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## Palestinian Partition Memory in Barghouti's '*I Was Born There, I Was Born Here*'

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### Abstract

Begun in the first half of the twentieth century, the Israel-Palestine conflict still stands as

an unresolved global issue. The ethnic cleansing of Palestine in 1948 shattered a million dreams and turned many more millions into refugees. Palestinians spread throughout the world, but Palestine no longer exists on the world map. With the passage of time, the world seems less concerned about the conflict and more supportive of the settler coloniser. The Palestinian intellectuals have now started to write to make the world recognise, remember and respond to their unending saga of physical and mental tortures, trauma, exile and resistance. Their struggle to come back to the homeland even as mere visitors is a vibrant theme of Palestinian Literature. Taking Jonathan D. Greenberg's *Generations of Memory: Remembering Partition in India/Pakistan and Israel/Palestine* as the base paper, this article attempts to conceptualise the eclectic angles of Palestinian partition and memory and its representation in a selected literary text. Mourid Barghouti *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here* taking the aid of memory to travel back into the past, to express the

agony of the present, and to dream about the future. The memoir recounts the author's journey to Palestine with his son after years, and his memories thereof. The paper analyses the different aftereffects of partition recorded in the memoir through the memory of the narrator.

**Keywords:** Palestinian literature, partition, memory studies, exile, return to homeland.

But due to the sheer breadth of memory that still remains, Partition retreats into the past and extends into the future, even touching generations far removed from the original state of trauma. -  
Aanchal Malhotra (18)

Partition cannot be considered as the act of drawing new lines on a geographical map. In-depth, it is an event in history that tear lives apart, change places into rubble, and even erase a generation forever. The world has witnessed many partitions. Many nations of the world have undergone the

agony of partition in some or the other period of history. But stories of some partitions continue to bleed for diverse reasons. One primary reason is the severity of human and material loss. As Ilan Pappé has rightly said, the 1947 catastrophe in Palestine commonly mentioned as the Al Nakba is an ethnic cleansing of the country. He adds, "...it took six months to complete the mission. When it was over, more than half of Palestine's native population, close to 800,000 people, had been uprooted, 531 villages had been destroyed, and eleven urban neighborhoods emptied of their inhabitants. The plan decided upon on 10 March 1948, and above all its systematic implementation in the following months, was a clear-cut case of an ethnic cleansing operation, regarded under international law today as a crime against humanity" (Pappé 13).

What is Urvashi Butalia's opinion about the partition in the Indian subcontinent can be easily applied to the case of Palestine also. She says that 'partitioning two lives is hard enough. Partitioning millions is insanity' (Butalia 9). The Palestinian partition, in some senses, is an event in which the hunter-hunted roles of the past reversed. The hunted of the holocaust took charge as hunters and launched the worst ever hunting of the twentieth century against the hunted, the Palestinians.

The tales of partition and the untold tales of the horrible experiences of the survivors are endless. People were driven out of their native country or made refugees in their own country. Around ten million Palestinians turned into refugees

and four million became internally displaced in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and inside Israel. Even years after the incident, the world's knowledge of the event was limited. The best possible way to bring international attention to the matter was to present it through literature. In Ilan Pappé's words, "By collecting authentic memories and documents about what had happened to their people, Palestinian historians in the 1970s, Walid Khalidi foremost among them, were able to retrieve a significant part of the picture Israel had tried to erase." (Pappé 14). This attempt also tried to bring back a national identity that had been scattered into different parts of the world.

Juliane Hammer asserts that, in the absence of state institutions, Palestinians should depend more on collective memory for the formation of their national identity. Hammer's comment on the authenticity and importance of memoirs is significant in this context. She explains, "When evaluating the importance of memoirs for the collective memory of Palestinians, it is important to acknowledge that they are not only important as historical documents — written accounts of experiences that shaped the authors' personal, cultural, and political identities — but also as puzzle pieces that help to paint a complex picture of the Palestinian experience in the 20th century." (Hammer 178).

This can be considered a major reason for the selection of Mourid Barghouti's *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here* as a text for this analysis. Barghouti is a Palestinian writer who was widely noted for his memoir *I Saw Ramallah*, which he

wrote on his visit to Ramallah years after its Israeli occupation. *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here* is based on his next visit to his native place with his son to say to him with pride, "I was born here, Tamim" (Barghouti 89).

*Generations of Memory: Remembering Partition in India/Pakistan and Israel/Palestine* written by Jonathan D. Greenberg provides the basic theoretical framework for the discussion which ensues. Greenberg presents partition memory not just as memory related to the event. He presents partition memory in a wider frame by connecting it to the survivors' past as well as their future. Barghouti's narration of the partition encompasses both his past experiences and his future dreams.

Following Greenberg's pattern, this paper is discussed in three parts. The first part reflects on the meaning of partition in a country's collective memory. Partition according to Greenberg is a "code word evoking layers of psychologically heightened, politically resonant meaning" (Greenberg 90). He adds that it is crucial to understand that 'partition' does not have a constant meaning for populations and can only be understood in the context of unique, granular memories, images, and stories that people have retained and passed on to others. In the same way, Barghouti remembers and presents the partition through memories of his past and journeys of his present. The primary intention of the visit was to infuse in his son's mind a Palestinian identity, but every place he visits, every person he meets, and every word he utters brings in him memories of the different phases of partition. When

Barghouti reaches his erstwhile home, he takes his son to the room where he himself was delivered. He then declares to Tamim with great pride, "I was born here, Tamim" (Barghouti 89). But the word *here* changes his psyche totally at least for a couple of minutes and takes him to the dark days of his life:

The word 'here' takes me to everything that is 'there.' It takes me to the houses of exile. 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. (Barghouti 89)

The word *here* triggers in him memories of the days he had spent in prison without committing any crime. He was thrown into prison because he bore a Palestinian identity. The word shatters his mind by bringing him the memories of exile in which he spent years in loneliness away from his beloved wife and son. This cites

how a single word can bring layers of meaning in a refugee's mind.

Another such instance occurs in the memoir when he reaches close to Qalandya checkpoint. This checkpoint between northern West Bank and Jerusalem restricts Palestinians from entering Eastern Jerusalem. The checkpoint evolves in his mind as a wall, a wall that has many meanings. "A thing of cement that winds its way among the houses, topped by army towers at irregular intervals. Reports, articles, speeches by politicians and campaigners for solidarity with the Palestinian people all speak of its disfigurement of the land. What I see, over and above that, is its disfigurement of the sky" (Barghouti 128). The thought about the wall continues to extend in his memory. As in any partition memory, the memory about the wall ends up in partition. The memory sprouts in the narrator's mind from a geographical structure. It expands into a metaphorical substance that separates people.

It is the wall of the Silent Transfer. This wall puts houses in prison. Prisons the world over are designed for individual criminals who, justly or unjustly, have been found guilty. This wall has been designed to imprison an entire human community. To imprison a morning greeting between neighbors. To imprison a grandfather's dancing at his grandson's wedding. To imprison the handshakes exchanged at a ceremony of mourning for the death of a relative. To imprison the hand of a mother and prevent it

from holding her daughter's when she gives birth. To separate the olive tree from the one who planted it, the student from his school, the patient from his doctor, the believer from his prayers at the mosque. It imprisons dates between teenagers. The Wall makes you long for colors. It makes you feel that you are living in a stage set, not in real life. (Barghouti 129)

Through this single word 'wall', Barghouti takes the reader to the depths of his mind and attributes new definitions to the cement structure. It emerges into something that separates him from his people, their land and from the outside world. The wall, for Barghouti, symbolises Zionist occupation itself that changed his position from that of a native to that of a visitor to the country. He explains, "Then I tell myself, this is the Lesser Wall. The Greater Wall is the Occupation. Isn't the Occupation a wall too?" (Barghouti 129). He puts an end to his thoughts on the wall with a hope that one day the wall will fall and never rise again to divide his land and people.

Greenberg connects Avishai Margalit's definition of trauma as an "effect of painful experience and emotional damage" (Greenberg 91) with the OED meaning of wound. He mentions that this definition highlights the relation between emotional pain, the way memory is suppressed, and the psychological cost of that repression. This is evident when the narrator forbids himself from starting a conversation with his travel mate fearing

that it may trigger painful memories in the listener.

I've got used to not talking if I'm with people I don't know in a car or a bus or line. You never know which way a conversation with strange traveling companions may turn. A question you ask, or your answer to a question, maybe embarrassing or dangerous or stir up a painful memory, or so I convinced myself some time ago. (Barghouti 23)

Greenberg then employs a medical analogy and connects the separation of the tissues from the body in a wound to the individual's detachment from his community in partition. A wound can be medically defined as the separation of the tissues from the body caused by external factors like cuts, accidents, or even surgery. Wounds can be severe or mild depending upon how deep and intense it is. Partition memory in this way is analogous with the medical definition of wound. Partition is the external factor which infuses wounds in the victim's mind. As a result of partition, the victim gets displaced from his past life. Like the wounds, the depth and the duration the memories stay in the victim's mind purely depends on the effect of the partition and his own psyche.

One of the Occupation's cruelest crimes is the distortion of distance in the individual's life. This is a

fact: the Occupation changes distances. It destroys them, upsets them, and plays with them as it likes. Whenever the soldiers kill someone, the customary distance between the moments of birth and death is distorted. The Occupation closes the road between two cities and makes the distance between them many times the number recorded on the maps. The Occupation throws my friend into prison and makes the distance between him and his living room one to be measured in years and in the lives of his sons and daughters, who will give him grandchildren he will never see. (Barghouti 79)

Barghouti, in these lines, presents to the readers how the partition removed him from his own people forever. Like the wounded tissue that gets separated from the other tissues, he is also moved from his familiar locations. He is not sure of his return to his homeland, just like the unpredictability of the healing of the wound. Partition changed his life in a manner he didn't expect.

In the second part of the article, Greenberg discusses the influence of the various national liberation projects that shaped the first-generation partition narratives. But Barghouti's memoir presents a counter to this. As mentioned earlier, even twenty decades after the partition, the world took the side of Israel believing that the ethnic cleansing was a normal expulsion. The Palestinians were forced into writing their history and recording their memory for major reasons.

One was to bring the attention of the world to the issue; the next was to deepen the understanding of their own and future generations as also to reflect and rejoice over things that they have lost forever. As Edward Said has rightly said, “The things that had been taken for granted — the structure of the society, village and family identity, customs, cuisine, folklore, dialect, distinctive habits and history — were adduced as evidence, to Palestinians by Palestinians, that even as a colony the territory had always been their homeland, and that they formed a people” (Said 138). Said claims that memoirs are material for Palestinian future and that it is their very character as individual and fragmented that will make them endure and be a part of the ‘museum of memory’.

Barghouti's memoir with its powerful narration and vivid representation of the individual's memory brings to the reader everything that the Palestinians have lost after the Al Nakba. The narrator, accompanied by his friends, takes his son to the sites of memory, and relishes their past memories connected with the place. He takes great pride in explaining every bit of the places they visit. But every memory brings to him the agony of the lost forever feeling. Barghouti also realizes that he needs to write about everything in his past, present, and future. The reason is that if not he, nobody will write about it. “I want to write the history of things no one else will ever write for me. I want to carve the least of my feelings with a chisel on a stone next to the highway” (Barghouti 44). He adds that he will not let their history be a saga of great events and places.

Nevertheless, we cannot take this as a reason to stay silent. We have to break the state of denial with which the world confronts us. We shall tell the tale the way it has to be told. We shall tell our personal histories one by one and shall recount our little stories as we have lived them and as our souls and eyes and imaginations remember them. We shall not let history be the history of great events, of kings and officers and books on dusty bookshelves. We shall recount what happened to us personally and the life stories of our bodies and our senses, which to the naïve will seem trivial, incoherent, and meaningless. (Barghouti 59)

Barghouti, this way, gives a new meaning to his memoir. He turns his memoir into a sample from which other writers can draw motivation to write about their history. He believes that writing is the best method to bring back everything that is lost, including their national identity. A close reading of the memoir is enough to make the readers understand the role the memoirs and autobiographies have played in recreating the lost identity in Palestinians over and above the role of the national liberation projects.

Greenberg identifies a normal tendency in partition memory to idealize the past. He supports his argument by quoting Veena Das and her mention of ‘frozen slides’: “Das's image of “frozen slides” suggests a way of remembering that is rigid,

if not ossified — stuck in a sentimentalized, glorified past that no longer exists, if it ever indeed existed, and wrapped in a nostalgic mood ” (Greenberg 9). He also adds that nostalgia glorifies the past by presenting people, places, and objects with ‘pure innocence’.

The character of Umm Mounif, Barghouti's mother, is an ideal example to contradict Greenberg's idea of valorising the past. She was denied education and forced into marriage at an early age:

“When the village stopped me from continuing my education, Abu Marwan, I couldn't take them on. But now the education of my children has become my whole life.” She says: “It wasn't just me they wronged. They wronged your father too. He didn't know me and had never seen me before in his life. They said, ‘So-and-so is for so-and-so’ and that was that. It wasn't your father's fault. They wronged us both. Take it as my testament to you all: ‘Treat your daughters fairly.’ Nobody should impose their will on anybody else when it comes to marriage” (Barghouti 101-102)

Barghouti, in a similar way, portrays in his memoir the bitter realities he experienced from the national liberal organisations:

Thus was formed the alliance that is the last and worst thing that a liberation movement needs. I had agreed to be director of the foundation for a year and from the

first weeks it became obvious that it was consumed from the inside by financial corruption—falsified invoices, salaries for non-existent employees, allowances, per diems for journeys never made, and seventy employees to do work that needed twenty at most. As usual, corruption won, albeit only partially this time. I tried and neither succeeded totally nor failed totally. In the current delicate Palestinian situation, this must be considered total failure. (Barghouti 160)

He accepts the truth that sometimes the national organisations failed to understand the Palestinian dream of return. He makes it clear to the reader that like in any other organisation, people in this organisation have also become prey to corruption and self-interests. He presents his experiences in the organisation as it is. He never made an attempt to idealise the past.

In the third part of the paper, Greenberg describes how personal narratives revise history and transfer the past into the second generation. The memories of the past are infused in the next generation through the oral and personal narratives written by the first-generation writers. The transmission of these memories is a need of the hour as, “behind every Palestinian there is a great general fact; that he once — and not so long ago — lived in a land of his own called Palestine, which is now no longer his homeland” (Said 115). Thus, the loss of the geographical space they considered as their homeland prompted the intellectuals of the period to

write about their people. Barghouti also underlines the idea by saying, "I tell myself no writer deserves glory so long as his people are in torment, even if he's the person best able to give expression to that suffering" (Barghouti 30).

Greenberg supports his idea of the relation between the second generation and personal narratives and their role in the revisioning of history by quoting Eva Hoffman. Hoffman considers the second generation as a 'hinge generation'. She, by using the word 'hinge' suggests to the reader that the second-generation acts as a link or bridge, between the previous generation who had first-hand experience of partition, and the subsequent generations for whom the 'troubled past may be distant and resolved' (Greenberg 12). He also brings in Marianne Hirsch's concept of post generation memory. "'Post memory'" describes the relationship that the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they "remember" only employing the stories, images, and behaviours among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to *seem* to constitute memories in their own right" (Hirsch 5). Greenberg mentions that the second generation works like a bridge carrying memories of the partition which have been shared with them through stories and experiences of the past generation to the future generations. The character of Tamim is an ideal example of the hinge generation. He is a Palestinian who hasn't

seen Palestine till adulthood. But the narrator and his wife were constantly sowing in his mind thoughts, stories, and memories of Palestine. "Before, Tamim had seen Jerusalem through my eyes and through stories. Today, for the first time, he has seen it with his own eyes. Now it belongs to him" (Barghouti 77). The narrator considers Tamim as a tool by which he can revise the misinterpreted Palestinian history and carry it to the next generations.

We shall retell history as a history of our fears, our anxieties, our patience, our pillow lusts, and improvised courage. As a history of the making of an evening meal, of stories of love, innocent and otherwise, of emotions hidden from the grown-ups. As a history of the goat bombed by planes in its field and of the heroism of the child who peed in his pants out of fear but suddenly felt brave and stood, wide-eyed, before the long dark line of tanks. (Barghouti 59)

Barghouti mentions in detail his intentions to retell history because the second generation, like the rest of the world, was told by the Israeli sources that the Palestinians were passive and it didn't take much effort to conquer them. The narrator, at one instance, says to his son that if he wishes to be a poet he should start from among his own people and his own land. He dreams that Tamim would be a Palestinian poet and will preach their history even after his death. "Then I turn to Tamim and tell him, "If you want to be a



poet, you have to begin here, among your own people and on this land” (Barghouti 104). When Tamim reads his poem in front of the Palestinian audience, Barghouti visualises his dream.

Later, nine whole years after we stood there, Tamim and his poetry will take on a different meaning for the people of Deir Ghassanah. They and the people of the surrounding villages will come to hear his verses. The people will fill the school playground. The child born in the Dr. Gohar Maternity Hospital on the banks of the Nile in Cairo will become the young poet of Palestine and its handsome son, with his long flowing verses, his smile, and the message of hope that these brought them, despite the long-lasting national dejection. This was a new son who was ‘theirs.’ This was a son they had discovered unexpectedly as they went about their normal daily acts of resistance and endurance. He had arrived ‘ready-made,’ as though he’d been born standing like that in some distant place and had come back to them. (Barghouti 105)

This is an instance in which the two generations that flowed in two different directions merge together for the cause of independence. Tamim, who has never seen the country earlier, reads to the Palestinians through a poem the story of their struggle. Everything required for moulding him into a national poet was infused into him by his

parents. The reception he gets from the audience makes the narrator realize that he and his wife have succeeded in their attempts to turn their experiences into their son’s memory.

Greenberg, in his article, explains the way memory is generated as an output of an event, and its transformation through ages. It can evoke various meanings and perspectives. Barghouti’s memoir throws light on various layers of partition memory. It helps the readers understand the role of memoirs in building a national identity and retelling the history that has been misinterpreted. Barghouti’s memoir is an exploration of the untold realities of the past. This retelling of the past shows the reader multiple angles of the 1947 Palestinian exodus. Through his memory he brings in everything he wanted the world to know about his people and their nation. This paper, thus, is not just a study of the Palestinian past but also its present fights and future dreams.

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