to remember” (Barghouti 2000, p. 85), admitting that exile requires acceptance of the sense of estrangement, which accompanies the individual while in exile and in his or her homeland. In Dier Ghassanah, where Barghouti grew up and could revisit in his return, he meets people curious to know about him in the same way he wants to know about them. Thus, the narrative in his text develops into a medium used to assess Palestinian displacement psychologically, by witnessing the change incurred, and physically, by comparing between the stages before coming to his place of origin and afterwards. The measurement done is not only by how much time he was away or how far he went from his homeland in Palestine, but also by how much transformation has occurred to his displaced selfhood, his place, and the relationship between these things and his people.

In what follows I argue that Barghouti uses his autobiography to reflect on exile as a reality that cannot be altered even if the return to the homeland is (politically) offered and physically materialized. *I Saw Ramallah* unveils the psychological state of being a dispossessed Palestinian, which Barghouti witnessed for three decades, as well as for a short time during his visit. Temporary returnee gains a sharper sense of displacement while visiting their homes after a long period of time. Given the political situation that caused their displacement, they feel that there might be no next return. The doubts and questions that Barghouti raises revolves about exile: What are the challenges and tensions that face those returning from exile? How can the act of recalling, recording, and expressing belonging defy the loss of land? When returning to their place of origin, what motivates the displaced people to come back? Can the displaced return?

### 3. Mourid Barghouti as a Displaced Autobiographer

Starting his autobiographical narrative in a rather unusual way, Barghouti does not follow what has been observed as the traditional way of starting autobiographies in Arabic literature and culture. In “Searching for Beginnings in Modern Arabic Autobiography,” Stefan Wild argues that, just like the beginning of a literary text, the beginning of autobiography should attract readers, coaxing them to read further, as it sets the tone and holds out a promise. In his analysis of the types of Arabic autobiographies, he distinguishes three types of beginnings. The first one is to begin with a *muqaddima*, an introduction, where autobiographers, such as Jabra Ibrahim Jabra in *The First Well*, justify why they are writing their autobiography and explain some issues related to the truth-value of the text, its title, or its substance, denying or confirming the text to be an autobiography. The second type of beginning starts immediately with the author’s autobiographical text by referring to a childhood incident or outlining the personal background so that the self is ready to be conveyed to the reader. And the third type of beginning is when the writer records their first memory, showing the reader “how the shadowland between the adult ego and the fog of childhood memories of smells, noises, images cannot be fully grasped and written down, and yet the author has to dig them out” (Wild 2007, p. 84). Barghouti does not have an introduction and he does not start with a far-fetched memory. On the contrary, his first passage and sub-section, “The Bridge,” places him in the middle of the chronological narration. The bridge allows him to reflect more than remember, since he is back to the old objects of memory, the places, and the homeland that he longed to see but had not been able to visit before. His text does not need a *muqaddima*, for displacement introduces him to his readers.

Barghouti’s style at the beginning of his autobiography takes the reader to the landmark of his exile, the bridge. His language also brings doubts of arrival itself as this arrival begins with the bridge. “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?” (Barghouti 2000, p. 10). The doubts about the possibility of entering Palestine after thirty years intensifies at the border, for it is a return to an occupied land and a highly politicized area. Such return remains uncertain until he gets inside, and Barghouti engages his reader with the moments of doubt as he experienced them himself. This is one of the most effective aspects of Barghouti’s text, and perhaps any autobiography that deals with exile. It captures two words, one before displacement and one after it, allowing the reader to compare and contrast between them, but also to imagine the varied manifestations of the author’s attachment to his or her homeland.

Remembering Palestine is part of the Palestinian nationalist memory. The *Nakba* generation, who left their houses and villages for the sake of safety outside Israel, associates the land with the memory of such land. Displacement for Palestinians was considered a temporary state, rather than an eternal fate. In *The Question of Palestine*, Edward Said describes this stand on (or reaction to) exile as the “sheer persistence” of the Palestinians who even after they had been “dispersed, driven out, conquered ... they still believed that they had the right to return to Palestine, they still felt uncomfortable with the idea of an Israeli (or even an Arab) overlord, no matter how many rewards were offered” (Said 1979, p. 222). Yet, Barghouti’s *I Saw Ramallah* does not provide such a hopeful discourse, though it brings back the memory of Palestinian, defying the linguistic, cultural, and political loss, as well as the erasure of Palestine from the public and private memory. Even though the title implies a return to Ramallah by seeing it, such a return is not the one that terminates the already enforced exile. The actual text describes a return, albeit a short one, to a former homeland, where time has changed the place and its meaning, as well as its people. Westerners, then Zionists, and then Israelis have all imagined and ideologically conceived Palestine with the tendency of eliminating Palestinian residents, even if only “figuratively” (Parmenter 2004, p. 14). Barghouti’s text tries to counter such elimination by bringing memory back again to the actual place from which it sprang. Barghouti’s title, just like the text itself, demonstrates the fulfillment of this wish to see his hometown. But “seeing” Ramallah is as powerful as an expression as it is meaningful in a context similar to seeing a dream. Thus, the long-anticipated return to Palestine—for which there has been a continuously increasing

nostalgia—became a dream, rather than a sure event in the future of a Palestinian like Barghouti. Wafaa H. Sorour observes this sense of exhilaration that Barghouti feels once he is back in his hometown.

Among his relatives whom he had long missed, Barghouti is so bewildered by indescribable emotions. The journey is a trial of his knowledge of his own country. In certain moments he is not sure whether his memory fails him or [if] it is the failure of non-tested ideals. He reveals the complexity, stubbornness, nobility, and humor that pervade the human condition. He describes scenes of people with warmth and sarcasm that might astonish those who have the worst expectations of the situation in the occupied territories. (Sorour 2004)

To be surrounded by his people again brings immense satisfaction to Barghouti. Yet, as an exiled individual, such a reunion must end soon and he must go back to Egypt, the country where he had once gone for the purposes of education. Because Egypt became his permanent home after exile, the country is an alternative to Palestine while being displaced. The title is relevant as Ramallah is only a vision through which the displaced Palestinian “returns,” but only temporarily, since a vision cannot be more than that.

The act of returning to Ramallah comes because of Israeli permission, which illustrates how the displaced autobiographical text represents not individual, but collective experiences of exile. Unlike Barghouti, other Palestinians were denied return to the occupied territories, and he must apply for a permit from the Israeli authorities before repeating his visit, which is not easily granted. At the end of his autobiographical narrative, he hopes that another permit will be granted for his son, Tamim, so that he can see his father’s homeland and the source of his exile. Edward Said, in his foreword to *I Saw Ramallah*, calls the book “one of the finest existential accounts of Palestinian displacement that we now have” (p. vii). This characterization comes from a critic who can identify with Barghouti’s experience as someone who was displaced from his homeland, Jerusalem, and also returned to see it after forty-five years. In this regard, the text speaks to not only the readers who want to see how the author saw Ramallah, but also to millions of Palestinians who cannot do so.

### 3.1. *Crossing the Bridge: Toward Home or Away from it?*

“The Bridge” is the title for the first chapter of the book. It is on the bridge, which connects Jordan to the Palestinian Ramallah, and during a hot day when the narrative starts: “A drop of sweat slides from my forehead down to the frame of my spectacles, then the lens. A mist envelops what I see, what I expect, what I remember” (Barghouti 2000, p. 1). The bridge in *I Saw Ramallah* functions not only as a chapter title, but also as a setting that aesthetically conveys Barghouti’s exile. For him, the bridge is “no longer than a few meters of wood and 30 years of exile. How was this piece of dark wood able to distance a whole nation from its dreams?” (Barghouti 2000, p. 9). It becomes the space that separates Palestine as a signifier assigned the concept of the homeland as the signified. The bridge as a recipient of Barghouti’s walk is an entrance inside Palestine, but the political situation and the loss of place causes the bridge to symbolize just the opposite: A walk back to the outside. There is a sense of humiliation that Barghouti faces upon his walk over the bridge from the Jordanian side to Palestine, and he contemplates this experience associated with the surroundings he saw on the bridge:

I asked the Jordanian officer about the next step. ‘You wait here till we receive a signal from them, then you cross the bridge.’ I waited a while in the room before I realized it was going to be a long wait. I went to the door and stood looking at the river. I was not surprised by its narrowness: [T]he Jordan was always a very thin river. This is how we knew it in childhood. The surprise was that after these long years it had become a river without water. Almost without water. Nature had colluded with Israel in stealing its water. It used to have a voice, now it was a silent river, a river like a parked car. The other bank displays itself clearly to the eye. And the eye sees what it sees. Friends who had crossed the river after a long absence told me they had wept here. I did not weep.

The image of the river as a “parked car” starts the series of contrasts that the author, as a displaced autobiographer, integrates into his (un)conscious assessment of how much he has changed, how much his country has witnessed change, and the relationship between the two of them. In this regard, the return is the stage that functions as a mirror—the past self faces a present self. The return also shows the exiled Palestinian going back to a place that reminds him of a bygone self, not by the mere passing of time, but by the actual absence of the place. The displaced person, therefore, cannot avoid his past as he is reminded of it by a changing place, looking back perhaps in anger, but certainly in awe and sorrow, as he reflects on why such a change occurred in the first place.

The bridge, which is called by different names according to the people who cross it, whether Arabs or Israelis, is one example of how places become not only material objects signifying a public function, but also a referent to private experiences and feelings. The bridge reminds the narrator in the text of the mood and memories associated with his journey. Upon returning, the Palestinian feels that the places from which he or she departed become narrative posts, a station that provides passages of narration and location. The bridge evoked in some of Barghouti’s friends the desire to cry. They wept, but he could not weep, trying instead to recollect his memories of the past passage across this bridge, which symbolizes a (re)connection of the past to the present. The bridge stimulates many comparisons between his past journey to a world that was a foreign destination to a current condition where he is a stranger, or *ghareeb*, a term that Barghouti takes almost a full page to define.

This definition of the “stranger” deserves attention as it shows how exile enriched Barghouti’s reflection and meditation on the stranger as a victim of such exile. The definition used in the text is lengthy. Its length is a metaphor for the prolonged period (thirty years) he was displaced. Moreover, Barghouti associates exile with death because he observes that as human beings, we associate the occurrence of death with other (departed) people, while we try to distance ourselves from thinking of death as being our fate. In the same token, both death and displacement uproot and erase one’s existence, and are unwanted but inevitable. The definition tries to summarize exile, but cannot make it in brief:

The stranger is the person who renews his Residence Permit ... He is the one who is always asked: “And where are you from, Brother?” He does not care for the details that concern the people of the country where he finds himself or for their “domestic” policy. But he is the first to feel its consequences. He may not rejoice in what makes them happy but he is always afraid when they are afraid. He is always the “infiltrating element” in demonstrations, even if he never left his house that day. He is the one whose relationship with places is distorted, he gets attached to them and repulsed by them at the same time. He is the one who cannot tell his story in a continuous narrative and lives hours in every moment. Every moment for him has its passing immortality. His memory resists ordering. He lives essentially in that hidden, silent spot within himself. He is careful of his mystery and dislikes those who probe into it. He lives the details of another life that does not interest those around him, and when he speaks he screens those details rather than declare them. He loves the ringing of the telephone, yet fears it. The stranger is told by kind people: ‘You are in your second home here and among your kin.’ He is despised for being a stranger, or sympathized with for being a stranger. The second is harder to bear than the first. At noon on that Monday I was struck by displacement. (Barghouti 2000, pp. 3–4)

Barghouti provides in this definition the wealth of political, psychological, cultural and conceptual elements that formulate the personality of the displaced. While it is expected that his narrative about Palestine will be centered on politics and conflicts, he takes the discourse deeper and spontaneously expresses fresh thoughts as reflected by an outsider who was never supposed to be an outsider. The stranger in his or her own land becomes an insider once they write about such imposed estrangement, as the reader can judge that they are not strangers. The lost country is textually rebuilt by the stranger who combats the erasure of Palestinian lands by confirming his belonging by the act of showing how such affiliation is negated.

This exiled person in *I Saw Ramallah* is made a stranger by the various hosting places and people that provided a temporary, conditional home. He can stay in alternative places, and he should adapt

to the welcoming places as well as the irritating gestures shown by some hosts. Barghouti feels that the blow of exile is not easy to recover from, but his intention is to nurture happiness rather than sorrow. His definition of the stranger implies that exile has designed his life and shaped his shattered identity. The only displacement can bring the pieces of the stranger into order, and as such creates another form of a disorder, and so on. It is established in autobiography theories that there has been a shift in the conceptualization of the self from being universal “achieving self-discovery, self-creation, and self-knowledge—to a new concept of the ‘subject’ riven by self-estrangement and self-fragmentation” (Smith and Watson 2013, p. 201). Barghouti’s exile takes writing as a medium to scribe these pieces and fix (in writing) their unfixable nature.

In a chapter entitled “Uncle Daddy,” which is what his thirteen-month old son used to call him after they were reunited in Budapest, Barghouti refers to his troubled relationship with the authorities at Cairo Airport. In 1977, just around the time of Anwar Sadat’s visit to Israel, Barghouti was forced to depart Egypt on political grounds, leaving behind his wife, the Egyptian novelist and academic, Radwa Ashour and his only son, Tamim. During his 17-year exile from Egypt, he could only reunite with his family by visiting Egypt for cultural activities related to his literary works. His entrance to Egypt through the airport begins with rituals that bring doubts about whether he will be permitted entry.

On one of my visits to Cairo I was held at the airport and kept for a whole night in the veterinary quarantine—no, this is not a typographical error: [T]he veterinary quarantine ... On subsequent occasions they permitted me to be held in the luxury of the arrivals hall for periods that varied between five and twelve hours ... It was years later that the reason for this special treatment became clear. The cultural authorities welcome and the security authorities refuse: [E]ach time I arrived and until they could agree that I could enter, all those hours had to pass. (Barghouti 2000, p. 129)

Even if the displaced Palestinian knows why he or she is not welcome by a certain office in the country, the explanation does not stop Barghouti from wondering why being displaced is a crime and punishment at the same time. Why does entering a country or settling in other places become as hard as returning home? As it seems the case, at airports and entry checkpoints, the displaced person like Barghouti can find a lot of time to think about these questions while waiting for permission to pass through the Cairo airport and other places.

Yet Barghouti does not focus on airports as much as he centralizes the bridge. This bridge provides a transition from the past—living away from home—to the present where home is encountered for the second time. Memories and reflections will prevail in the sphere between these two stages, and that is what his text tries to capture. It is this in-between stage where his displaced self is trapped—not completely displaced, but also not fully returning to its place. The bridge as a memory and as a present object function as an alternative to the far-fetched childhood memory. Instead of going into the remote earlier period of his life, Barghouti recalls the memory of this object, the bridge, which he has not seen for thirty years. He creates a parallel between the memory of the bridge and the momentary act of seeing it again, and views them in light of each other. Thus, seeing this homeland again, by walking across the bridge, becomes the equivalent of the first memory of childhood. The bridge becomes Barghouti’s starting and departing point, both in his displaced life and his autobiography. Seeing his homeland again is what matters: “When the eye sees it, it has all the clarity of earth and pebbles and hills and rocks. It has its colors and its temperatures and its wild plants too. Who would dare make it into an abstraction now that it has declared its physical self to the senses?” (Barghouti 2000, p. 6).

### 3.2. *Crossing the Bridge: Departing from Traditional Narratives*

Beyond the non-traditional, emblematic beginning of his autobiography, Barghouti creates new aesthetics where personal narratives of exile are elevated to be universal, referring to any other displaced person, not necessarily Palestinians. On the face of it, *I Saw Ramallah* is about a Palestinian having the chance to see his homeland and later to document such an experience. But what the eyes



of the narrator see and what his memory recalls both re-capture and create a new place that changes his perception of exile and his awareness of a hopeless return. In the process of such aesthetic creation, Barghouti emphasizes the human dilemma of losing a place and not being able to return to it. He, furthermore, avoids politicizing his return, which is rightly observed by Edward Said, as he points out in his preface that “Barghouti’s writing is really amazingly free of bitterness or recrimination; he neither reproves and harangues Israelis for what they have done nor berates the Palestinian leadership for the bizarre arrangements they agreed to on the ground” (p. x). Said catches the humility that Barghouti’s text expresses when he refers to his family name, Barghouti, as being derived from the word “flea.” Said seems to ignore the added irony that the translation of this word is pronounced in English just like the word “flee,” which both describes the escape of Palestinians, or fleeing Palestine, during and after 1948, and denotes the case of Barghouti and many of his compatriots and family members.

No justice can be done to the originality of *I Saw Ramallah* in the context of Palestinian autobiographies without reference to its unique treatment of return. As a term, “return” traditionally evokes a commitment to return as a usurped right and as a chance to restore Palestine. Barghouti problematizes the idea of return; he does not denounce it, but he also does not associate it with the grand narrative that Arab politicians and statesmen rhetorically and repeatedly use when referring to the coming of tomorrow bringing the return to Palestine, or “*ghadan al-awda ila filasteen*,” meaning “tomorrow is the return to Palestine.” Such rhetoric could have stripped the work of many of its aesthetic values. As Anna Bernard shows, Barghouti develops a Palestinian aesthetic that takes into consideration some of the critical voices that emphasize, in the words of Hanan Ashrawi in another context “a sense of responsibility in critics and writers alike, so that weak literature will not be excused just because it is Palestinian.” He is also in accord with another Palestinian critic, Salma Khadra Jayyusi, who asserts that “literature would lose its immense value if restricted to polemical narrations or to propaganda, and perhaps [its] greatest achievement ... is its subtle and aesthetically sophisticated portrayal of a genuine existential situation.” He shares with these critics the disapproval of those who want to “reduce the painting into a poster, the lyric into a military anthem, the play into preaching, the novel into a straight ideology, or the poem into slogan” as Barghouti himself accuses some writers of having done. (Bernard 2007, pp. 666–67). One might easily agree with Bernard’s evaluation of Barghouti’s literary aesthetic based on what she sees as “conveying the everyday experiences of Palestinian individuals” (Bernard 2007, p. 667). However, the text invites the reader to see it as a reflection of not only a Palestinian individual experience but mainly a human experience of rethinking home, making home a place to see and visit, not only as an imagined abstract.

That is why Barghouti uses a very polite and somewhat objective language when addressing the Israeli authorities. He has many questions in his head about the Israeli soldier, none of which seems to carry a tone of accusation. He does not blame the soldier for his exile, even though he faces unjustified procedures that prevent him and his family from returning home or reuniting as a family. He asks “is he performing a military duty he cannot avoid? Is there anyone who has tested his humanity? His own individual humanity?... Can he notice my humanity?” (Barghouti 2000, p. 14). Barghouti finds a sense of humanity attached to the Israeli soldier even though he has suffered from the Israeli’s policies that could be symbolized by the image of this soldier, particularly using the army to prevent Palestinians from returning to their families and houses. Yet, he frees himself from the traditional narrative of one-sided victimization, looking at Israeli soldiers as victims of their participation in the process of displacing and disciplining Palestinians, a process that strips both parties, the doer and the recipient, from their humanity. Therefore, Barghouti does not consider his displacement as a strictly personal experience. Rather, he observes it as a collective experience in which Israelis or Palestinians compose the primary elements of such a phenomenon.

The consideration and conceptualization of the Israeli soldier’s human side runs contrary to the long-held sentiments that some Palestinians have toward Israelis whom they consider only despicable and ruthless. This image of the Israeli soldier is reinforced in many ways, such as the broadcast of footage of Israeli soldiers shooting at Palestinians Intifada participants, by television and

other media. In *Wild Thorns*, Sahar Khalifeh conveys the picture of the Israeli soldier who symbolizes erasure of the Palestinian identity and rootedness. Khalifeh provides the scene where Usama steadfastly holds to the Palestinian name Nablus, “despite the soldier’s attempt to erase that name and its reality by calling it Shekem” (Metres 2010, p. 89):

“...my mother moved to Nablus.”

“Why did your mother move to Shekem?”

“She likes Nablus.”

“Why does she like Shekem?”

“She’s got lots of relatives in Nablus.”

“And why have you left the oil countries to return to Shekem?”

“I’m returning to Nablus because my father died.” (Qtd in Metres 2010, p. 89)

Because they carry out aggressive acts against Palestinians under occupation, the Israelis are usually shown in Arabic nationalist discourses as people lacking human characteristics, such as justice and compassion. Other Palestinians might discard such a simplification of their struggle for their homeland and consider humanizing their traditional enemy as a positive gesture to their cause. Barghouti validates the latter position based on his judgment of the Israeli soldier whom he did not see when he left Ramallah. More importantly, he raises the Palestinian displacement to a higher level where, instead of voicing blame or condemnation against the individual, the struggle should be against the authority that controls people’s lives.

Focusing on power relationships in Palestinian society, Barghouti critiques some Palestinians, including intellectuals, from having been abused by authority and having abused it: “[T]he greater body of Palestinian intellectuals fell in line with the Authority. Got closer to it than was wise, rested on its seats, took pleasure in imitating it and identifying with its features” (Barghouti 2000, p. 124). That is why when he was asked, in a radio interview in Ramallah, about the struggle of Palestinian people, he found the question reflective of simplification and over-glorification of the Palestinian people.

My host asked me: ‘Are we not a miraculous people, a different people, a different nation?’

I said: ‘Different from whom exactly? Different from what? All peoples love their homelands and all peoples fight for their homelands if they have to. Martyrs fall for their causes everywhere. Prisoners and detention centers are crowded with the fighters of the Third World, and the Arab world is at their head. We have suffered and we have sacrificed without limit, but we are no better or worse than others. Our country is beautiful and so are the countries of others. (Barghouti 2000, pp. 122–23)

When the host asked him about what he thought were the requirements of a successful broadcasting service, he replied that it should follow “*al-ibtiaad an al-sulltah*,” which means “to keep its distance from authority/power.” In a Foucauldian manner, his critique emphasizes the need to resist power and those in power, though in his sequel, *Wulidtu hunak, wulidtu Huna (I Was Born There, I Was Born Here)*, he seems more sympathetic to Yasser Arafat, but perhaps because he feels that he does not belong to the power circle of Arafat. Barghouti’s vision of Palestine is obviously refined by his knowledge of and displeasure with the governing powers in the Occupied Territories, as well as his poetic approach to exile, and his exposure to other places and cultures. He wants Palestine to be a better place, even if he cannot return to it.

As a displaced autobiographer, Barghouti uses his return to Palestine as an opportunity to convey some of his poetic allusions related to exile. After questioning the meaning of what Palestinians refer to as enemy, he treats the Israeli soldier as a human being whose humanity is perhaps visible only to him. He immediately refers to the soldier as being less perplexing than the concept of the homeland, because the Israeli soldier is the concrete materialization of the settlement, of owning the land that Barghouti and his folks officially lack: “This soldier with yarmulke is not vague. At least his gun is very shiny. His gun is my personal history. It is the history of my estrangement. His gun took from us the land of the poem and left us with the poem of the land. In his hand he holds earth, and in our hands we hold mirage” (Barghouti 2000, p. 13). Displacement

feeds Barghouti with new meanings and images that he revisits again as he returns to Ramallah and as he writes his text. The return stimulates the creation of metaphoric and imaginative combinations of objects from his people and objects from their enemy. For example, he shows how the gun symbolizes the Israeli soldier's control over the Palestinian memory of the land.

Barghouti sees homeland as a multi-layered notion that does not necessarily connote possession, for it is not contained as a totality. Israel, as Derek Gregory argues, "has redistributed the splinters of Palestine into a series of abstract categories located in a purely topological imaginary" (Gregory 2003, p. 24). The abstraction Barghouti presents of the homeland conveys his inability to have a clear conceptualization of his belonging to an occupied land. He asks: "My homeland? The West Bank and Gaza? The Occupied Territories? The Areas? Judea and Samaria? The Autonomous Government? Israel? Palestine? Is there any other country in the world that so perplexes you with its names? Last time I was clear and things were clear. Now I am ambiguous and vague. Everything is ambiguous and vague" (p. 13). Yet, seeing Ramallah helps Barghouti to get rid of such abstraction: "Who would dare make it into an abstraction now that it has declared its physical self to the senses?" (p. 10). These questions and observations conflate his personal narrative with a discourse that reexamines everything taken for granted. Unlike the traditional Palestinian narrative of having everything settled in terms of the belonging to Palestine—that Palestine is always Arabiya (belonging to the Arabs) and that refugees must be allowed to come back—Barghouti, in his autobiography, engages himself in an existential quest for unobtainable truths. He accepts doubts and uncertainties instead of settled answers.

Barghouti recounts an early trip from Ramallah, specifically from his hometown of Deir Ghassana, to Egypt, for the purpose of obtaining an academic degree. Once his education was complete, the plan was to go back to Palestine. However, Barghouti describes how exile, in the form of the Six-Day War in 1967, changed his plans, leaving him unable to proceed with his life, academic or social. "The examinations are suspended for weeks. The examinations resume. I graduate. I am awarded a BA from the Department of English Language and Literature, and I *fail to find a wall* on which to hang my certificate" (Barghouti 2000, p. 7) [Emphasis added]. The metaphor of having no wall refers to having no house or place to call home. Barghouti reminds his Arabic reader of the famous lines of classical Arabic poetry that the majority of Arab high school students memorize. These lines come from a poem by Qays bin al-Mullawah, known as Majnoun Layla or, in some English variations, Layla and Majnoun. Qays addresses his love to Layla by referring to her abode:

I pass by the dwellings, those resided by Layla  
 And I kiss this *wall* and that *wall*  
 It's not Love of the houses that has infatuated me  
 But of the Beloved who dwells in those houses. [My emphasis and translation]

The poet glorifies place as a reminder of the loved ones who no longer reside there. This cultural, if not universal, attachment to place as part of connecting to people is still prevalent among Arab people, particularly those who are constantly travelling or displaced. Therefore, when Barghouti states that he does not have a wall, he means, by extension, that he does not have, or is incapable of obtaining, a homeland as well. Barghouti's metaphor also implies the absurdity of having left a homeland to achieve a goal, only to end up accomplishing the goal but losing the land. Like Majnoun Layla, who finds solace in the place formerly occupied by his beloved, the displaced autobiographer needs to go back to his place, physically or in writing about its past existence. The poet implies that he is doing so secretly; likewise, the displaced autobiographer is privately invoking the place, suggesting that if he or she has a place, then subsequently he or she exists. Claiming a place in writing or revisiting the place, even for a short period of time, compensates for the time spent without.

This wall metaphor is understood by many Palestinians who left their homeland for other countries. They had planned to return, but suddenly there was no place to return to, unless they begged for permits, often in vain, from the very people who enforced the exile. Another example, narrated in autobiography, of someone who was denied permission to rejoin her family is told by Barghouti's contemporary compatriot, Hanan Ashrawi. A well-known Palestinian diplomat and influential voice in the Palestinian politics, Hanan Ashrawi was born in 1946 in Nablus. Like

Barghouti, she also lived in Ramallah, where she completed her high school education. Because she also wanted to study literature, Ashrawi joined the Department of English at the American University in Beirut. After she received her bachelor's and master's degrees in literature, the Six-Day War in 1967 left her without a homeland and she was denied re-entry to the West Bank until 1973. In her autobiography, *This Side of Peace: A Personal Account*, Ashrawi reveals the stress of being unexpectedly trapped between a lost homeland and the unfamiliar "place" of displacement:

When I received my master's degree from the American University of Beirut in 1970 I had nowhere to go. I could not remain in Lebanon because I had neither a visa nor a work permit, and I could not go home to Ramallah because of the Israeli occupation since the 1967 war; when I applied for a permit to return I was denied. I had planned to go home and teach, but this was not to be, at least not then. Fate intervened. (Ashrawi 1995, p. 28)

Both Barghouti and Ashrawi experienced exile while away from home. If "displacement is like death" (Barghouti 2000, p. 3), as Barghouti describes it, then being away from home only complicates the reception of such death. When such a catastrophic event happens, the tragedy of losing someone, or something in this regard, intensifies if a person is not present to experience the loss first-hand.

In Arabic culture, as in many other cultures, attending the *hadath*, the event, of a dear one's death, like a father or mother, is incredibly important and socially necessary. Therefore, if someone is unable to attend the death of such a dear family member, while he or she is pursuing an education in another place or country, feelings of sadness and sorrow are unresolved and multiplied. Likewise, there is no easy recovery from the trauma of losing one's home while being absent. Going back to the place, therefore, re-invokes the memory of such a painful loss. Nevertheless, if the displaced person could return and stay, such painful memories might fade away. If he or she still cannot return and reclaim his or her place, then the constant loss of the homeland will always stimulate both the feeling of loss and the awareness that a return is not possible. Therefore, we can imagine the difference between Ashrawi, who could finally go back to her homeland and settle in Palestine, and Barghouti, who is displaced, grief-stricken, and still wondering why he was displaced in the first place.

#### 4. Conclusions

The displaced autobiographer changes during displacement and so did the homeland, as well as the relationship between the person and his or her land also changes over time. Yet, change transfers the state of returning home into a state of questioning such a return. In an interview published in 2001 with Mahmud Darwish, he describes what home means to him: "[H]ome is a place where you have a memory; without memories you have no real relationship to a place. Also, it is impossible to return. Nobody crosses the same river twice. If I return, I will not find my childhood. There is no return, because history goes on. Return is just a visit to a place of memory, or to the memory of the place" (Darwish 2002, p. 77). Like Darwish, who died in 2008 in the United States of America, Barghouti dismisses the fantasy of the return. Barghouti describes living in Ramallah as being in a cage with no light, pointing out that return is not conceivable. For him, exile seems to be inevitable even if the displaced person goes back. Occupation and claiming Palestine to be completely for Israelis creates a different Palestine. The erasure of landmarks from the Palestinian landscape over the years makes Palestine even more different, a place that an exiled Palestinian can still identify as his or her homeland by writing about it and recalling the time when it was not a contested piece of land.

With the return of the displaced autobiographer as its main narrative mode, *I Saw Ramallah* stands as a pioneering Palestinian autobiography that fits the subgenre of displaced autobiography, as previously conceptualized (Al-Saleh 2003). It documents memories and compares personal experiences to portray Ramallah as a space that reflects exile with all its tensions. The text challenges the ability to return to Palestine under the Israeli occupation and depicts how the constructed memory of a homeland creates a place in a textual/autobiographic sphere, where writing tries to fix the changes that have occurred during the years of absence. Barghouti's poetic autobiography both reflects old moments of displacement and contributes new insights to how fluid exile is, always

haunting the displaced even if he comes back to his homeland. His return to see Ramallah is a stand against erasure. It represents a shift from only being a dream, to a newly constructed vision of belonging, and finally to an accepted displacement. Thus, seeing Ramallah and leaving it behind, which resulted in a recorded personal experience, refreshed and broadened Barghouti's memories, of yet another newly departed place.

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