

Tracing the Threads: Nostalgic Memory in Mourid Barghouti's *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here*

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Abstract

*Nostalgia emerges as an emotion and expands itself into memory. For Palestinians, forced into exile for centuries, nostalgic memory is a tool to explicate their traumatic past. Through their memories of nostalgia, they re-establish and re-stabilise their connection with Palestine as their lost homeland and dreamland of return. They mould nostalgia into an effective platform to make their unending struggles pellucid to the world. Nostalgia succours the Palestinians scattered in different parts of the world to erase their spatiotemporal distances. Svetlana Boym, in her theory of nostalgic memory, revolts against the autonomy of time over human lives. 'Nostalgia', for her, is a historical emotion that can create profound impacts on the future of the past. Most Palestinian memoirs clearly reflect one or the other type of nostalgic memory proposed by Boym. This paper attempts to read the memoir, *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here*, written by Mourid Barghouti, through the lens of the reflective nostalgic memory proposed by Svetlana Boym.*

Keywords: *Memory, Palestinian memoirs, exile, reflective nostalgia, restorative nostalgia*

Introduction

In an age of destruction and disparities, the representation of the traumatic experiences gave a new shade to historiography and memory studies. Psychologically, a traumatic memory manifests as a palimpsest of longing and loss. As Cathy Caruth mentioned, a traumatic memory is never processed as a linear sequence of the past, but as a haunting presence. Kolk's explanation of the neurological connection of trauma corroborates Caruth's theoretical conceptualisation of the subject. He posits, the traumatic memory is stored in the somatic, that is, the nonverbal parts of the brain. And for this reason, it does not contain a beginning, a middle, or an end, and it is not organised along an undeviating chronological line. The non-linear traumatic memories explain the sublime experiences and thereby establish an unfathomable connection with history. Ankersmith explores this association and links it with nostalgia. He postulates that trauma can be seen as the psychological counterpart of the sublime, and the sublime can be considered as the philosophical counterpart to trauma. He adds, both stem from the ruptures in history that shatter certainties and lead to a loss of identity, which can manifest as nostalgia for an irrecov-

erably lost past.

Nostalgia, as an emotion, is often read synonymously with the past. It transports individuals to a bygone era when everything around them was incredibly wonderful. Nostalgia usually brings to mind a time and space that one desires to freeze forever. In his book, *Nostalgia Now: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives on the Past in the Present*, Michael Hviid Jacobsen begins the introduction by describing nostalgia as “something surrounded by the stagnant and musky smell of the past and of that which has been left behind on the road forward” (Jacobsen 1). But in the process of establishing itself with the past, nostalgia got a wild shade of negativity. The Cambridge Dictionary defines nostalgia as “a feeling of pleasure and slight sadness when you think about things that happened in the past”. The natural tendency of human beings to look back to recollect a happy past when the present is drab could be a reason for the negativity of nostalgia. The unending discussions and studies that have come up over the years rule out the condition of addressing nostalgia as a mere emotion of the past. Over the years, nostalgia has developed into a theoretical framework that can fit in any discussion, not just about the past, but the present and future.

The term nostalgia has its roots in the Greek words ‘nostos’, meaning to return home and ‘algia’, denoting pain and thus the word suggests the painful longing to return home. The term was first coined by Johannes Hofer (1688/1934), who assumed it to be a cerebral disease with obsessive thinking of the home as the major symptom. In the seventeenth century, it transformed from being a temporary illness to an incurable disease. It took a completely different turn in the twentieth century, changing from a disease to an umbrella term that can encompass anything related to the past. Mentioning the same shift, Fred Davis in his book, *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* has noted, “Not only does the word nostalgia appear to have been fully “demilitarized” and “demedicalized” by now but, with its rapid assimilation into American popular speech since roughly the nineteen-fifties, it appears to be undergoing a process of “depsychologization” as well” (4). The long history of nostalgia was highly notable enough to awaken theorists of many disciplines to the real potency of nostalgia.

By the end of the twentieth century, nostalgia had evolved into a burgeoning discipline, its influence permeating diverse areas of academic inquiry. Zygmunt Bauman claims that we live in the ‘age of nostalgia’. Nostalgia holds tremendous significance in this century for the major reason that it merges with history, expanding its scope to evoke idealised pasts, at times when the world, the nation or the community turns into a hotbed of revolt and humanity. For the same reason, an undertone of nostalgia can be sensed in most of the literary pieces. People living in disputed territories or who have lived through the atrocities of conflicts take the aid of memory and nostalgia to narrate their past. Barbara Parmenter, in her book, *Giving Voice to Stones: Place and Identity in Palestinian Literature*, mentions, “Nostalgia became the most characteristic element in the image of Palestine in exile literature during the 1950s. Rather than invoking past Arab glories, holy places, or nationalist ideals, exiled poets wrote of scenes from their youth. It is in these scenes that a sense of attachment to the land begins to emerge and in which the land’s specific qualities find a voice” (43). This paper studies Mourid Barghouti’s *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here* using the theoretical lens of Svetlana Boym’s theory of reflective nostalgia. It attempts to prove how the memoir aligns with the major aspects of reflective nostalgia.

Theoretical Framework

Nostalgic memory has been a subject of intense scholarly debate, with theorists exploring the endless possibilities of nostalgia. Boym’s theory of nostalgia was widely studied by theorists to explore the possibilities of the types of nostalgia. For instance, Gizela Horvath’s article, “Faces of nostalgia. Restorative and reflective nostalgia in the fine arts”, explores the complexities and

creative possibilities of nostalgia in fine arts. In an article, “Geek Nostalgia: The reflective and restorative defence of white male geek culture”, the authors assert that geek culture embraces both restorative and reflective nostalgia. Nicole Lindstrom, in the article “Yugonostalgia: restorative and reflective nostalgia in former Yugoslavia”, explores the difference between the two types of nostalgia in the past of Yugoslavia. In “Restoring a Home: Restorative and Reflective Nostalgia in Anna Mitgutsch’s *House of Childhood*”, Katya Krylova discusses how the protagonist of the novel exemplifies restorative and reflective nostalgia. Mourid Barghouti’s first memoir, *I Saw Ramallah*, was studied by literary enthusiasts extensively. But due to the novelty of the second memoir, *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here* is not studied much. In the detailed literature review done for the paper, only newspaper articles and reviews were only found.

I Was Born There, I Was Born Here is written by the widely acclaimed Palestinian writer, Mourid Barghouti. This memoir was written as a sequel to Barghouti’s first memoir, *I Saw Ramallah*. Thrown into exile by the Israeli occupation in Palestine during his early thirties, he succeeded in returning to the country only after thirty years. His journey back to his long-lost homeland turns into an enigmatic representation of the vivid memories of the individual. Through his memories, he paints before his son (and the readers), a Palestine which can never ever be retrieved. Barghouti’s memoir serves as a great tool in preserving and propagating the Palestinian identity in an era of the approaching extinction of the Palestinian collective consciousness. This memoir can be considered an ideal example of reflective nostalgia for various reasons.

Svetlana Boym, a Russian-American cultural theorist, presented the idea of types of nostalgia in her seminal work, *The Future of Nostalgia*, which was published in 2001. In this work, she proposes that there are two types of nostalgia - restorative and reflective. Boym mentions that reflective nostalgics adore fragments of memory. She also adds that they tend to temporalise the spaces. Barghouti carefully adopted and used fragmented memories as a great narrative tool in this memoir. Barghouti, in the memoir, has effortlessly represented his memories on every page of the book and turned it into a classic example of shattered memories. The influence of the exilic life has instilled in Barghouti the thoughts of the temporality of his familiar spaces. The shattered nature of his memories is explicitly evident throughout the memoir. Barghouti shifts from the memories of his past to the present in a flash. The chain of memories fragments in this instance without letting the reader know what transpired in the aftermath. Barghouti’s memory is never coming to a climax anywhere. Every memory is interrupted by some incident in the present. In one instance in the memoir, Barghouti recounts the day he became a father. His memories of the past present to the readers even the intrinsic details of the day, including the colour of the bulb that lights up to show the gender of the baby. However, in the next paragraph, he shifts the focus of his narration entirely to the present, where he hugs Tamim for receiving his permission papers to travel to Palestine. In such a pattern, Barghouti uses his personal memories as a thread by which he knits the entire memoir.

Nostalgic memory in *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here*

One of the striking aspects of reflective nostalgia is the feeling of not being fully here and there. According to Boym, “A modern nostalgic can be homesick and sick of home, at once.” (50) She adds that homecoming will not bring to a close the journey of the individual in the created spaces of imagination. The emotion of being again in the familiar spaces will not yield the result. The title of the memoir, “*I Was Born There, I Was Born Here*”, itself is an ideal example to validate the argument. Through the title, Barghouti explicitly mentions the dream he carried throughout the exile: to tell his son, “*I Was Born Here*” instead of being in an alien corner of the world and telling him, “*I Was Born There*”. But the title also implicitly suggests Barghouti’s condition of being homesick and sick at home simultaneously. Throughout his exilic life, he yearns to come

back home. But after reaching there, he fails to blend in and accept the new changes he sees in his homeland. This is strongly evident through the words he had chosen for the title, there and here. Mahmoud Darwish, a celebrated Palestinian poet, emphasizes the agony of being here and there, "I am from there. I am from here. I am not there and I am not here. I have two names, which meet and part, and I have two languages. I forget which of them I dream in." This reflects the fragmented identity shaped by displacement and the liminal space of exile" (Darwish 88). Even though these words are commonly used to indicate a direction, if used together in two sentences with the same meaning and words, they create greater confusion. Edward Said mentions the irrevocable pain of an unrecoverable homeland.

Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile's life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement" (Said 180).

And like Barghouti, every Palestinian exile is destined to carry this mental confusion during their entire lifetime.

According to Boym, returning home neither brings solace to the nostalgic's homesickness nor puts an end to his life. Unlike restorative nostalgia, reflective nostalgia finds beauty in cherishing scattered memories and temporalising the space. Barghouti is a compelling example of reflective nostalgia. He acknowledges the temporality of the spaces with an unusual calmness. He witnesses a sea change of transformation in Palestine. And it is visible from his narration in the memoir that he is trying to accept reality. The long narration of the wall is an ideal example to state the same. He narrates:

The Wall, which separates Jerusalem from Ramallah and from all the lands of the Bank. The Wall wasn't here last time. No news bulletin, statement of condemnation, official data as to its length, breadth, and height, or even photograph or television image, can convey its ugliness when seen by the eye....On the contrary, it is the wall of the great historic theft, the theft of more land and trees and water, the wall of the displacement of Palestinians following the exhaustion of their resources through their separation from their lands, crops, and water basin. (Barghouti 127-128)

In this instance, Barghouti elevates the wall beyond its literal meaning and treats it as a metaphor. The physical wall becomes the symbol of many things that resonate in the lives of any nostalgic. Initially, the wall represents the boundary between Jerusalem and Ramallah. Later, he uses the same wall to represent the transformation of the geographical spaces. Finally, he uses the wall to symbolise occupation itself. Like a reflective nostalgic, he reflects on the sea change in his favourite place. But unlike a restorative nostalgic who tries to create an imaginary world around them, Barghouti accepts the metamorphosis of the place with the hope of regaining it. He mentions:

At the same time, I am confident that it will disappear one day by some other means. This wall will be demolished by our refusal to become used to it. It will be demolished by our astonishment at its existence. This wall will fall one day but now, in this moment of sorrow of mine, I see it as strong and immortal. (Barghouti 128)

Even though the occupation and the wall exemplify the matter that tore his life apart, he looks forward to the temporal nature of space and believes that one day he will regain everything he has lost. In this memoir, he is least worried about changes and mostly worried about losing his homeland.

Other than his nature of temporalising with space, readers can find many instances in the work

where Barghouti is homesick and sick at home. He yearns to come back to his hometown throughout his exile. He gets the chance to visit Ramallah after thirty years of struggle. His yearning to visit his ancestral home and the remedy to it, that is, return, is mentioned in detail in the first memoir. In *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here*, Barghouti's journey with Tamim to Ramallah helps Barghouti grapple with his deep-seated reflective nostalgia. Barghouti finds great satisfaction in taking Tamim to different places and trying to instil in him the Palestinian identity. But like any reflective nostalgic, the journey does not erase his strong longing for home forever. He fails to relate to the places, and this makes him fall back into the loop of homesickness and being sick at home.

Barghouti recounts his visit to one of his favourite spots in Ramallah with his friends and Tamim. But he fails to relate to the Lovers' Lane, where he and his friends spent hours as teenagers. On seeing a place, Barghouti introduces it to Tamim: "In the fifties we used to call it Lovers' Lane." But the drastic transformation of the place makes one of them comment: "It doesn't look like that now. Where are the lovers? Where are the girls? Where are the trees?" The conversation ends with a sombre reflection: "It seems everything goes backward everywhere." (Barghouti 63). Here, the narrator purposefully avoids mentioning the speaker of each dialogue. Through this, he seems to indicate that not just Barghouti, but each of them, fails to bridge the gap between the geographical space that they see in front of them and the space of their memory.

This Ramallah that I recall in my imagination is just a mirage now. It isn't the Ramallah that I'm showing Tamim today. It's as if it, along with Cairo, Beirut, Damascus, and all the other Arab cities, had been a creation of our imaginations, not a reality. Satellite-channel sheikhs and Islamic fundamentalists say that lands were lost and defeats suffered one after the other because of our generation's dissoluteness and distance from religion. The same people hated Nasser, hated Arab unity, hated socialism, and hated our whole generation. I can't understand these charges at all. Here, simply, was a city that decorated its streets for holidays, girls and boys who walked through its spaces, and records whose music we listened to obsessively, our hearts pounding with what we thought was love (Barghouti 66).

Another instance mentioned at the beginning of the memoir also points out Barghouti's terrible condition of adding a strangeness to the places in which he grew up. He mentions,

I'm not familiar with these roads that Mahmoud is taking, and not just because my memory has faded during the years of exile; the sad and now certain truth is geographical that I no longer know the geography of my own land. However, the car is now traveling over open country and there's no sign of paved roads, traffic lights, or human beings as far as the eye can see. It's going across fields and I don't know how this is going to get us to Jericho. (Barghouti 10)

Whenever he fails to relate to the spaces, he falls harder into the feeling of being sick at home. This feeling of being homesick and sick at home marks the narrator as a classic example of reflective nostalgic, and the memoir is a wonderful representation of the same.

According to Boym, reflective nostalgia concentrates on individual and cultural memory, while restorative nostalgia focuses on national history. Barghouti, in this memoir, paints his past personal life with exceptional precision and thoroughness. He details his family's history and his birth and growth as a Palestinian in a captivating narrative style. Barghouti does not follow a chronological order in explaining his personal story. But using the aid of fragmentary narrative, he narrates to the reader every key moment of his life. To cite an example, he explains the story behind his name:

From then on, all my official papers have been in the name of Nawaf and no one outside the family and a small number of close friends knows this name, none of whom

ever calls me by it. I refused to acknowledge, as did my family, my made-up name. We behaved as though it didn't exist. I went on being known everywhere as Mourid and I publish my books, articles, and poems under the name Mourid al-Barghouti, a name that I love as much as I hate my official name.) (Barghouti 99-100)

His long description elaborately presents the day when he learns that he has another name. He cries out to his parents, telling them that those certificates are not his. This could be the only place in which he has mentioned the background story of his official name. At another instance in this memoir, he mentions his days of exilic trauma in detail. This personal history, told as a memory, hits him when he shows Tamim his place of birth and tells him that he was born there. He narrates,

It takes me to times that overlap in my mind. It flies with me from 'my' room here and Tamim's silence to searching in 1963 for a place to rent in the Agouza district of Cairo, to asking for the timetable for the first days of studies at the university there, to driving over the Margaret bridge between Buda and Pest in Hungary, to sleeping on the floor in the Khalifa Prison in Cairo, to the soldier kicking me with his boot in my right kidney to wake me up so that I could be expelled from Cairo at dawn when Tamim was a five-month-old child, and to Radwa's voice as she curses the officers and then cries after they leave, taking me with them for an absence that will last seventeen years. The word 'here' flies me to a apartment in the Mkahhal Building in the Fakihani district of Beirut, the studios of the Voice of Palestine in the building opposite, and to the rooms of hotels, too numerous to count, where I and other young men argue with delegations and organizations from around the world over a comma or half a sentence in order to assert our right to self-determination and in defence of the PLO. (Barghouti 89)

The personal history, wrapped with multiple deep emotions and told as fragmented memories, connects the reader to the innermost feelings of the narrator. It symbolises the gravity of reflective nostalgia that the protagonist holds.

Cultural history and memory are highly interlinked concepts that analyse the complexities of remembrance and retrieval of a bygone era. Boym mentions that reflective nostalgia encourages individuals to engage with cultural history, whereas restorative nostalgia concentrates on national history. This engagement helps the individual develop nuanced perceptions of the past without romanticising it. Barghouti also throws light on the cultural history of Palestine. Unlike a restorative nostalgic, the reflective nostalgic mentions cultural history. This memoir is also not an exception. Barghouti mentions cultural history through the narration of the importance of olives in the lives of Palestinians. He mentions,

The olive in Palestine is not just agricultural property. It is people's dignity, their news bulletin, the talk of their village guesthouses during evening gatherings, their central bank when profit and loss are reckoned, the star of their dining tables, the companion to every bite they eat. It's the identity card that doesn't need stamps or photos and whose validity doesn't expire with the death of the owner but points to him, preserves his name, and blesses him anew with every grandchild and each season...Next to these stoves they exchange their sly humor, make fun of their cruel situation, practice their masterful skill at friendly backbiting, and, when the visits of relatives or neighbors bring a boy and a girl together in one house, exchange flirtatious glances that combine daring with shyness. For those who don't like coffee, they bring the blue tea pot, and sage leaves with their intoxicating perfume of the mountains. (Barghouti 10-11)

Olive trees are not just trees for Palestinians. It is an indispensable part of their culture. Every part of the tree has one or more things relevant in people's lives. Barghouti skillfully chooses the same to represent cultural history in the memoir.

Conclusion

Mourid Braghouti's *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here* is a classic example of the representation of reflective nostalgia. Barghout, in this memoir, using the narrative style of fragmented memory, discusses in detail the life he spent in exile and his return. His journey back to his homeland is a dream of many Palestinians. The events narrated through the medium of reflective nostalgia unfold before the readers a micro history of Palestine before and after Nakba. The analysis using Boym's framework on nostalgia expands the scope of memory studies and its connection with history. The reflective nostalgia enriches the process of zooming in on individual lives to understand their lives and creates a new space for counter storytelling. This work could be a live-in experience for many who have not or will not visit Palestine and are living a similar life the author has lived. Through such works, many such nostalgics might be feeding their nostalgia and dream of return.

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