JOURNEYS THROUGH HOME AND EXILE: PALESTINIAN AUTOBIOGRAPHIC WRITING

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JOURNEYS THROUGH HOME AND EXILE: PALESTINIAN AUTOBIOGRAPHIC WRITING

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

to the faculty of the

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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ST. JOHN’S COLLEGE OF LIBERAL ARTS AND SCIENCES

at

ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY
New York
by
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ABSTRACT

JOURNEYS THROUGH HOME AND EXILE: PALESTINIAN AUTOBIOGRAPHIC WRITING

Laila Shikaki

This dissertation analyzes Palestinian autobiographical writing that discusses homeland, exile, and homesickness, with a focus on an intergenerational understandings of Palestine, both as an idea and as a physical place. It concentrates on the personal writing of Palestinians inside and outside of Palestine, written in Arabic and in English, and uses feminism and postcolonialism, especially the works of scholars from the Middle East, as its theoretical base. This necessity for writing and showcasing the personal, presented in the autobiographies themselves and my own analysis of them, comes from the need to defy the occupation, and the reshaping and renaming of Palestine. It thus becomes a revolutionary act when Palestinians assert their lives and use the personal pronoun “I” against the backdrop of their continuous erasure, confiscation of their lands, dismantling of their houses, stealing of their culture, and silencing of their voices. My central texts are autobiographical works by Jean Said Makdisi and Suad Amiry, Edward and Najla Said, Mourid and Tamim Barghouti, as well as the poetry of Nathalie Handal and Naomi Shihab Nye. Additionally, I will incorporate my own autobiographical published poems as a Palestinian who studied in the United States.
DEDICATION

To my Palestine:
All the Words are Written for You
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Introduction

In Mourid Barghouti’s second autobiography *I Was Born Here, I Was Born There*, he writes about his dismay of being labeled in a magazine as “Mourid Barghouti—Palestinian Authority” instead of “Palestine,” after the publication of one of his poems in an international magazine. Barghouti takes this opportunity to show his dismay not only from the Israeli occupation that led to the loss of Palestine, but to everyone who collaborates and allows the situation to perpetuate. He writes: “When I asked them to explain, they said there was no country called Palestine, to which my response was, ‘Is the Palestinian Authority a country?’” (Barghouti 141). This incident reminded me, as I was reading his book for the third time, of an introductory course I took with the American Fulbright Scholarship before pursuing my MFA in California in 2011, where my name tag had “Laila Shikaki—West Bank.” I scratched the two words and wrote “Palestine” instead. That alone allowed me to speak about my country to everyone who asked, and a lot did!

Barghouti’s and my insistence on being labeled and identified correctly is at the core of this dissertation. It is what has led me to write about Palestinian autobiography where the personal “I” and the insistence on writing and representing the self is at the center. This assertion is also at the heart of Palestinian autobiographic writing, as we write in spite of continuous erasure and displacement, and thus the act of writing and studying Palestinian autobiography becomes crucial.

This dissertation analyzes Palestinian autobiography written in the late 20th and early 21st century both in English and Arabic, by writers living inside and outside of Palestine, as well as my own published poems. I focus on homesickness, familial
relationships, and the interpretation of self and Palestine. In this dissertation I show that
Palestinian autobiography can be read in multiple ways. The depiction of Palestine, and
even the existence of more than one Palestine, is present in every one of the autobiographies
I write about. I argue in most chapters that just as the personal “I” changes and shifts as a
person is writing their autobiography, so does the image of Palestine change with every
writer, depending on their physical and emotional location.

When it comes to Palestinian autobiography, the act of writing a self materializes
in distinct ways. Palestinian identities and the selves Palestinians use while writing cannot
be looked at as mere inventions that can be manipulated in order to receive more attention,
since our country is claimed to be an invention as well, a land that had no people. The act
of writing about a self that is continuously erased, about a people whose land is stolen and
confiscated, their streets forbidden to them, and the names of their cities changed, becomes
more serious, realistic, and urgent, burdening its authors with responsibility. Those
autobiographic writers, however, are able to be creative, humorous, sarcastic, and romantic
at the same time. Several characteristics shown in Palestinian autobiography make it
unique. I aim to show that while most Palestinian authors write about their lives and the
lives of their families, they also employ collective writing that can help in the
understanding of the Palestinian cause. Most Palestinian writers use political historical
events as the starting point of their narrative, introduce generational aspirations and
contexts, and rely on family to tell their stories.

I argue throughout this dissertation that writing the self in the midst of literal
erasure and displacement is political on its own. The political in Palestinian modern
autobiographic writing, however, does not need to be mentioned by name, although in most
cases, as my examples show, it is. It is revolutionary to just narrate a personal story because a Palestinian personal narrative always has politics embedded in it, one way or another. The insistence on writing about displacement, but also joy; writing about exile, but also family relations and love is collective, political, and Palestinian. It is thus impossible to find a non-political Palestinian autobiography written after the Nakba of 1948. I argue in my chapters that “political” does not necessarily mean writing about news, policy, and statistical dates and figures. When it comes to an occupied people, simply writing down their life story, living semi normal lives, and depicting patriarchy and the status quo is political.

The Israeli occupation of the Palestinian lands aims to destroy all notions of sovereignty, but also identity. And since Palestine is still under settler colonial occupation, Palestinian authors focus, whether explicitly or implicitly, on politics and the effects of the occupation. In her book *Literary Autobiography and Arab National Struggle* (2017), Tahia Abdel Nasser reveals the specificity of Palestinian personal writing. She argues:

While postcolonial autobiography dealt with the effects of colonialism in the Arab world and offered forms of self-representation to challenge colonial and Orientalist misrepresentations, Palestinian memoirs focused on the writer’s relationship to Palestine. These memoirs dealt with the legacy of the *Nakba* (catastrophe), the Israeli occupation, and the segregation enforced on the Palestinian population since 1948. Writers revisited their youth in British Mandate Palestine or the effects of the loss of Palestine in 1948 and the 1967 War in Memoirs. (Abdel Nasser 7)

This relationship to Palestine is the foundation of my dissertation, and I show how the devastating years Abdel Nasser mentions above affect the authors I study and how they see themselves and Palestine. And while many Palestinians write away from Palestine, they write about and to it. This dissertation mostly presents writings of authors outside of Palestine, always connecting the situation of Palestine to the writer’s life away from it.
Barghouti writes about his visit to Palestine, Amiry writes about her illegal status in her homeland, and Edward Said writes about the effects of certain years on his life and the lives of many thousands of Palestinians. While every Palestinian story is different, most Palestinian autobiographers I turn to in this dissertation collectively write and they write for the collective. Any personal writing becomes collective when it concentrates on events that have happened to the collective, such as the Nakba of 1948, exile, and return.

The specificity of the Palestinian experience is, thus, due to the occupation of its land and the displacement of its people. In most autobiographical works I explore, the authors discuss the year 1948 as it had a tremendous effect on the memory of Palestinians. It is the year of the Nakba (catastrophe), where thousands of Palestinians lost their land, lives, and forever their physical connection to home and family. In dissecting this temporal marker, I depend on the idea of “postmemory” coined by Marianne Hirsch, where children of parents who have suffered loss and catastrophes retain their family’s memory.

What is distinctive in understanding the specificity of the Palestinian cause, especially in autobiographies, is that while there is constant movement (due to the nature of exile and displacement), there is also stagnation and constant return to the events of 1948 and 1967. To some authors, this return happens when they mention old relatives (in chapter 1, I attend to Amiry mentioning her mother-in-law’s fear of leaving her house lest she never returns like what happened in 1948), or when they visit Palestine again and slowly see the changes that have occurred to their country (like what I analyze in Edward Said’s writing in chapter 2), or my focus on Al-Barghouti’s postmemory in chapter 3. There, then, seems to always be a “before/after 1948” and “before/after 1967” in the writings of Palestinian autobiographers. In addition to the political notion in Palestinian autobiography and the
personal becoming collective and communal, these breaks in time and space make the act of writing the self different in the Palestinian context.

Because of displacement, where a Palestinian resides and when she writes are essential elements in understanding Palestinian autobiography. Therefore, an important component that I pursue in this dissertation, and especially in chapters 2 and 3, is that of place or location. I analyze how visiting Palestine again affects the writers themselves, but also how they see Palestine. In chapter 3, I analyze how Mourid Barghouti does an excellent job in showcasing this idea of a real and imagined Palestine—an imagined country that has been built inside his memory. He investigates how his romanticized version of Palestine changed as he returned after many years of exile. Najla Said briefly mentions this idea as well in her autobiography, which I write about in chapter 2, where she shows disinterest in the country that she only visited as a young person, mentioning how while there was greenery around her, she only noticed the brick settlements and the dark colors. This concept of seeing Palestine in different ways is an important aspect that I clarify in my chapters.

Many contemporary autobiography theorists claim that the self used in personal narratives is an invention, a creation that almost does not really truthfully exist. This creation, they argue, is due to the use of the medium of language, as well as memory and distance in time that may in some cases affect the authenticity of a narrative. Paul John Eakin, for example, states in *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* (2014) “that autobiographical truth is not a fixed but an evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation, and, further, that the self that is the center of all autobiographical narrative is necessarily a fictive structure” (Eakin 3). Because of the
distinct characteristics present in Palestinian autobiography, to read it as merely a fiction, a creation or recreation of a self, as many scholars of autobiography see it, seems simplified to me. Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith’s Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives (2010) provides another analysis of this notion of authenticity. In their chapter, “Autobiographical Truth,” they show autobiography as standing in the middle: “autobiographical narration is so written that it cannot be read solely as either factual truth or simple facts. As an intersubjective mode, it lies outside a logical or juridical model of truth and falsehood” (Watson and Smith 7). They also claim that there are autobiographical acts that the author enacts when writing.

Contrary to this fictitious creation of an autobiographical self, in “The Autobiographical Situation,” Janet Gunn writes about a manifestation of the self, the “I” that is used in autobiography, and whether it is reimagined or represented in personal narratives. She states that: “The self…displays, not distorts, itself by means of language” (Gunn 9). In this quote, Gunn is responding to the critics who believe that autobiographers create new selves while writing. She in fact claims that the self is displayed, meaning portrayed and not distorted or merely created for the sake of writing. I have used this understanding of autobiography throughout my dissertation, especially in chapter 2 which researches the Saids and shows a difference in the way the father represents himself and the way his daughter writes about her younger reflective self. Especially for reading marginalized narratives like the Palestinian self-writing I focus on, Gunn’s analysis and understanding of autobiography and the self become particularly relevant and appropriate.

In order to be specific, I have opted to use the term “autobiography,” meaning writing about the self, instead of “memoir” throughout this dissertation. There has been
consensus that while memoir is a form of self-writing, it usually pays attention to one moment in time, or a time period, zooming into the events of that period, and not necessarily detailing a person’s general life. In *Literary Autobiography and Arab National Struggle*, Abdel Nasser opts for the all-encompassing word “autobiography,” knowing that some of the books she used in her research and analysis, in fact, could be considered memoir. She compares the two terms in her introduction: “Critics have focused on the difference between autobiography (*sīra dhāṭīyya*), a form that focuses on the development of the author’s personality, and memoir (*mudhakkīrāt*), written at a late moment in the author’s life. Memoirs chronicle the context more explicitly than autobiography and examine the role of the writer in the events” (Abdel Nasser 17). While I do not find both terms interchangeable, I see that all the autobiographies used in this dissertation show the development of the author’s life, and while they highlight certain moments in the authors’ lives, their reflections span more than a moment or a period. Therefore, I use the term “autobiography” and “autobiographical” to refer to writing about one’s self and life.

In every chapter of this dissertation, I read my own poems as autobiographic texts, similarly to how I understand the autobiographical prose of each chapter. There is an analysis of poetic elements in the poems I study, but my main concern throughout this dissertation is on the message shared, and the sentiments received, regardless of how it is packaged. Things become more complicated, however, in my last chapter where my primary texts are autobiographical poetry, because while I am very certain that my published poems reference my own experience, one is never certain with poetry. The personal pronoun “I” operates in similar ways in poetry and autobiographical prose, yet it is not always personal and authentically about the poet’s self. A poet could use a first-
person persona or personal speaker like an author uses a first-person narrator in their fiction. One could then say that there is no “pact” between the poet and their readers about the authenticity of the pronouns used in poetry. What has helped in chapter 4, however, is the fact that the two poets I study have a wide range of autobiographical essays, interviews, and poems depicting their lives. I have chosen poems that were dedicated to the poets’ family (making them personal), or poems that resemble their life stories and where they came from. Once I became certain of the personal elements in the poems, it became easier to explore those poems as words about personal experiences.

Throughout my dissertation, I aim to make use first of Palestinian and then Arab and then international theorists and writers to ground my research on autobiography. I depend on a mixture of Palestinian literary theory, Arab literary theory, feminist theory, postcolonial theory, and other BIPOC theories. Because of the intersectional aspect of my dissertation, many of the theorists central to my research operate within two or more of these fields. Since there is not much thorough research on the case of Palestinian autobiography, I was not able to find many Palestinians who write about Palestinian autobiography specifically, nor other exhaustive research on the genre of Palestinian autobiography. One example of a full-length study of Palestinian autobiography is Assad Al-Saleh’s “Displacement in Palestinian Autobiography,” (2010) which is not available fully on ProQuest. Al-Saleh is not Palestinian himself, but he works on a few Palestinian autobiographers, like Edward Said, Fawaz Turki, Fadwa Turan, and Mourid Barghouti. What I aim to do is different. My attention is on the familial, collective, political writing of Palestinian autobiographers. Rather than use one female autobiographer in my thesis,
like Al-Salah, six of my nine authors are women, and I incorporate the work of Arab feminist thinkers as much as possible.

Rabab Abdulhadi, who co-edited *Arab and Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence, and Belonging* (2011), is one example of a Palestinian thinker I want to shed light on. Her book shows the diversity of thought among Arab feminist thinkers. Understanding autobiography in the Arab world and especially ones written by women demands culturally and historically specific understandings of autobiography, and the books I mention below by Arab feminists situate my research. While little critical work pursues the special case of the writing of Palestinian women, two works that I depend on in this dissertation by Fadia Faqir and Nawar Golley consider the writings of Arab women. While “Arab” and “Palestinian” are not interchangeable, Palestine belongs to the Arab world and has similar cultural aspects and ways of living and writing, especially the areas that used to be called the Levante. Palestinian women are Arab women, and therefore, most Arab theories, especially about writing and understanding of family and identity can be used in understanding Palestinian literature or Palestinian women writing. What is uniquely Palestinian, nevertheless, is the many years of living under occupation, constant erasure, and displacement. These reasons give Palestinian autobiographical writing, and especially women writing, a different aspect that my dissertation illustrates from the beginning.

According to Arab feminists like Faqir and Golley, women’s writing is collective, as it tells the stories of other female characters. It is empowering, political, and weaves the very personal with the collective. My focus in this dissertation is on this intergenerational and familial representation, and how the understanding of self and Palestine meet and divert in Palestinian autobiography. Chapters 1 and 4 explore the writings of Palestinian
women in hopes to show how these women use writing as a way of understanding their families, and by extension their own lives, which were continuously affected by the Israeli occupation, as well as patriarchy. Fadia Faqir’s anthology, *In The House of Silence: Autobiographical Essays by Arab Women Writers* (1998), is a collection of personal writings by women from around the Arab world, each centering specific issues and concerns. Faqir’s introduction and conclusion shed light on the writings of Arab women, and how and why we write. Faqir emphasizes how the writing of women differs from the writings of men, citing that most women in the Arab world did not have their voices heard, whether in politics or broader society. It is because of these conditions, however, that women eventually write: “Some contributors to this book have written their texts precisely because they lack self-confidence and a sense of empowerment, whether political or social. The need to define their position in history and locate themselves vis-à-vis the male master narrative, and to explore and formulate a separate individual identity has urged Arab women writers to write their life stories” (Faqir 14-15). Defiance in their writing reminds us of the defiance of the Palestinians in writing back and claiming their narrative. The intersection between female writing and Palestinian writing is important here, as I mostly analyze the writings of Palestinian women in this dissertation. In her introduction, Faqir argues, “For Arab women writers, the writing of autobiography is not as straightforward as for male writers. This confidence and certitude about the self and its position in history and language is lacking” (Faqir 11). Faqir here is alluding to Arab women who asserted themselves while national struggles were taking place. Most women had behind the scenes jobs but were not shown to the public. While her sentence seems negative, I understand women’s perseverance and insistence to be indicative of a movement. Faqir states in her
conclusion that the women whose writing she includes (and I would argue almost all other Arab women):

Perceive freedom as a prerequisite for writing, and show how that freedom is realised. For some it is the struggle with the family, the dominant neopatriarchy, for others it is the struggle with restrictive culture, oppressive regimes and/or the religious institution. Some fail to realise themselves in their countries of origin and choose to live in exile. And some end up displaced and uprooted, and for them any sense of personal or political freedom could not be achieved outside the homeland. (Faqir 180)

Faqir’s passage above shows that most Arab women write in defiance of something, and it is clear in my chosen autobiographies that all Palestinian authors, women especially, write in spite of a political situation, whether that be the British Mandate or occupation (chapter 1), or the erasure of the Palestinian people and the pressure of having two identities (chapter 2), or the occupation and how it disfigures the land and exiles its people (chapter 3).

Nawar Al-Hassan Golley’s two books, *Arab Women's Lives Retold: Exploring Identity Through Writing* (2007) and *Reading Arab Women’s Autobiography: Shahrazad Tells Her Story* (2010), showcase the intersection between Arab feminist theory and other global theories like Marxism and postcolonialism. In *Reading Arab Women’s Autobiography*, Golley seeks to test “western” theoretical works while researching Arab women writings. An important topic that Golley illustrates in her introduction, which I also investigate throughout this dissertation, is the idea of the private and public, especially when it comes to the writings of Palestinian women. She states in her introduction:

The “private” and the “public” were (and still are) supporting for men, whereas for women they were (and perhaps still are to a large extent) two opposing spheres. Neither in practice nor in theory were women expected to violate the sacred world of men, the “public.” Writing about the “private” used to be considered one of the weak aspects of women’s writings. But now, and in feminist terms, representing the domestic can be a political act in itself; for the goal is to change the situation imposed upon women. In its critique of the family and of the division of social life
into “private” and “public,” feminism also puts the private in the public sphere. (Golley III)

This framework helps explain the different ways women’s writing can act as political and feminist. Simply by documenting one’s life under constant struggle and revealing a person’s personal life, she is contributing to the movement as she is sharing her life with others.

I also rely on Abdel Nasser’s *Literary Autobiography and Arab National Struggle* (2017) to ground my research on autobiography. Abdel Nasser and I use autobiographical comparisons in our chapters. My exploration, however, is more detailed to issues regarding writing about homelands and family relationships. Abdel Nasser explains how both Franco Moretti’s theory on world literature and inequality, as well as the Arab thinker’s Hisham Aboul-Ela’s study of the effects of migration on the literature of the colonized world in his 2007 book, *Other South: Faulkner, Coloniality, and the Mariátegui Tradition*, help in creating reasons to study works of literature away from Eurocentrism. Abdel Nasser writes that “the entry of Arab autobiography into new literary and cultural networks through translation, migration, and circulation enriches the study of comparative literature and may influence the global reading of Arab literature” (Abdel Nasser 153). She compares Arab autobiographies from different Arab countries through the theme of solitude, whereas I compare Palestinian autobiography with a concentration on familial relationships and the writings coming as a result of exile and displacement.

Most Arab feminists reject the western, white perspective of presenting women and writing about their struggles. They claim that their struggles are intersectional, and not unified. They understand Arab feminism as standing between national struggles of
liberations and patriarchy, connecting the liberation of the Arab world, and especially Palestine, to the freedom of thought and liberation of Arab women. In their book *Arab and Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence, and Belonging* (2011), the editors Abdulhadi, Alsultany, and Naber describe their concerns about using the word “feminism” in their book title and discussion. They write in their introduction:

Although this volume is about Arab and Arab American feminist perspectives, many of us do not comfortably identify with the term “feminism.” We use the term “feminism” as a shorthand for a commitment to gender justice, including an end to gender inequality, homophobia, and transphobia. We further note that not all struggles for gender justice are the same: some tend to be hierarchical; some privilege struggles against sexism over struggles for feminist, queer, and transgender justice; others position gender justice in tension with and opposition to other forms of justice. (Abdulhadi et al. xxxv)

This critical understanding of feminism comes as a response to western understandings of women’s existence, especially women of color. The editors continue to explain where their concern comes from:

As editors, we share a commitment to the necessity of resistance against hegemonic liberal U.S. feminisms that reinforce Orientalist and racist discourses on Arab and Muslim women. These feminist frameworks call for an end to what they define as inherent “cultural” or “religious” practices that they take out of historical and political contexts while ignoring historical and political realities. (Abdulhadi et al. xxxv)

The Palestinian autobiographies I use in this dissertation reflect upon similar political and historical realities. Another reason for the mistrust that some women and Arab societies at large have regarding feminism, is the notion that feminism is foreign to the Arab world “because feminist and national consciousness emerged at the same time and as a reaction to Western imperialism, feminism is an illegal immigrant and an alien import to the Arab world and, as such, is not relevant to the people and their culture” (Golley 521). In her
article “Is Feminism Relevant to Arab Women,” Nawar Al-Hasan Golley debunks such interpretations:

Arab feminism was not imported from the West. It was an inevitable result of the changes that took place in the area, which encompassed all aspects of life. Arab feminism was born out of the struggle between the dying, traditional, religious, feudal Ottoman way of life and the rising, modern, secular, capitalist European ways of life. (Golley 529)

While many Arab women disapprove the ways their lives have been misunderstood, they all agree that their voices need to be heard. In Arab and Arab American Feminisms: Gender, Violence, and Belonging, the editors even note that each of the women who contributed to their collection had her own understanding of feminism, which the authors I use in this dissertation have as well. In her article, “Arab Feminism at the Millennium,” Therese Saliba summarizes the development of the study of Arab women:

Initially, the post-Orientalist scholarship on Arab women that flourished in the past two decades sought to critique exoticized, reductive representations of Oriental and Muslim women oppressed by their culture. Feminist debates of the 1980s centered on the heterogeneity of women's experience, the critique of Islam as an all-encompassing category, and the primacy of various categories of analysis—sexuality, socioeconomics, and the legacy of colonialism and the nationalist response in shaping Arab women's lives. (Saliba 1087)

This quote provides an example that shows the continuous malleability of any field, but especially that of feminism, where women of color, and women in the Global South began to include their writings and thoughts and refused to be shadows, only spoken about. Once again, the struggles of the Palestinian people and their demands to be heard and represented by themselves and on their own terms is where postcolonial studies and feminist studies meet and intertwine.

The works by Faqir, Golley, and Abdel Nasser have shaped this dissertation’s understanding of autobiography in the Arab world. While I have found some interesting
and helpful research papers, journal articles, and even PhD dissertations about some aspect of Palestinian life narrative, what I found missing, however, is a complete research project based on Palestinian autobiography like the one I carry out here. Some chapters in critical books do examine Palestinian autobiography, yet lack attention to missing and representing the homeland, as well as an exploration of familial relationships, or only explore two books or two famous authors. My dissertation offers a dialogic, comparative analysis of Palestinian autobiographies that analyzes more than one aspect of being Palestinian. Dissecting my own published poetry adds to the depth of this project, as I look at my poetry as part of the Palestinian literature and examine it as objectively as possibly, while arguing that writing the personal, whether in prose or poetry, is political, academic, and representative.

Since all the autobiographies I study were written in the later 20th and early 21st century, the effects of colonialism and national liberation movements appear, whether directly or indirectly, which is why I refer in every chapter to postcolonialism and the effects of the political on the personal. In Literary Autobiography and Arab National Struggle, Abdel Nasser expands the connection between writing autobiography and the effects of colonialism and those movements of liberation. She states: “Arab autobiography in the mid-twentieth century responded to the enduring effects of colonialism, national movements, and independence” (Abdel Nasser 1). About the relationship between this genre and those liberation movements, she details:

For Arab writers, whose formation and careers spanned these major historical moments, their autobiographical production is fraught with the representation of subjectivity vis-à-vis anticolonial and anti-imperialist movements. They explored the tension between the communal and the individual in a form that was broadly conceived as the writer’s expression of subjectivity within collective struggles in
the Arab world. The rise of Arabic autobiography dovetailed the private and the public, the individual and the national.” (Abdel Nasser 1)

In my dissertation, this attention on the national struggles, as well as the communal and private becomes more clear in chapter 1 and chapter 3 where the authors directly present their conflict with the Israeli occupation. *The Edinburgh Companion to the Postcolonial Middle East* (2019), edited by Anna Ball and Karim Mattar, is one of the few recent expansive works that write about the Middle East within the field of postcolonialism. In their preface, “Dialectics of Post/Colonial Modernity in the Middle East: A Critical, Theoretical and Disciplinary Overview,” Ball and Mattar state that “as a consequence, the category of ‘The Middle East’ has been constructed in postcolonial studies in an ahistorical, unsystematic and fragmentary way” (Ball and Mattar 7), explaining the dire need for a framework that situates the Middle East at its core. This focus on the Middle East does not only depend on a geographically South-South analysis, but it is also one that depends on their ‘post/colonial modernity’ structure. Discussing its importance, the editors write that “as a broad intellectual and historical horizon for analysis, this concept suggests both the impact of diverse colonial encounters on the modern history of the region and the forging of complex postcolonial positionalities against continued manifestations of local and global hegemony” (Ball and Mattar 8). This emphasis allows for a more intersectional understanding of postcolonialism that involves introducing, not just colonialism, but “imperialism, statecraft, religion, ethnicity, minority, gender, sexuality, terror, war, revolution and migration within and across the Levant, the Gulf, North Africa, Iran, Turkey, and beyond” (Ball and Mattar 8).

One of the first critiques of seeing Palestine through the lens of postcolonialism is the idea that the “post” in postcolonialism indicates an end to an era of colonialism. In the
case of Palestine, while the British mandate did end, it was replaced with a more complicated and ugly occupation that is still ongoing. Despite all of these issues, I have found it worthwhile to incorporate the field of postcolonialism, but only by expanding its definition and scope, as the lens to critique and understand Palestinian autobiographies. The reason is that many elements that theorists beyond Europe and the United States have used in their analysis of literature coming from the Global South, are mirrored in the literature and writing of the Middle East, but especially Palestine. In the introduction to “Where is Palestine?”, Patrick Williams and Anna Ball write, “While Palestine’s contemporary colonization clearly invites us to situate it within anti-colonial strands of the discourse, it is also possible to explore various facets of the Palestinian narrative through a range of “post-colonial” critical lenses” (Williams and Ball 130). One of these elements they mention is the notion of writing back. Writing back in a way to respond to the occupation, and in order to document and represent lived experiences, is at the core of Palestinian writing in general, but especially Palestinian autobiography. The mention of occupation, the mixing of the political and personal, the usage of Arabic language and translation in English for Barghouti’s writing for example, and English in the writings of most Arab American women and in my own writing, and the critique of the new systems that arose out of the ashes of the old colonial system (the Palestinian Authority in the case of Palestine since the occupation is still ongoing) are all central to the autobiographies analyzed in my chapters.

While there are many definitions and understandings of postcolonialism, I refer in my dissertation to Leela Gandhi’s definition in her book, Postcolonial Theory: A Critical Introduction (1998), where she writes: “postcolonialism can be seen as a theoretical
resistance to the mystifying amnesia of the colonial aftermath. It is a disciplinary project devoted to the academic task of revisiting, remembering and, crucially, interrogating the colonial past” (Gandhi 4). This act of remembering and interrogating is what Palestinian authors do in their autobiographies. Gandhi’s definition is then an updated one that allows more nuance and engagement with the past. Ania Loomba’s definition in her book Colonialism/Postcolonialism (2015) fits our discussion about Palestine even more. She writes in the third edition of her book: “It has been suggested that it is more helpful to think of postcolonialism not just as coming literally after colonialism and signifying its demise, but more flexibly as the contestation of colonial domination and the legacies of colonialism” (Loomba 32). Such definition allows for countries like Palestine who are still under settler colonialism to be considered under the field, removing the concentration on the “post” in postcolonialism. In fact, Loomba further explains her choice. “Such a position,” she states, “allows us to incorporate history of anti-colonial resistance with contemporary resistances to imperialism and to dominant Western culture.” (Loomba 33)

The Israeli occupation, to many historians, theorists, as well as ordinary people, reflects a perpetuation of colonialism and imperialism. Such imperial colonial practices are at the core of my chosen autobiographies, and Palestinian writing is one way of opposing these practices and showing our stances.

My dissertation complicates the understanding of memory, especially when it comes to the Palestinian cause, as Palestinians write collectively about erasure and the effects of occupation, and have vowed never to forget. This aspect of collective writing against an issue is similar to the writings of many ethnic American autobiographies and BIPOC writers where they document a collective, communal struggle, and write in
opposition of a societal, systematic issue. In her analysis of ethnic American autobiography, Betty Bergland argues that ethnic American autobiographies work in “exposing the contradictory ideologies of American identity politics” (Bergland 87). She showcases how “Slave narratives expose the institution's brutality in the land of the free, while narratives of the 'freedmen' and women expose the endemic nature of racism. Native American autobiographies expose pernicious racism directed at indigenous populations at the same time as they illuminate ancient traditions. Chicano narratives challenge the sovereignty of anglo domination in the south-west, while Japanese American narratives expose the more recent racism of World War II internment camps” (Bergland 87). I argue that Palestinian autobiography, through its collective, communal style challenges the perpetual displacement and erasure, and the fabricated lie that Palestine was a land without a people.

This “Collective” memory could be understood through the term “postmemory,” which I write about in chapter 3. Coined by Marianne Hirsch, the concept of “postmemory” is when children of parents who have suffered loss and catastrophes retain their family’s memory. Hirsch uses the Holocaust as an example of such a traumatic moment, and I argue that for Palestinians the Nakba of 1948 is an analogous catastrophic moment. Watson and Smith utilize this notion of “Collective Memory,” by writing that: “Memory is a means of ‘passing on,’ of sharing a social past that may have been obscured, in order to activate its potential for reshaping a future of and for other subjects. Thus, acts of personal remembering are fundamentally social and collective” (Watson and Smith 20-21). My research is grounded on this idea of a collective memory, where Palestinian
autobiographers analyze special years and moments pertaining to the Palestinian past and memory, whether or not they lived through these years themselves.

In order to differentiate between the self that is writing, and the character that is being written about, I decided to use the author’s last name when referring to the writerly self (Makdisi, Said, Barghouti, for example), and their first name when referring to the self they are writing about or their previous self, meaning the character embodied in the text (Jean, Najla, Mourid, for instance). Chapter 2, for example, which examines Edward and Najla Said, shows the most difference in the representation of the self and Palestine in this dissertation. I explain some of the reasons in the chapter, but it is clear that Said the father has more space and maturity to dissect his life, while Said the daughter is still unable to show a difference between her two selves in her autobiography. Continuing with this idea of differentiating the writerly self from the self written about, I have also opted to use the third person when discussing my own work. I use my last name “Shikaki” when analyzing my writing. This creates the space that I found necessary to write with as much objectivity as a person who is writing about themselves can have.

My dissertation is divided into four chapters, where every chapter highlights a few elements of Palestinian autobiography written away from the homeland. My aim in placing two autobiographies in every chapter is to read similar works in conversation. Just as Palestinian autobiographers write communally, I read their works together and not in isolation. Where the autobiographies diverge, my own poetry connects. The method I follow in my analysis revolves around a main theme in every chapter. After studying the two autobiographical works together, I separate my analysis into the individual
autobiographical text, only to return to read them together in my conclusion. When analyzing my own poems, I reinforce the themes and the relationships between the texts.

I have paid a lot of attention to the organization of the chapters as well as to the order of my chosen poems. Every chapter has within it a bond, a relationship of some sort, not only between the autobiographies and my autobiographical poetry, but between the books themselves, as well as the authors. An example of a bond between autobiographies occurs in chapters 1 and 4 where the female writers use their relationships with other women and shed light on others throughout writing about themselves, whether this happens in prose or poetry. A more intimate bond, perhaps, happens between the writers themselves, as chapter 2 and 3 study familial relationships where we hear from both parents and offspring. In every chapter of my four chapters, I do three things. First, I examine two or more autobiographic writings by two different writers (with the exception of chapter 3 where I discuss two autobiographies by the same author). Second, I analyze three to four of my own poems written while in the United States, and thirdly, I show resonance and dialogue among all the works. Every chapter, therefore, looks at a few elements of Palestinian autobiography, centering the notion of intergenerational homesickness and representation of different Palestines, as well as personal, collective, and political writing. The uniqueness of my study, therefore, is a result of the intergenerational, communal, dialogic, and feminist approach I take. This idea of writing about more than the “auto,” the individual, complicates and expands our understanding of autobiography.

I have chosen my primary texts for their importance in documenting the Palestinian story and based on a personal and emotional preference. The first autobiography I thought of writing about was Mourid Barghouti’s *I Saw Ramallah* as I had read it for the first time
before leaving Palestine to California to start my graduate studies. When I reread Barghouti’s first autobiography again while in NYC, I decided to reexamine his second book *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here*, and saw the connections between them. I could not shake off my emotional connection to the books, as they were able to mirror my homesickness, as well as the clear familial relationships, especially because Barghouti’s son, Tamim, also wrote and was known to the public. I immediately looked for other duos with a parent-child connection, and Edward and Najla Said came to the picture. I really wanted a Palestinian feminist approach and so the first chapter about Amiry and Makdisi was my answer. Once again, the choice was based on either an emotional connection I had with a narrative, or a clear portrayal of familial relationships. As I was dissecting my own poetry, I wanted to find other poets who, like me, wrote about Palestine while living in the United States. I chose Nye and Handal because of the similar notions we all write about, such as homesickness, identity, and language. While writing the chapter, I realized how it operates as a conclusion and found it fit to replace a traditional, separate concluding chapter. While I am certain that I could have added other great works of art like the walks Raja Shehadeh writes about in his books, and the poetry of Suheir Hammad, I find that my primary texts are good introductory examples of what a reader will find in other Palestinian and Palestinian American narratives. My reasoning for not including some texts is either because I did not find an emotional connection with them, or because the text or its author had received a lot of recognition and attention, or both. Another reason is that I wanted to research modern autobiographies where the lives of the author resonated with the modern readers. Here I am thinking of Fadwa Tuqan’s *A mountainous Journey* published in 1990. Tuqan goes back to her childhood and writes about the segregation between the sexes and
her inability to continue her primary education. This injustice does not occur in the majority of Palestinian homes nowadays as the rate of illiteracy is extremely low and the number of female students (whether at schools or colleges) is high. Truly, this dissertation is the result of my homesickness and a desire to feel seen in books that were accessible and not only through political texts and skewed news clips.

Across this dissertation, I do not concentrate on the language the texts are written in, as in I do not specifically choose or discard autobiographical prose that are written in either English or Arabic. If the text was written originally in Arabic like Mourid Barghouti’s autobiographies, I read them in both languages, but did not really find any necessity in referencing the Arabic version since I found the English translations to be extremely well-written and able to convey the emotional toll of the books. Every other text was written in English. For the autobiographical poetry, however, I analyze English-language poems in order to pay attention to the issue of language, as well as to compare my poems, which are all written in English, with poems also written in English, away from Palestine. I want to show that works written in English by bilingual poets have a certain common thread to them.

depicts the situation when Ramallah was occupied by the Israelis for a few weeks in the 2000s and describes her interesting relationship with her mother-in-law who stayed with them, as the then prime minister of Israel, Ariel Sharon ordered the invasion of certain areas of Palestine. Family is central when it comes to Arab female autobiographical writing, as women find solace in other female members, and family relationships and reputations are highly important in Arab and Palestinian households, where the “we” is more important than the “I”. This is why in most female autobiographies, the personal “I” is always accompanied by stories of other females, whether grandmothers and mothers in the case of Makdisi, or mothers-in-law in the case of Amiry. I show how different women utilize different styles of writing in order to write about their lives, and how minor female characters are central to Arab autobiography, but especially to the writing of Arab women who share the experience of other female members of their family in their own autobiographies.

The last section reviews my own poetic expressions of my female identity living away from Palestine, as well as moments of familial relationships used in my poetry. “Two Women Fight” demonstrates how the speaker is divided into two women who come together when I write, which seamlessly works its way into this chapter which concentrates on women, family, and the act of writing. Additionally, in “As He Pointed His Gun Towards Me,” I portray the political situation and family closeness. In “June First” I explain my relationship with my parents, especially my mother, who plays a huge role in my life, as mothers do in most Arab households. I show how the subject of family appears in my selected poems, and how writing about Palestine and family while away from both, intensifies feelings of homesickness.
Chapter Two, “The Saids: Different Self-Representations Away From Palestine,” analyzes the representation of Palestine and living away from home in Palestinian American autobiography, with a special attention on familial relationships. I look at Edward Said’s autobiography Out of Place (1999) where he writes, in English, that he felt the need to document his life journey after hearing he had a terminal illness. I study his book side by side with his daughter’s book, also written in English, entitled Looking for Palestine: Growing up Confused in an Arab American Family (2014), where Najla Said portrays living in New York City, visiting Lebanon where her mother is from, and the famous trip her father took back to Palestine in 1992, when she and her brother visited for the first time. The chapter shows how these two related authors document their respective relationships with Palestine as they grew up away from it, showing a more serious, reflective interpretation of self in the father’s autobiography. While Edward Said’s book ends with him feeling somewhat comfortable being out of place, Najla Said writes about finding her voice in theater with an Arab group after September 11, 2001. One reason for this difference in perception is that Edward Said’s journey was ending as he wrote his book. He also had many contributions to cultural criticism and understanding of Palestine and the Middle East, while his daughter’s journey seems to be only beginning with theater and her own understanding of herself and Palestine.

The last section showcases my own understanding of Palestine and myself while living away from home. I clearly state that although I am not writing as an exiled person, feeling homesick is alienating and at times feels not like a temporary state. I delve into my published poems “My Palestine Stands Still,” “Watani: My Homeland,” and “I Stop Writing.” These poems state how uncomfortable it is to live abroad, yet they are also
nuanced and show that although one is distanced from their homeland, one still has hope and still writes and expresses, just like Edward and Najla Said do; they write as they long; they write as they survive away from home.

Chapter Three, “Lost Homelands: An Exilic journey from Abstract to Real” shows how Palestinian authors reflect in their autobiographical writing the idea of return, and what happens when a father takes his son to meet his homeland. The notion of introducing a homeland to someone else, whether it is a friend or a son, presents a “creation” of a new homeland, especially when that person is then allowed or able to visit the homeland he had not seen in years. I argue that such returns, although joyous and celebratory, are not just a reminder of what has been lost because of exile and displacement but are also a distortion of the image of Palestine, in which nostalgia and expectations play with the emotions of the narrator. My primary texts are the autobiographical works of the Palestinian author Mourid Barghouti *I Saw Ramallah* (1997) and *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here* (2009), as well as Mourid Barghouti’s son Tamim Al-Barghouti’s autobiographical poem “In Jerusalem.” Barghouti returns to Palestine after thirty years of exile in his first book and brings his son for the first time in his second book. Although the voice of Tamim is not heard explicitly in *I Was Born*, it is narrated through the father. It is as if the second book is showing Palestine both from the eyes of the father and the son.

I conclude the chapter with my own writings on return. I end with my poem “Meeting” which was written about encountering an Israeli soldier once I returned to Palestine from California where I was doing my M.F.A in Creative Writing/poetry. I also use “As they Discuss Politics” and “Will you Stay?” since they also share the topic of
Chapter Four, “I Write Poetry, too: Poetry and Palestinian Women,” also ends with my own poetry, especially about homesickness and how I explore my identity outside of my homeland. This analysis is preceded with a discussion of autobiographical or semi-autobiographical poetry by two Palestinian American poets, Natalie Handal (b. 1969) and Naomi Shihab Nye (b. 1952). I am interested in this chapter in showing how these Palestinian American poets write about their homelands, living away from home, and their family ties to the land, especially in a very condensed format such as poetry. I also explain the differences in reading autobiography in prose and in poetry. This is a chapter about poetry, but it is also about Palestinian American women who use English to convey issues pertaining to homesickness, family, and language. I study three Naomi Shihab Nye poems which showcase her grandmother and father, concluding with her poem “Arabic” where she sheds light on issues regarding language and the inability to feel (or be made to feel) whole without connecting to one’s own mother language. Nye’s evocation of her family members is reminiscent of other female Arab autobiographers portrayed in this dissertation who use family members and communal themes in their writing. In “The Words under the Words” Nye draws an image of her strong grandmother who misses her son in the United States and awaits his letters. In “My Father and the Fig Tree” Nye depicts her father’s life away from Palestine and his attachment to a tree that represents his homeland and nostalgia. Nye’s style is diverse, unified, and her attention is to details and images. While her words are usually simple, they are always rich in meaning. Nathalie Handal’s poetry, on the other hand, has a more complicated, multi-layered, and nuanced style as the poet herself lived in
many areas and speaks multiple languages. “Bethlehem” depicts her city of origin, recalling her grandfather. Her poem “Blue Hours” illustrates a persona’s difficulty in belonging, switching from one language to the next, feeling a betrayal in both. “The Songmaker-19 Arabics” demonstrates Handal’s poetic ability, especially when it comes to bilingual representation.

My own poems in this chapter are “I Miss Home the Most,” and my newest poem (published in December 2019) “House, not Home.” These two poems depict homesickness, and show how closely I feel attachment to my home, and also family, unable to live happily abroad. My poem “A Language that is Mine” explores being away from home and slowly feeling alienated from a language I grew up speaking. Although the focus remains on family ties and homesickness, I pay attention in this chapter on language, and how being bilingual adds another level of exile and pain to those who have fled or were forced to leave Palestine. Here, I write about my published poem “Bilingual.” This idea of missing home as one is forced to learn new languages and slowly lose her Arabic is an idea that enriches our understanding of exiled writers and their homeland. This is a reason that I have chosen works by Palestinian American poets. This chapter functions as my conclusion, as it brings together notions that have been discussed in every other chapter.
A Note on the Personal and Academic

There is something in me that resists academic writing with its research, quotes, and citations. There is something in me that dislikes the fact that a quote must validate a person’s research, yet of course having spent many years in academia, studying and then becoming an instructor at universities in Palestine and in the United States, I am aware of the importance and need for peer reviews and accountability. This dissertation will follow PhD guidelines and honor basic research tenets; and it is aimed to be academic, yet what is different about my dissertation is the fact that I use my own published poetry in conjunction with Palestinian autobiographical works. This, I believe, adds to my dissertation, and does not make it less academic, or less serious. I am aware that writing about one’s self, especially as a new researcher, is a bit unconventional, but my primary sources in these chapters are mostly autobiographic, one of the few genres in literature that allows for the creative and the real to mix, and because I am analyzing personal writing, I felt compelled to share my own.

This fascination with autobiography began a long time ago, as I have always been interested in finding the “personal” in any kind of writing. I usually pay attention to the forward and acknowledgement pages in any academic and nonacademic work. In addition, the genre of nonfiction excites me, especially that of autobiography, as I feel that I learn a lot more about historical events when they are told in a personal manner through the eyes of someone who has experienced them. History, to me, is more important when told, not as events, but as a story, a real story that has ramifications, people as its characters, and is not told in a passive tone. When I began writing poetry, I felt the need to share my own personal narrative. I enjoyed playing with personas and creating very different points of
views and going inside their psyche, but what I always felt at ease doing and what was rewardingly therapeutic was writing about Palestine, my homesickness, and living in between spaces. For a Palestinian whose land, people, culture, and identity are continuously erased by the Israeli occupation, reading works of Palestinian nonfiction where the personal pronoun “I” is loud and clear, feels very empowering. Having lived in the United States for over six years during my master’s and PhD years combined, I missed home very much, and not seeing my experience as a Palestinian resonate in other literary works made my homesickness feel worse. And so I wrote! I wrote for myself first, and slowly brought personal work disguised in poetry to my workshop classes. Later on, thankfully, I found many spaces to publicly share my work with over twenty poems published thus far.

It is both humbling and extremely difficult to compare your own writing to that of Palestinian icons like Naomi Shihab Nye, Mourid Barghouti, Edward Said, and Souad Amiry, yet it felt important and urgent for me to do this comparison. The reason for using my own poems is to show the multiple, nuanced ways of looking at Palestinian writing. It also shows that a female student’s experience in California can resonate with that of a renowned poet and writer from Palestine who spent most of his life abroad. I want to show that there are different ways of engaging with autobiography. Analysis, which will be used heavily in the coming chapters, is one of these methods. The other method I want to add, however, is that of resonant experiences (mine) written in a different format (poetry), analyzed in the third person, by me. I am forever grateful to St. John’s University, especially my English department for guiding me and helping me write such a personal thesis. My advisor Dr. Dohra Ahmad always heard my ideas, regardless of how crazy they
first appeared. Dr Chetty and Professor Bacote read quickly through my chapters but gave me many thoughtful and thorough comments and advice. I was once asked in Dr. Ganter’s prospectus class why I was writing my thesis on Palestinian autobiography and why I was adding my own poetry. I simply found no other answer than: because it is either this or be overwhelmed in homesickness! And while my homesickness ebbed and flowed, I truly never found peace writing about anything that did not involve Palestine. In almost every literature class, both at Chapman University and St. John’s University, I used writing that compared Palestinian literature and art with the topic of the class, whether that was Postcolonial Literature, Irish Literature, African American Resistance Literature, American Literature since the 19th century…etc. It is both an honor and a responsibility to write in a comparative mode yet again in my PhD dissertation, but use my own writing as the secondary subject. It is my hope that in reading my work side by side with other more canonical works, one is able to fully grasp the difficulty of representing and presenting Palestine, and learn how the field of Palestinian literature, inside and outside of Palestine is as diverse as its citizens, and their experiences.

Now, over eight years since I have written my poems, I find myself understanding them and using them differently. My own published work is now allowing me to deepen my understanding of other Palestinian literary works. Through writing this dissertation, I find myself understanding my own writing and thinking of myself as a contributor, rather than receiver of knowledge and personal narratives. I believe the point of pursuing a higher education is not only to understand the subject matter, but to become the subject yourself and to be able to better understand yourself. Spending hours analyzing my poems and
seeing them as equal to works of a much bigger audience and reception might be one of the most important lessons I have learned on this journey.
Chapter One: Personal and Collective: Palestinian Women’s Autobiography

Introduction

Both Sharon and my Mother-in-Law: Ramallah Diaries (2003) written by Suad Amiry, and Teta, Mother, and Me: Three Generations of Arab Women (2005) written by Jean Said Makdisi exemplify what my dissertation aims to show. They both discuss intimate narratives that merge out of the personal to the collective; they do not only show the life of one person, but many; they are both birthed through one or more political events; they focus on the Nakba of 1948; and both demonstrate how difficult, yet necessary it is for women to write. This chapter will show how Palestinian female authors represent themselves through their political circumstances and document their life through documenting the lives of others. It will also contrast the two approaches the two authors take in order to illustrate the diversity of Palestinian autobiography. The chapter will end with my own published poetry that will show similar notions found in the two autobiographies. I will be, hence, studying what Arab women contribute in their writing as we understand their own lives, connect with other family members, and document in order to share with the world. Therefore, this chapter aims to explain how Palestinian women autobiographers use political and collective events in order to share their personal intimate lives.

Quick Theoretical Background

As mentioned in the introduction of this dissertation, the art of writing an autobiography is simple yet complicated. It is based on what the French philosopher Philippe Lejeune calls “a pact” between the writer and the author. Readers believe the
authors and they trust that they are documenting their real authentic stories, yet of course writing is an act that is performed, and through different elements it comes to life. Even Lejeune’s first writings about autobiography changed over time. In her article “The Autobiographical Pact, Forty-Five Years Later,” Carole Allamand discusses Lejeune’s progress, writing “Lejeune was thus led to rehabilitate his pact, which he does in ‘The Autobiographical Pact, Twenty-Five Years Later,’ arguing that a ‘pact’ is precisely not a contract, but a performative act befitting the pragmatic nature of the autobiographical transaction” (Allamand 54). Thus, reading and writing autobiography become malleable and open to interpretation, a pact, and less of a fixed contract. Voice, tone, location, and memory are some of the elements that need to be paid attention to as one analyzes autobiographies and memoirs. These elements and many literary characteristics could detach the writers from their work or life, creating a space for imagination or interpretation.

In Fadia Faqir’s book In the House of Silence (1998), she writes: “The intricate process of textual self-representation combines self-discovery, self-creation and self-perception and then representation within the constraints of the medium of language. This process turns the texts under discussion into narratives with a certain degree of fiction which varies according to the writing, writer’s motives and the occasion” (Faqir 2). And so, discussing elements of literature, for example tone or use of comedy (as I will do in this chapter) becomes important.

In their landmark work on understanding personal writings, Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives (2010), the authors Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith discuss the “performative act” of writing an autobiography. They cite memory and identity as well as other elements as “sources and dynamic processes of
autobiographical subjectivity” (Watson and Smith 21), concluding that “We are always fragmented in time, taking a particular or provisional perspective on the moving target of our pasts, addressing multiple and disparate audiences. Perhaps, then, it is more helpful to approach autobiographical telling as a performative act” (Watson and Smith 61). This means that one needs to look closely at autobiographies, understand where the authors are coming from, when they are writing, and to whom, as writing becomes a performance and an action deliberately taken, not merely a stream of consciousness. Amiry and Makdisi always situate the reader, using specific political events to anchor their narrative, making the process of interpreting their work easier and more realistic. But the importance of looking at the special case of Arab women writing, however, comes from the voice autobiography gives these women, especially Palestinian women. Nawar Al-Hassan Golley’s book *Arab Women's Lives Retold: Exploring Identity Through Writing* (2007) discusses the importance of such women’s writings, stating that “Arab women's autobiographical writings serve as more than a means by which to create images of the self through the writing act, but rather they have served as a way to find a voice—whether private or public—through which to express what cannot be expressed in any other form” (Golley IV). And thus, maybe for the Palestinian women’s autobiographies, the act is more “truthful,” reflecting real life, and should be taken more seriously, as there is a lot at stake, as these women write against the backdrop of multiple societal and especially political constraints, that at times situates them as secondary characters. Writing their own autobiographies, therefore, makes these women more in control of their surroundings and more active in their communities.
Since these autobiographies are written by women and are about women, the choice to see them through the lens of feminism is not surprising, since as has been argued in the introduction, autobiography written by women, especially in the Arab world, differs from male autobiographical writing. The feminist theory through which I will discuss these works, however, is not a typical traditional white feminist lens. This feminist theory does not look at brown women as monolithic, or a collective “Third World Woman” (Mohanty 337). My understanding of feminist theory comes from Arab feminists who are well-read and able to understand both the residue of white feminism, and the specific case of women in the Arab world. Therefore, most of my secondary sources come from Arab women or women of color. In *Reading Arab Women's Autobiographies: Shahrazad Tells Her Story* (2003), Golley writes that “For Feminism to be universally useful, it has to take into account cultural differences and cross-racial, regional, social, and economic boundaries (Golley xiii). This, of course, is what white feminism, especially in its beginnings, was lacking. It still considered itself a “white savior” for women living in different non-Western countries. While discussing women’s writings, especially autobiographical writings where women delve into their private lives, Golley argues that:

Writing about the “private” used to be considered one of the weak aspects of women’s writings. But now, and in feminist terms, representing the domestic can be a political act in itself; for the goal is to change the situation imposed upon women. In its critique of the family and of the division of social life into “private” and “public,” feminism also puts the private in the public sphere. (Golley IV)

The autobiographies I discuss in this chapter will show the value of this notion of writing the private and making it public. It will also show how both Amiry and Makdisi criticize the Israeli occupation and shed light on societal issues. Their writing continues to be relevant as it helps the authors’ own understanding of their lives and the world around


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them, which consequently helps readers of any gender as they deal with similar notions the authors deal with in their autobiographies.

**Summary of the Works**

The authors of both *Sharon and my Mother-in Law* and *Teta, Mother, and Me* use autobiographical writing in order to share a private, yet collective experience; both women write during an Israeli invasion (in Palestine and Lebanon respectively), making their works political as they center the occupation; and both women discuss more lives than their own. Each woman, as the titles of their books show, examines a women-women familial relationship. Both books are similar in that they shed light on others and discuss politics, yet due to their distinct focuses, they differ in both style and tone. *Sharon and My Mother-in-Law* for example, portrays the author’s life under Israeli military occupation before the Oslo Accord of 1993. This was before the arrival and establishment of the Palestinian Liberation Organization in Palestine, at a time when all aspects of Palestinian lives were administered through Israeli governors, with a later focus on the time of the Israeli invasion of areas of the West Bank in 2001-2002, especially those of Ramallah and Nablus. Amiry uses humor—delving into her neighbor’s gossip, discussing annoyances with her mother-in-law during curfew—to show life under military occupation, demonstrating how difficult her life was without official papers. Despite using humor when possible, Amiry ends her book on a bleak note, demonstrating how the occupation only gets worse and is still continuous and brutal.

Makdisi’s book *Teta, Mother, and Me*, on the other hand, spans three colonial rules, and examines the author’s life, but also the lives of her mother, grandmother, and other minor characters. Unlike Amiry’s comedic approach, Makdisi uses thorough research,
academic resources, multiple family writings, and even pictures and articles in her analysis of her relatives’ lives. Her work can be read as a love letter to her mother and grandmother, while at the same time it is full of political discussions, especially presenting the disastrous effects of the loss of Palestine in 1948 on the author’s parents and grandparents. Makdisi’s book concerns itself with Arab women in society and in their households, where the author confesses to having read her Teta’s life differently: she had seen her through a different lens that she was only able to correct after writing her autobiography, showing the importance of documenting one’s life through writing, especially for an Arab woman.

*Sharon and my Mother-in-Law: Humor in Occupation*

*Sharon and My-Mother-in-Law*, despite its title, does not really fully concern itself with the Israeli Prime minister Ariel Sharon, who brought havoc to the lives of the Palestinians during their stay in Lebanon with the horrific massacre of Sabra and Shatila (1982), and to the Palestinians of the West Bank and Gaza with his cruel invasions and collective punishments, during his reign (2001-2006). Amiry simply uses the title as eye catching, eventually ending her book with mentioning Sharon’s name and his sinister ambitions, therefore even in her title putting the personal against the public. In fact, the first part of her book narrates her adventures before the year 2000. It discusses her life in Jordan, her education, her marriage, and her interests. In part two, she finally narrates living under the Ramallah invasion and siege of 2001-2002.
Amiry\(^1\) begins her narrative with an introduction that immediately sheds light on political matters. She writes in her preface, connecting her life as a married woman to that of her parents: “I don’t think I ever understood or, for that matter, forgave my parents, or the hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who fled their homes in 1948, until my husband and I had to flee our home in Ramallah on 18 November 2001” (Amiry I). Here, Amiry is creating a connection and an understanding between the older generation and herself. Through the communal process of leaving, she was finally able to understand those who fled during the Nakba. This understanding came through an introspection that was brought through writing. Amiry then proceeds to state the reasons for her writing. This is something that is embodied in Jean Makdisi’s writing as well. It is as if these women autobiographers need to justify taking the time and space to document their journeys. Faqir mentions a need to discuss political events, which both Amiry and Makdisi do, as an explanation for writing. She states, about Arab women writers’ use of politics: “Their self-representation had to be justified by referring to political events, or by associating themselves with male members of the family who had played an important role in the public sphere” (Faqir conclusion 12). Amiry shows how her book was birthed out of that experience of the Israeli invasion of 2001, a bursting of a bubble that was the safety of the cosmopolitan city of Ramallah. “Late in the evening,” she writes, “I would often sit down and send e-mails to friends and relatives who were anxious to know what life was like for me during those terrible times. Writing was an attempt to release the tension caused and compounded by Ariel Sharon and my mother-in-law” (Amiry ii). The friends Amiry wrote to were mostly women, and she finds

\(^1\) I try to differentiate between Amiry the writer and Suad the representation character embodied in the text. While they mostly intertwine, it is important to connote the difference between them. Amiry is the writer, Suad is the character being written about.
a place in her preface to thank them and show appreciation for allowing her, not only to
write but encouraging her to publish her words, as well, creating a connection between the
author and her female friends. Slowly, however, Amiry starts to present her story through
narrating other people’s stories as well. It is as if narrating their pains makes hers allowed,
believed, or even accepted. Throughout her narrative, she presents herself differently. Each
self-representation fits a scene that she narrates.

The first representation Amiry shows in documenting her life in Sharon and My
Mother-in-Law is her tenacity and fearless character. On more than one occasion, she
shows how she bravely stood up to Israeli officers, even barging into the office of the Israeli
governor of Ramallah demanding she gets her Identification Card after a humiliating scene
where the Israelis promised IDs but did not follow through. Amiry begins her narrative in
Sharon and My Mother-in-Law with explaining her life, and she chooses the Israeli airport
of Tel Aviv to do so, illustrating how difficult coming to Palestine is. She begins in the
summer of 1995, two years after the signing of the Oslo Accord. As a Palestinian born
outside of Palestine, and like many Palestinians after the Nakba of 1948, she has a nuanced
life story of where she is from, and where her family resides. In her chapter “I Was Not in
the Mood,” Amiry begins sharing the Israeli officer’s questions regarding her life, and
especially regarding her birthplace, Syria. She simply tells the Israeli officer that she has
never lived in Syria. To us readers, she explains how her Palestinian father met her Syrian
mother and got married and moved to Jordan, and during summer breaks, the mother would
send her children to Syria. She paints a quiet picture of Arab lands with easy access, she

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2 This is similar to how Mourid Barghouti begins his own narrative of I Saw Ramallah, which I discuss in
chapter 3.
shows her envy of the older generation who were able to travel freely between Arab countries, as she shares more stories of her childhood, opening up the conversation about her personal life with her readers.

In the scene above, Amiry constructs the character of an angry woman demanding justice. She even tells the officers at the airport that the reason she was traveling to London was “dancing,” starting a series of humorous remarks and actions that will ebb and flow in the text. In a tense scene, where Suad shows bravery, yet confesses to being secretly anxious, she barges out of the airport’s interrogation room in order to tell the driver waiting for her in the early morning, that she is being detained. Amiry writes: “My heart was pumping as I walked towards the exit; by then, two security men were walking very close to me, one on each side. One of them kept repeating, ‘Don’t make us do things we don’t like doing.’ And here Amiry shows her wit and control by replying: ‘Yes, arresting me in front of these tourists will create a scene which is not favorable for tourism in Israel!’ I screamed back. ‘Why can’t I be treated just like any of these tourists?’” (Amiry 11). There are many other moments where Suad either asks out loud or introspectively wonders about her status as a Palestinian living in the West Bank (without official papers for the majority of the time), once again showing the discriminatory unjust haphazard state of the occupation of Palestine. Postcolonial theory and literature study this notion of otherness that Amiry feels, especially under Israeli government rule (before the Oslo Accord of 1993), where scholars discuss the relationship between the conquering power, present or its remnants, and the indigenous speaker. The fact that Amiry writes about her struggles with her occupier is an element of both postcolonialism and feminist theories.
Amiry presents another generational connection than the one she mentions in her preface, through a failed trip to her ancestral house in Jaffa. Through telling this story, she continues to show her courageous personality at that time, narrating that she decided to move alone as a single woman from Jordan to Palestine to work at Birzeit University in 1981. She took a trip to Jaffa, with her husband to be, and before entering the neighborhood where her house (now confiscated) was: “All of a sudden I realized that my familiarity with Palestine came only through my parents’ recollections and my scattered childhood memories” (Amiry 18), and backs away and begins to cry because she had always believed that she would visit that house with her father, who had passed a few years back. Suad confesses that she would not be able to recognize the house on her own anyway. This is an example of Marianne Hirsch’s concept of “Postmemory,” where children remember certain events and places through the memory of the older generation who lived through trauma. In this scene, however, she was not able to face whatever memory she had retained. Amiry shows a realistic yet sensible person who feels both guilt at not knowing her country, but also understanding and compassion towards herself. She decided to return to her homeland after all and establish herself, although everything stood in her way. Not being able to venture out and try to figure out which house had once belonged to her parents and was then confiscated by Israelis, is just one example of her journey.

Another example of the cruelty of the occupation that shows Suad’s character as persistent and full of perseverance is when she got married but was not allowed to stay in Ramallah where her husband had been living and where she had been staying illegally after the expiration of her permit. Having had their wedding in Jordan where her mother and

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3 Chapter 3 of this dissertation discusses the topic in more detail.
relatives live, and upon returning through the Allenby bridge\(^4\), she was denied entry. Yet again, she argues with the Israelis and tells her lawyer as she was sent back to Jordan: “If the bastards don’t give me a residency so I can live with my husband, I will stay ‘illegally’ for the rest of my life.” Here again Amiry is showing both the cruel, unjust ways of the occupation, but also her stubbornness and readiness to fight back. She does become and remain “illegal” for over seven years, telling her audience: “You don’t quite get it? Neither did we. Every time I spotted an Israeli soldier from a distance, I jumped out of the car, turned my back and walked in the opposite direction. If I had been caught with no papers I would be automatically deported out of the country” (Amiry 35). This is the realistic sensible side of Suad who knows that confronting the soldiers would only do her harm.

As Amiry is presenting her character, she is also presenting and illustrating the character of the occupying forces, and when she eventually receives her papers, she does so by force. In one incident, her husband was away traveling, she was out of a job, and still waiting illegally in Palestine for her permit. In that moment, she shows another side of her, one that is both brave, yet also almost hopeless: “I could now easily understand how people completely lose it,” Amiry writes before her character commits a very audacious act. The retrospective narrator explains: “I could feel the anger mounting slowly inside me. The seven years of hiding away from the Israelis turned into a strong urge to face them, to look them in the eye and make them realize how criminal their behavior had been towards me and all other Palestinians” (Amiry 41). That Suad does! Suad barges into the Civil Administration caption Yosi’s office during the Palestinian Intifada, at night, unannounced, and demands to get her ID. In “‘Baleful Postcoloniality’ and Palestinian

\(^4\) See chapter 3 for the significance of such a bridge.
Women’s Life Writing,” Bart Moore-Gilbert analyzes Amiry’s discussion of herself as a woman who takes advantage or manipulates the occupation’s patriarchy, by stating that: “Amiry’s text…adumbrates ‘alternative strategies,’ which specifically aim to exploit the blind spots of Israeli colonial patriarchy. She successfully threatens one military official, for example, with a full hysterical fit unless he accelerates the granting of a permit she requires: ‘Yossi stood still; like all men, he didn’t know what to do with a crying woman’ (Moore Gilbert 59). This self-determined and confident act, again, shows bravery, as well as the use of gender stereotypes against themselves. It also shows the degrees Palestinians, especially women, must go through in order to survive the occupation. Amiry, yet again, conveys her wits and clear understanding of the situation, and of the people around her. Reading her words in 2021, however, sounds very absurd as any confrontation today between Palestinians, civilians, or officers and Israelis leads to imprisonment or brutal altercation, if not death. Amiry writes about a time before the first and second Intifadas of 1987 and 2000, a time where there was some communication between the Israelis who controlled the West Bank, and the Palestinians who were not yet represented by a Palestinian Authority. I believe Amiry depicts a continuation and worsening of the Palestinian case due to the occupation. The sham agreement of the Oslo Accords of 1993 and the establishment of the Palestinian government and Palestinian ministries and infrastructure did not allow the Palestinians any self-governance, as they were still very much under occupation. This is clear when Amiry describes a bursting of the bubble of the cosmopolitan city of Ramallah (that I will discuss later) when the Israeli army besieged the city, and especially the compounds of the Palestinian late president Yasser Arafat, destroying any notions of sovereignty.
Amiry tells the stories, gossip, political news, and jokes of the people of her neighborhood. Most of the encounters she discusses are funny and paint an image of a communal people who are close and get into each other’s business, yet some incidents are heavy and show misogyny and ill treatment of women. As discussed above, female Arab autobiographers write their stories in order to document, reflect, and understand. This understanding is not only of women’s life circumstances, their past and present, but also of the lives of the people around them. Amiry, who was writing her PhD dissertation as well as teaching at Birzeit University during that time, draws a picture of her sitting on her veranda focusing on her work, and here an image of a diligent scholar appears, yet she is constantly interrupted by the women of her neighborhood who either want to gossip, or seek her advice. Amiry’s narratives are retrospective and almost free of judgment. Her writing is sort of a tell-it-all, where, as readers, we do not only know about her, but get to know her neighbors and some family members.

One incident that is also political, yet shows a new side of the writer is when Amiry’s neighbor Ramy, a young fifteen-year-old man, confesses, during the Intifada, that he was collaborating with the occupation, a very serious offense in the eyes of the writer, and society at large. She had suspected he had a young man crush on her, and being an older woman, she allowed him to come to her house to help him with his homework. This was the point when he confesses. When she asks him why, his response is both pathetic, but also nuanced and complicated. He tells her: “I kept asking my friends at school if I could join the Popular Front, but they told me no party would ever accept the son of a collaborator. I told them my father was not a collaborator—he is a civil servant. A collaborating civil servant—he’s doubly guilty! they would laugh. They said they would
never let me take part in their political activities” (Amiry 53). This incident shows how the occupation manipulates and separates the Palestinian people, like the colonial powers across the world have done before them. Ramy continues to tell Suad, who at first is dumbfounded, how the Israeli interrogators manipulated him to work with them, telling him that they will lessen his brother’s sentence if he collaborates. He tells her that he has the number of the Israeli captains, whom he has been calling and revealing the neighborhood’s whereabouts and activities. Here, Suad becomes, for a short moment, jealous of the fact that her young neighbor has such connections and can simply call the Israeli governor. She confesses: “That is impressive, I thought to myself. That alone would make me collaborate with anyone. Not having to stand in line in the rain and the hot summer sun... not having to spend hours trying to get all sorts of permits” (Amiry 53). This of course is Suad’s daydream and not meant to be taken literally, but it shows how the occupation affects every aspect of a person’s live, making them feel desperate and almost lose their morals. When Ramy continues to tell her that he, himself, even interrogated his classmates who had refused to allow him to join their struggle, Suad is shocked, as readers are, listening to Ramy state that he hid his face: “I pretended to be an Israeli interrogator and faced them with all the details of their lives which I knew from class. They were in total shock, and two of them collapsed and admitted to their acts against the Israelis” (Amiry 54). This horrific scene shows three things. It shows another side of Suad, an almost desperate, yet realistic and mother-like side, as she was able to understand her neighbor, yet was aware of the dangers of his actions and their ramifications. In addition, it also continues to shed light on the dehumanizing immoral effects of the occupation, and how easily it can break a teenager’s moral compass. It further presents Amiry’s somber tone
when telling serious incidents as it connects her story to the stories of her neighbors and family.

*Sharon and my Mother-in-Law* is filled with incidents that simultaneously continue to shed light on both the nominal and major effects of the occupation, as well as introduce Amiry’s readers to more minor characters. Amiry has many lines that show how absurd the occupation is. She portrays conversations with relatives, with her husband, with her neighbors, all in anticipation of a nuclear war. One conversation happens as they wait in line during curfew to get their masks after the Iraqi president Saddam Hussein threatens to attack Israel with chemical weapons. The neighbors are sipping Arabic coffee, making fun of the soldiers, understanding how “tragicomic” the situation is, as told by one of the neighbors, a conversation that Amiry narrates: “All of a sudden I noticed that Emile was holding a thermos of coffee and small paper cups. ‘What is this?’ I inquired. ‘Well, I decided to take part in this ‘tragicomedy,’ since the stage is in our front garden’” (Amiry 87). This scene sheds light on the Palestinians taking charge of a situation, making fun of the colonial power, and deciding to live and have fun in the moment, in spite of the context. The neighbor sacrifices his coffee in order to have some laughs and talk with his neighbors. They, in return, deliver, and the scene becomes more joyful and in defiance of the occupying forces. Amiry is able to show a moment of solidarity through humor. According to Janet Bing in her article “Is Feminist Humor an Oxymoron?” humor alleviates tough situations. She writes: “Humor can also help those who are relatively less powerful cope with difficult or oppressive situations. This is partly because humor helps establish a feeling of group solidarity” (Bing 24). This notion of a collective unity occurs a few times
in Amiry’s text, where the laughter happens between Suad and members of her family or her neighbors.

A second incident pertaining to Amiri’s dog also shows how absurd living under occupation is. Amiry writes about how her dog gets an Israeli passport and can legally go to areas she cannot simply because the pet received vaccination at an Israeli settlement. She describes encounters with Israeli vets and even a soldier at a checkpoint when she ventures without a permit, telling the soldier who stops her that she is officially the driver of the dog who has a permit, and he lets her pass! I read this incident as Amiry using satire to critique the status quo of the occupation, and perhaps to show how the Israeli occupation attempts to dehumanize Palestinians. In her article “Laughter Against the State,” Nerissa S. Balce defines satire as “always comedy or laughter directed against the state, on behalf of the powerless and the dispossessed” (Balce 52). The purpose for Amiry, then, is to continue showing the cruelty of the occupation, in more ways than one. In her article, Balce even defines postcolonial satire “as a humorous narrative that produces new histories or new ways of interpreting and understanding the colonial past and/or the neocolonial present” (Balce 53). This definition fits into our discussion, because while the Israelis claim to be supporting even animal rights in their “democracy”, there are many documented incidents of Israeli settlers killing Palestinian livestock such as sheep and cows. And yet in Amiry’s narrative, a dog was able to obtain a valuable passport allowing it to roam freely, while thousands of Palestinians cannot. Balce’s definition and Amiry’s purpose of using humor and satire make sense when we compare this dog’s easy access to the multiple denials of entry that have led to deaths, women delivering at checkpoints…etc. How absurd is this occupation?!
Amiry chronicles, in a diary format, her daily life under the Israeli invasion and siege of Ramallah. Through her narrative, and although never explicitly told, the reader concludes that the Israeli soldiers and army are not the same from part one, who allowed some leeway for Suad to show her bravery. It seems the older the occupation gets, the more horrifically rotten it appears. Here, we are told stories of pregnant women killed, hospitals ransacked, and tanks destroying cars and entire infrastructures. In Amiry’s writing, and for the majority of the second part of her narrative, she narrates how she spends time alone in her city under curfew, since her husband was on a business trip, and gets stuck in Jerusalem. Amiry discusses a female bond, between her and her neighbors, between her and her mother-in-law, and even between her and her female dog. Throughout the narrative, Amiry compares the siege of 1991 (during the Gulf War) and through the first Intifada, with her current situation as she is writing, indicating a cyclical notion of the occupation repeating itself yet also becoming more horrific every year. Of the first lifting of the curfew, she writes, especially about the situation of her mother-in-law:

The first time they lifted this curfew, on 2 April, I learned about the respite from the TV after it was over. None of my friends could reach me, as telephone lines had been cut in our neighborhood…The area immediately around Arafat, where my ninety-one-year-old mother-in-law, Um Salim, lived, had no electricity, telephones or water, as I learned from her when I first saw her twelve days later. (Amiry 141)

This passage is one of many that show Palestinian lives under closure. The fact that Suad did not know of the lifting of the curfew shows the cruelty of the occupation that does not care for human rights of movement and ability to buy food and house supplies. Writing casually about her mother-in-law not having basic needs is also unique here. Amiry continues to show the bond between her and her mother-in-law, but also her neighbors, who send their sons to tell her that the closure will be lifted for a few hours, or who call
her asking her to stay at their place since she is home alone, or even those who urge her to write to them about her situation. During the third lifting of the curfew, however, Suad is finally able to reach her mother-in-law, and jumps though fences and crosses people’s backyards in order to get her. Amiry, at that moment, circles back to the preface of the book with the mentioning of the 1948 Nakba. When Saud tells her mother-in-law to only pick a few outfits to take, since they will return later to pick the rest, her mother-in-law responds: “That’s what we said in 1948 when we left our house in Jaffa; it was May then.” And here Amiry shows another side of her personality, a visibly vulnerable side, as she writes: “Oh, God . . . her words left me speechless. I stood still and cried” (Amiry 149). This scene also shows the cyclical notion of the occupation, and how history repeats itself. It makes clear that the older generation does not forget. It also shows how long lasting the effects of the aftermath of the Nakba and its Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder are. The mother-in-law’s purpose, then, becomes clear as it not only showcases Amiry’s relationship with her female relative, but also the existence of the memories of the mother-in-law work as an embodiment and example of the occupation’s long-lasting effects and continuous brutality.

Contrary to the title of the book, Suad does not spend a lot of time putting down her mother-in-law, or even complaining much about her. In a comedic chapter that also shows her being gentle and understanding with her elderly mother-in-law, she narrates a conversation she has with her about marmalade:

“Ah, my God. Oh, mamma mia,” the moaning continued. I got out of bed and walked across the hallway towards her bedroom. She was lying in bed with her back towards me. “What’s wrong, Um Salim, are you OK?” I said tenderly as I patted her on the shoulder. “Oh, God, I’m so tired, I don’t know why. I’m not the same as I used to be.” “It is OK, Mother, none of us is OK or the same anymore,” I replied. “What will happen to the marmalade?” she asked with a worried voice.
“Don’t worry about it. It was meant to keep you busy and entertain you. It was not meant to fatigue you. Just have some rest and you and the marmalade will be OK.” “But I have not had my breakfast yet.” “OK, I’ll prepare it for you and bring it to you in bed.” “But now, I must have my breakfast at eight.” (Amiry 153-154)

Here, Amiry shows the absurdity of worrying about jam in such grim circumstances, yet she is both understanding and caring of the silly worries and repeated orders of older women. This scene portrays how difficult it is to live under siege, but also that Suad adheres to her mother-in-law’s commands, answers her questions, and later shares her complaints with her readers. In one scene, she awaits the arrival of her husband from Jerusalem, writing: “‘Take care,’ I said as my heart sank. I really wanted him to come and take care of his mother, as I had just about had it” (Amiry 166). The plot is filled with humorous and silly incidents, but also tension, Amiry’s (and her mother-in-law’s) worries about stolen and confiscated homes, worries of not having enough food in the fridge; as well as stories of lost souls, broken doors, and young people arrested. And it is out of such absurd situations that Amiry’s humorous account is presented. As the author Nadine Adel Sinno shows in her article, “Family Sagas and Checkpoint Dramas: Tragedy, Humor, and Family Dynamics in Suad Amiry’s Sharon and My Mother-in Law: Ramallah Diaries,” Amiry’s humor is clear, yet not always present. In situations that are tragic, her tone is somber, and so “Amiry disorients her reader with her on-off humor, creating a tug of war between laughter and tears, as she sets up her reader to fluctuate between positive and negative emotions—keeping her alert and preventing her from feeling completely redeemed.” Sinno explains that the reason for such changes is the intensity of certain circumstances, like death, where Amiry is only filled with sadness or anger. She continues to explain the benefits of Amiry’s approach in her writing: “The reader experiences,” she states, “a certain degree of complicity and emotional dislocation as she [Suad] laughs at and protests the
injustices of occupation” (Sinno 50-51), doing so while putting herself and the people around her on display. I agree with Sinno’s observations, as the book does create “a war” of some sort, where every few pages a new episode either makes you laugh or causes you to ponder and get angry and upset. It is as if the response to the absurdities of the occupation is both anger, and humor that comes out of frustration and disbelief.

Amiry concludes her narrative suddenly, not with the lifting of the siege, nor on a happy note, but with Ariel Sharon, the former Israeli prime minister, who is only mentioned a few times before. As the book ends, Sharon had begun with the construction of an apartheid wall that separates Palestinian homes and confiscates even more land. Amiry concludes her book by writing:

As I lay there, I recalled what Ariel Sharon had said in 1973, when asked by Winston S. Churchill III, grandson of the former British prime minister, how Israel would deal with the Palestinians: “We’ll make a pastrami sandwich of them. We’ll insert a strip of Jewish settlements in between the Palestinians, and then another strip of Jewish settlements right across the West Bank, so that in twenty-five years, neither the United Nations, nor the U.S.A., nobody, will be able to tear it apart” (Water and Land Grab Report 2003). It had taken Sharon an extra five years to make a concrete wrapper around the pastrami sandwich. (Amiry 207)

This passage, and this ending, befits an autobiography that chronicles a woman’s life under an occupation that knows no mercy, and has lasted over seventy years. Amiry’s book introduces a foreign reader to the daily life of Palestinians under occupation. It shows a female warrior as she struggles to live in her homeland, get formal Israeli permits, finish her PhD, and survive in a patriarchal society and under military occupation. In their article “Cultures of Resistance in Palestine and Beyond: On the Politics of Art, Aesthetics, and Affect,” Ruba Salih and Sophie Richter-Devroe write about the multiple dimensions Palestinians deal with in their writing. They state: “Post-Oslo Palestinian art had now to
engage with a matrix of intersecting forms of control, as exercised by, first and foremost, Israeli occupation forces, but also the PA, the refugees' host states, humanitarianism, and neoliberal economic forces” (Salih and Richter-Devroe10), which explains why Amiry’s book is dense. It weaves humor with seriousness as it discusses multiple facets of Palestinian life.

While Amiry does show multiple sides of herself, as well as her society, and while she shows instances of bravery, there is never an egocentric side present. According to Nawar Golley, this humble look at one’s self is embedded in Arab women’s writings. In Reading Arab Women’s Autobiographies, she states that “For the moment people start writing or talking about themselves, they are creating an egoistic space of some kind. However, this ego can either be magnified, as happens in most men’s texts, or dismissed in order to give way to a more collective ego or self, as happens in most women’s texts” (Golley 118). Amiry chooses to document a more collective side of her story, which might be the reason for the lack of this “egoistic space.” The emails she intended to send in order to release her frustration, were sent to the entire world to see, and maybe carry some of that frustration; because now, and because of Amiry’s writing: now they know.

**Teta, Mother, and Me: A Memoir of Many Selves**

Jean Said Makdisi, the author of *Teta, Mother, and Me* comes from a well-known family. She is the sister of the world-renowned literary critique Edward Said (chapter 2 discusses his writings), and her husband is well-known in Lebanon, having had the position of deputy president of the American University of Beirut. Her sons, especially Saree Makdisi, write and publish books, and it is out of this nuclear and extended family and the success of its male family members that Jean Makdisi writes. *Teta, Mother, and Me* is a
long narrative, spanning many events, that discusses the lives of many people. It reads as a “traditional” female autobiographical text where the writer uses other stories and political events to “carry” the weight of her narrative, yet, as one continues to read, one is able to see that Jean herself is as important as her other female characters mentioned.

It is because of the characters used in the book and their life stories, that Makdisi’s self-representation is not as easy to find or hone down, as it was in Amiry’s narrative. While Amiry does mention other family members and neighbors, her focus is on her story, her characters assuming minor supportive roles. Makdisi, on the other hand, uses her characters as anchors in certain moments of her book, with special sections dedicated entirely to her Teta, her Teta’s sisters, and even her Tata’s friends. Makdisi portrays all of her physical, emotional, and political developments in her self-representation which she presents chronologically at times, and driven by specific themes in her narrative, at other times. She appears as a young child, an ignorant young adult, an observant daughter, a diligent student, a married woman, an employee, and a mother. As I will explain in the coming sections, she shows how her political development came later in life, even though she was exposed to radical changes and modern approaches taking place right in front of her eyes.

Just like Amiry, Makdisi is aware of the benefits of personal writing. In fact, over many pages, she writes about the importance of documenting one’s thoughts. She even encourages her own mother to write her autobiography that Makdisi reads after her mother’s passing, using parts of it in her book, creating a connection with her mother by quoting her own words in her autobiography. She asks her uncles to write their stories of their mother (her Teta, grandmother), and she eventually finds letters that her mother had kept (carbon copied), and through them is encouraged to write her own narrative. Makdisi,
therefore, writes for a purpose, and while Amiry wanted to release the tension and negative emotions she had harbored in her, ones that were exacerbated by the continuous curfews and cyclical notion of life under occupation, Makdisi writes to understand herself, as she understands her family and world around them. It seems she was not able to analyze her static emotions and represent herself until she read the stories of her family and decided to document them for the world to read. Through her discoveries, she finds herself and is then able to analyze her thoughts, just as she had analyzed her family and society at large. It is through this understanding that Makdisi was able to better understand, and thus represent herself in her writing. It is what led her to accept the reality that while she raised three boys, eventually becoming a Teta herself, she was not able to fully benefit from the experiences her sons benefitted from, as she took some time off to take care of them and was not able to fully delve into her academic studies and professional life the way they did. I believe it is a recognition of sacrifice and self-understanding.

According to Fadia Faqir’s introduction in *In the House of Silence* (1998), a book consisting of different Arab women personal writings coming from a variety of places, women write in order to gain confidence and understand the world around them. On the issue of confidence and reasons women write, she states: “Some contributors to this book have written their texts precisely because they lack self-confidence and a sense of empowerment, whether political or social. The need to define their position in history and locate themselves vis-à-vis the male master narrative, and to explore and formulate a separate individual identity has urged Arab women writers to write their life stories” (Faqir xiv-xv). This is illustrated, in many passages, analyzed below, where Makdisi states that she eventually gained self-confidence and peace, with herself, and the world around her.
That she is a woman who gained self-confidence through writing about other women might encourage her readers. Makdisi’s thorough research depicts Palestinian lives prior to the Israeli occupation. It is like an excavation of a time of a different colonial rule in order to understand a present one.

Makdisi’s act of writing, then, helps her create connections between her mother’s life and the world around her, once again allowing her to first understand other people’s lives, and through them, understand her own. The fact that Makdisi writes in detail about her relationship with her mother, however, is revolutionary on its own, as Dalya Abudi mentions in her book Mothers and Daughters in Arab Women's Literature (2010), comparing Western and Eastern notions of writing. Stating that while in the West mother-daughter relationships are displayed to the public, Abudi writes: “In the Arab world, the topic has remained shrouded in mystery and silence. The reason for this situation is the concept of privacy and sanctity of family life” (Abudi 3). The fact that Makdisi and Amiry can write freely about their relationships to other women, as well as members of their family and society is important here. Makdisi writes at the beginning of her book about not really knowing her mother, showcasing what she believes is her active role in erasing her story: “With a further shock I had realized that I had not asked her about her life. I had collaborated in her self-effacement, as though accepting that the past of old women had no interest. It became part of my task to find out why, as I traced the few marks she had left, holding up the old ink to the light in order to try and read what had been rubbed out” (Makdisi 12). Jean literally and metaphorically had to do this act of reading. She had to read her mother’s writing, but also metaphorically she needed to decipher her mother’s life and trace her steps, having admitted to being part of her mother’s erasure. And what had
been rubbed out (again metaphorically and literally), and only brought back through writing, was erased because of the mother’s old age and the lack of interest a patriarchal society has in older women. This society was mostly interested in men and their writings and stories, while women supposedly had their homes, their kitchens, and their children; and so, the daughter never thought to question the narrative and feel interested in her own mother’s life, taking it for granted.

From the beginning, there is a mission that Makdidi is writing through, a mission she declares from the start: understanding her female relatives is personal, yet what the writer does here, though research, is connect that personal life to the lives of others. She confesses: “By the time I finished, Teta's and Mother's past had become mine, and mine theirs. Through my new understanding of their lives, my own became in my eyes less fuzzy, less detached from theirs. I felt less alienated, more attached to the world, more at peace with my mother and grandmother, and with myself and the world in which I live” (Makdisi 16). These conclusions about herself, her mother, and her Teta arise out of her writing, showcasing again the value of autobiographic narratives, as a process, not only a product. Stating that the lives of her mother and grandmother became hers shows their connection, but perhaps also the perception of history repeating itself. It seems Jean’s life becomes mingled in the lives of other women. In her article, “Gendered Autobiography: “Record” and “Inquiry”: A Comparative Reading of the Memoirs of Edward Said and Jean Said Makdisi,” Hala Kamal discusses this notion of Makdisi understanding her mother, through research, which involved the process of studying her mother’s journals. She states, “In her memoir, Jean Makdisi refers subtly to the power of women's self-representation. By urging her mother to write a journal, by tracing her grandmother's life and stressing the
cross-generational continuum, the memoirist demonstrates her awareness of the importance of personal accounts vis-à-vis history. In her attempt to resist the marginality imposed on women, and in her effort to give voice to her mother and grandmother, Jean Makdisi retrieves them from invisibility” (Kamal 84). And this removal from invisibility becomes Makdisi’s mission and cause, since demonstrating the lives of Palestinian women, especially prior to the occupation, is very important. Makdisi is therefore showing not only her mother and grandmother to the world, but also many Palestinian women, as she shares their stories and initiatives. She is bonding with her late relatives, as she is sharing their lives with the readers, a personal becoming collective in front of the eyes of those who read the narrative.

While many notions about women, education, and modernity change in the text, one constant idea reiterated in Teta, Mother, and Me is what the loss of Palestine in 1948 had done to the author’s family. Makdisi does not only mention the human and financial losses, valid as they may be, but she also discusses the sense of emotional loss, the feeling of alienation her parents and the generation before them felt. This is reminiscent of Amiry’s writing about the effects of the occupation, which started with the creation of “Israel” in 1948. There is always a “before” and “after” 1948 in the narrative of Palestinians, especially in Makdisi’s text. While discussing her grandmother’s life, Makdisi mentions the effects of the Nakba on her Teta. She writes about the ties that were severed after 1948:

After 1948, Teta’s social decline accelerated and became irreversible. Like most Palestinians, she was now totally dispossessed. She had already lost her home and property; now she lost her place in the world and in society. She lost not only her present, but also her past and her future. She lost the status in the family that she had spent a lifetime of hard work earning. Her last defense, the world of her
children, had been blown up, and she had to watch helplessly as they scattered. (Makdisi 328)

This quote shows the importance of one’s homeland, and what happens when that land is confiscated by the Israelis, its people replaced. It also discusses exile, living away from home while dreaming of a lost and stolen land. It was important for Makdisi to mention this horrifying period as it changed her family’s life, as well as the lives of all Palestinians. Understanding the Nakba made Jean understand her Teta. Once the grandmother was removed from her country, she moved to Egypt and then Lebanon, becoming a refugee, and her whole life forever changed. Like Amiry’s text before, Makdisi’s autobiography is built upon politics as both texts discuss the effects of the occupation on the characters themselves and their family members. This book, specifically, discusses the end of the British colonial rule and the beginning of the Israeli occupation, creating a cyclical notion of suffocation and endless wars, like Amiry’s narrative portrayed. It also shows the need for writing, as it acts as counteractive to the Nakba which aimed to displace and separate. This idea became clear in the quote above where Makdisi demonstrates how her Teta felt without a present, past, or future. Writing, on the other hand, especially about one’s family and their past, unites and regroups, reminding a generation of the losses of their peers. Makdisi’s book is also very dense, taking place in different locations, mentioning different dates, and it is full of movement (whether forced or by choice): that of the grandmother’s, the mother’s, and the author’s. By writing about the lives of her Teta and even her Teta’s family before the creation of “Israel,” however, Makdisi asserts the existence and legitimacy of the Palestinian people and their cause. Hoda Elsadda’s article “A ‘phantom freedom in a phantom modernity’? Protestant Missionaries, Domestic Ideology and
Narratives of Modernity in an Arab Context,” states: “As a text which seeks to counter dominant tropes in the infowar against the Arab world, Makdisi’s memoir further confronts and challenges one of the most powerful neocolonial narratives in the contemporary world, namely, the Israeli narrative about the question of Palestine, or the Arab–Israeli conflict, propagated in mainstream media by politicians and public pundits” (Elsadda 224). Makdisi makes clear that, while the Nakba of 1948 was a monumental event that changed the life of Palestinians, it is not and should not be the only way to represent and talk about them. This idea is implicitly made clear by both Makdisi and Amiry, who both discuss the Nakba, while not allowing it to overshadow the events before and after 1948. Writing about life before colonialism is one of the characteristics of postcolonial theory, as it encourages scholars to delve into the “pre,” and not just the “post” in postcolonialism, since there was life and thinking and writing for indigenous people before the arrival of colonialism. Makdisi demonstrates through her narrative that Palestinian lives existed and thrived before their displacement in 1948.

Makdisi’s engagement with the political situations she writes about, however, came much later. In her narrative, she constructs a self that was ignorant or not interested in the world around her, indicative of her socioeconomic class, as they were able to move from one city to the next, avoiding the plight of most Palestinians who became refugees, exiled around the world. Makdisi explains that her younger self was not interested in politics, even though she was born in 1940, and had witnessed her father lose his home in Jerusalem and move from Lebanon (where they were vacationing) to Cairo in order to establish the family again after the Nakba of 1948. Even when the rule in Egypt changed in front of her eyes, and even when she moved with her husband to the United States in the 1960s, she
does not become immediately involved or interested in politics. Makdisi does write about the civil rights movement and the women’s waves of freedom afterwards, but Jean was not politically engaged or aware yet. Slowly and thoughtfully, Makdisi explains that her lack of knowledge and engagement came from her place as a young woman in an Arab household. Men and boys would stick together during family gatherings and they would discuss political situations, since they were more exposed to the outside world, while women separated themselves and talked about other issues pertaining to women’s roles and expectations in the house. At first, Jean felt that history happened and women only witnessed it, which mirrors other Arab women autobiographical writings, as Fadia Faqir mentions in her introduction, stating that “For Arab women writers, the writing of autobiography is not as straightforward as for male writers. This confidence and certitude about the self and its position in history and language is lacking” (Faqir XII). Jean, however, finally understands (and that again is because of writing) that women do change history, and only when she went back to understand her Teta’s life and the life of the first educated women of Palestine under the British mandate, does she appreciate her lack of knowledge that led her to research, and eventually write anew. Makdisi, in this sense, creates connections between the lives of women, and historical political events taking place. Writing about the personal helped Makdisi understand the political public events happening around her, as she discovered how the elder women in her life were in fact part of the political conversations and actions, and not just men.

The Lebanese Civil War of 1975 reminded Jean of the Nakba of 1948, as both political events affected her mother and grandmother. Makdisi blames the events of 1948 for having severed her Teta’s connections, eventually leading to her dementia and death,
and the war in Lebanon for the demise of her mother’s condition. Here again we have a connection between women and public events, between a political experience and a personal one, and a personal life story leading to a collective one. Makdisi writes extensively about the destruction of the war and its negative effects, especially on her mother’s well-being, accusing the war of causing her mother a deep and permeant depression, as well as her death from cancer before the war ended. The war in Lebanon also changed Jean herself, making her more aware of the political world around her. Makdisi writes about her lack of political involvement prior to the war: “The older I grew,” she states, “the less directly involved I became in the political events surrounding me, and the less vocal I became in expressing my reactions,” probably because of the distractions of her life, having three boys and working. Makdisi continues: “That remained true until very recently, when, propelled by the direct and shattering experiences of the Lebanese war, I learned to speak up on politics” (Makdisi 99). Jean started to do her research about the events taking place in Lebanon. Having settled with her family in Beirut at that time, she regained a connection with her mother, yet that connection was infused with war and its tensions. In one instance, as she reads the journals she had asked her mother to write, she deals with a personal sadness: reading about her mother’s “side” as she narrates the events of the war. She writes:

Memory, of course, plays tricks on all of us. I do not remember that I ‘passed by her every now and then’: I remember a rigorous daily exercise of passing by to see her, and making sure that my sons saw her as well. I remember her spending every weekend at my house during these difficult times, and never going anywhere on Sunday without her. I remember driving her home in dangerous times; I remember going with her on visits when she asked me... (Makdisi 366)

This section is important as it shows a daughter dealing with knowing, after it was too late, her mother’s “true” feelings about an event they had both experienced and lived
(differently), and a writer humbly correcting what she read about herself. Makdisi narrates doing her job as a daughter, taking care of her mother, meeting her needs, yet the mother does not find it important to document, or had completed forgotten those moments. In *Reading Autobiography*, the authors discuss the connection between memory and personal growth: “the politics of remembering— what is recollected and what is obscured— is central to the cultural production of knowledge about the past, and thus to the terms of an individual’s self-knowledge” (Smith and Watson 25). And so, it was important for Jean to come to terms with her mother’s memory in order to understand both her mother’s life and psyche, but also her own. This, to me, is the beauty of personal writing. It allows the person to face difficult circumstances and deal with them, head on. Makdisi could have removed this section from her analysis and autobiography, yet she decides to keep it, forgive, and explain her point of view, the way that *she* saw the same events. This section once again shows the effects and importance of family stories and political events on Jean herself.

Makdisi’s research, her careful analysis of her circumstances and the circumstances of other women and the political events taking place around her life and the lives of her elder female relatives, allow her book to be balanced and complete. And while Makdisi comes from a prominent Christian family, her portrayal of Muslim women is fair and thoughtful, once again showing that she does not only present herself or her Christian faith, but her community at large. Makdisi writes from a place of understanding and experience. The writing of this book helped her get in touch with her relatives, her friends who came from different backgrounds, and herself. She ends her book, not on a bleak note like Amiry, but with some advice for female readers about balance, especially when it comes to the notion of modernity, not leaving the past behind, nor clinging to a foreign future. Makdisi,
instead, encourages us to “renegotiate the nooks and crannies of our own history, understand our past, ground ourselves firmly in it, and then move consciously towards a modernity of our own deliberate making. Only then will we be able to lay full claim not only to the future ahead, but also to the present and the past” (Makdisi 393). Here Makdisi continues to be realistic, asking women to be balanced in their understanding of their past, as it will help in their understanding and changing of the future. In an article written in 2008, after the vicious 2006 Israeli war on Lebanon, Makdisi writes in “War and Peace: Reflections of a Feminist,” where her tone is deliberate and frustrated: “I ask, in my bitter disappointment and dread, in what way have we made the world better? In what way has the entrance of women into the mainstream of public and intellectual life advanced the joint causes of justice, equality, and liberty? And especially how much closer has the advancement of women brought us to ending war and its train of misery?” (Makdisi 106). Makdisi once again shows that women’s advancement happens not in a vacuum, or because of specific jobs women undertake. She questions the validity of such advancements if they do not help the world rid itself of wars and injustice. It is clear that after the Lebanese civil war, Jean has been in constant political engagement, and as stated, her understanding of feminism is wholistic and practical, as she connects the freedom of women to the freedom of the world. Her encouraging words of advice become questions in her 2018 article, where she gives a warning regarding the status quo of women: “Can we find ways of preventing wars of aggression and occupation, and provide alternative mechanisms through which these could be effectively resisted, so that justice may be achieved? Or will we merely continue to try and enter the violent, rotten, cruel world that already exists, only to join the forces defending it against others, who, like us, once wished to change it?” (Makdisi 109).
She seems to be criticizing white feminism by showing how important it is not only to critique other women and institutions, but to offer solutions; not to receive quota positions and be happy about high ranks, but to help change the current situations of the world. Makdisi, therefore, wants solutions on the ground. In fact, her entire narrative revolves around realistic understandings through research and family stories. Jean sought answers and she received them. She wants the women coming after her to seek balance and zeal in research as well.

Both memoirs, read alongside each other, demonstrate the broad range of Palestinian women’s autobiography, as well as some important commonalities. *Teta, Mother, and Me* is more “traditionally” written, and has a somber voice filled with tragedies, wars, and loss, *Sharon and My Mother-in-Law* is equally important but told in a more satirical, nonconventional way, also about war and loss, yet not spanning through different periods of colonial rule. These two narratives, although very different, send the same message of solidarity between family members and small communities, document stories of women and Palestinian events, and show how women in Palestine deal with patriarchy and misogyny. In the case of these two authors, women build themselves up through education, but also, and maybe more importantly, through personal writing. In the chapter “Arab Women Write the Trauma of Imprisonment and Exile,” included in Golley’s *Arab Women's Lives Retold: Exploring Identity Through Writing*, Daphne M. Grace discusses the deliberate choice women make in selecting the genre of autobiography, by stating that “Autobiography, therefore, is often an informed choice, one used as a political tool with the object of exposing Arab society and its problems through personal narrative” (Grace 13). Both Amiry and Makdisi’s writing delve into issues in their Palestinian
societies, as Palestine is part and parcel of the Arab world, and while they both were lucky they did not have misogynistic members at home, it is important to remember that other women, especially from different socioeconomic backgrounds, suffer from both patriarchy and occupation, especially in Palestine, yet still write and document. Amiry was able to survive the siege as she shared her experience, first online through emails, and then to the entire world. Makdisi was able to connect her life and make sense of her family, outside and inside of her home domain, proving that staying idle at home is not a trait that Arab women were born into, but was brought to them with years of colonialism and foreign rule. As Grace mentions, the choice to utilize autobiographical writing is always deliberate and thoughtful. I have, therefore, chosen for this discussion to use two similar yet different personal narratives when discussing the point of view of Palestinian female autobiographers in order to show how unique each autobiography is, where they diverge, and when they meet.

Laila Shikaki’s Poetry: Representing Home and Selves

In order to leave some space between my writing and myself, I will hereafter refer to myself as the poet or Shikaki, although I am aware that the poet I am speaking about is myself. While the autobiographies I analyze in this chapter use the pronoun “I” while referring to themselves, I want to create some distance since what I am attempting to do is different. I am not merely analyzing moments that happened to me, I am actually analyzing poems written at a specific moment and then creating links between them as a unit, as well as putting them side by side with the autobiographies chosen for this chapter, and my other coming chapters as well. While the genres, life experience and even place of birth and living differ, discussing my poetry will show how there are similar ideas that resonate
within Palestinian self-writing. This comparison will also open up the discussion and show how different women write differently about Palestine, while living away from it.

This section will discuss my three published poems, written while I was studying in California. These poems were chosen because they speak in harmony with the primary resources used in this chapter. I have organized the poems in a way that will create a better understanding of the poems on their own, but also put together as they tell a story that is both similar yet unique in each poem. My poems start with a description of the two women who emerge out of me while in California, and then a remembrance of a time while in Palestine where I almost got killed by an Israeli soldier. It ends with how my last few days in California went, thus creating a story of how complicated and nuanced the experience of living abroad is, especially for a female poet. It also shows how family relations affect the writer. The notions discussed in these three poems, the double personality that comes out of writing, the political poetry, and the feelings of living abroad resonate with those discussed in Amiry and Makdisi’s narratives.

I will start with “Two Women Fight” which speaks to the multiple identities Arab women feel, especially when living abroad. There is no denying that in most Arab countries, women feel some sort of either a traditional pull, or a patriarchal strain, clearly shown in *Teta, Mother, and Me*. In no way do western countries “save” Arab women (contrary to what the western media states), but in certain cases, Arab women feel some sort of freedom to write while living abroad, or while using a language that is not our own. This is one of the reasons that women like Amiry, Makdisi and myself choose to write in English. Maybe we feel we will be understood better outside of our language, maybe we feel a bit distanced writing in a language we studied at school as young adults.
Laila Shikaki’s “Two Women Fight” begins with mentioning the two women this speaker feels are in her. Shikaki mentions the attire of the first woman who rides a bike and wears tight pants as she listens to music; very Californian! There is a specific line, however, dedicated to the headscarf the speaker wears, a nod to her religious belief and in no way running away from it. The other woman described is not the opposite of that character. We do not know her physical appearance, yet we know how she carries herself. She is prideful, she has dark features, and the poet ends with the line “her heart missing a few of its pieces” (Shikaki 10). It is not clear where that heartache comes from, but if we will surmise that one of these women is settled in California and rides her bike happily, then maybe the other woman is homesick as her heart breaks because she wants to return, or because of the pain she saw back home. This dichotomy recalls Makdisi’s *Teta, Mother, and Me* where she writes about her own double personalities, and the two women in her, by stating: “Part of me was pleasing, submissive, obedient, mild-mannered, polite and happy; but another part was in constant turmoil, resentful, angry, rebellious, ambitious, hemmed-in” (Makdisi 120). This understanding of the self shown in Makdisi’s statement mirrors the last chapter of Fadia Faqir’s work, where she writes that Arab society and its constructs “lead women to develop a mainly silent public persona where they are pleasing, obedient girls, learning housekeeping, cooking and listening in silence to their fathers and brothers and then escaping whenever possible to an inner courtyard where they are the Shahrazad of their imaginary kingdom” (Faqir 18). Is the creation of an alter ego, or a double personality, an escape, then? Does writing become a revolutionary act simply because it conveys what most Arab women are unable to say out loud? In Shikaki’s poem, the two personalities are born out of her homesickness and the closeness of her return home.
Although the two women in Shikaki’s poem are not directly opposites, like in the description of the two personalities in Makdisi’s writing above, they are not in harmony. Shikaki writes that when it is bedtime, “they scream and they negotiate/ all night long/ while I consciously sleep/ but subconsciously listen.” And what they fight about is clear in the following stanzas, yet it is worth noting that Shikaki here writes that she is actively listening to these desires and wants, and eventually she states that she releases this tension when writing her words down (Shikaki 12-15). Her third and following stanzas reveal the differences between these women, showing the speaker occupying both spaces, hinting at traditional issues, like Makdisi’s reflections. She writes at one line that “one of them wants to stay…/where she met a boy who offered her pieces of his broken heart,” maybe hinting at a relationship or close friendship (Shikaki 16-18). When she mentions the other side of her, the other woman, she says: “the other wants to go back where she won’t have debates of that kind” (Shikaki 20). The reader here might assume a traditional setting, or maybe even an inability for Arab men to be vulnerable and share their broken hearts. Regardless of the answer, Shikaki does not seem to be siding with one woman over the other. In fact, her second lines compare a woman happily living on her own, and the other woman having “the luxury of never sleeping in an empty house,” yet again hinting at a traditional setting where family members live together in harmony (Shikaki 22).

These comparisons continue until Shikaki abruptly ends her poem by stating the reason writing, especially expressively and creatively, is beautiful and necessary. She declares: “These women hold hands as I write/ they confide secrets and sometimes they cry” (Shikaki 25-26). Here Shikaki shows a moment of solidarity, a sisterhood between her two selves, an understanding of the situation. Although the poet ends with “and when
night comes/ they begin to fight,” it is clear that she has solace when she writes; it is clear she is able to live with these two women who are created out of her living situation and homesickness (Shikaki 28-29). These are important lines that once again hint at the essential role of writing that women in general need, but also women who are in exile and away from their home, families, and familiar surroundings, as reflected in the two autobiographies discussed above. Writing, to the three authors, is therefore necessary and it does not only bring an understanding of one’s self, but a literary production to share with others. Clearly writing becomes a necessity, not a luxury.

The second poem that I will discuss is one of my first published poems entitled, “As He Pointed His Gun Towards Me,” and this poem, like the one above, has a clear message about the act of writing. Yet, what is unique about this poem is that it clearly discusses politics, as well as mentions family issues and family members, establishing another link with the autobiographies discussed earlier. Based on a real story, this poem begins with the dramatic title, immediately capturing the attention of the reader. Shikaki describes the scene, diverging from traditional near-death experiences where people see a white corridor of light; she does not see her deceased grandmother, whom she never met, and like Jean, regrets not really knowing, nor does she see special features of her parents, mentioned for the first time with “my mother’s red bright face/ my father’s dark eyes” (Shikaki 8). What Shikaki describes in this poem, instead, is sensuous. She writes that what she saw in that vision was the color red, and not white. She writes about worrying about her body bleeding, tossed on the road. Her next stanza shows the importance of writing in her life, where she starts her third stanza with negations once again; she does “not think of heaven or hell” (Shikaki 15). Instead she:
…thought of lonely nights with no ideas. 
Images wanting to explode inside,
For the option of writing is forever lost. (Shikaki 17-19)

And here the importance of writing shines yet again. Here, we have a poet who is afraid of not being able to express herself through writing. She does express, however, her thoughts and gratitude for her family members and a special person in her life who remains anonymous in this poem. Shikaki shifts her discussion from family members—starting with her brother and then her mother, moving to that special person, and even her unborn children—and the present situation where she mentions instinctively shifting her body to protect the female driver of the car, creating a solidarity, a kind of sisterhood. The first sisterhood or bond was between her two selves who hold hands as she writes, mentioned in “Two Women Fight,” and here the bond is between the speaker and the driver, where she is physically shielding her from harm. This poem shows the hardships ordinary Palestinians face in their daily life. It shows how from a near-death experience, a poetic expression is born. Thus, it connects the political with the poetic, the personal with the public. It sheds light on Palestinians’ daily lives. The irony is that the poet was on her way to a writing workshop when the incident happened. She was going to teach young Palestinians the art of poetry, and it seems she, herself, learned that poetic callings often happen abruptly.

This poem is not violent, although the title may suggest so. Shikaki has romantic lines dedicated to a special person who helps her friends and family cope as the poet imagines herself having died, while that special person hides his pain and is unable to visit places they visited together. Such is life in Palestine! Even the romantic is coupled with the political, the individual with the collective, a reminder of Amiry and Makdisi’s personal
narratives mixed in with political collective events. Amiry, for example, writes about returning from her wedding, a very personal intimate moment, only to showcase her inability to enter Palestine, a collective public experience Palestinians undergo. After Shikaki mentions her family members by name, she shows how she does not get shot, and as she realizes that she is alive, she “exhale[s]” and ends her poem with these strong words on the connection between her writing and her future:

I thought of me,
My unwritten words,
My life not lived,
And my undecided future. (Shikaki 57-61)

This poem takes place in Palestine where there is occupation and violence, yet, as the poem shows, there is also family appreciation, love, caring for others, as well as writing. Like Amiry and Makdisi, it seems Shikaki’s choice of her genre is deliberate. She needed to express her emotions as she almost faced death. Her outcome is a poem that is both political and romantic, realistic and dreamy, personal and collective, mentioning her family members and a special person, yet Shikaki herself is at the center of this poem, as Suad is at the center of hers.

Shikaki’s third poem, “June First,” provides a mixture or a conclusion of the previously discussed poems. In it, Shikaki writes about the date she will return to her homeland from California, the bond she has with her mother, and once again the importance of writing. “June First” begins with Shikaki setting the scene. She explains that she has reached a consensus decision with her mother on when she will travel back home. She uses the poetic technique of an enjambment in her second line with the separation between “come back” and “home,” as if she needs the reminder that going home is a sort
of return, a place that she will “come back” to. The focus is on the speaker, but also her mother and their close bond. The speaker narrates sentences her mother told her about understanding her pain of saying goodbye to California, reminding her that her current experience is another one of those monumental events in everyone’s lives, where her mother says:

I know you will be upset,
and will cry. like you did at the end
of high school.
like you did after college. (Shikaki 10-13)

These lines hint at education and its importance in the life of the speaker, similar to the two autobiographies above. They also show the connection between mother and daughter, and the bond these two women have, the third bond between women in these three discussed poems. The mother gives her daughter “incentives” to return, such as visiting friends and seeing family members, creating another bond or link between Palestine and family, clearly mentioned in the two autobiographies analyzed above, but especially in the exhaustive writing of Makdisi. The poet connects the personal with the political, and takes a specific moment in her life, that of graduating and getting her degree, and connects it to a larger image of a freed country and writing that does not stop. Shikaki’s poetry is not idealistic or overly dreamy here. Just as the two women in her mind were fighting in “Two Women Fight,” she mentions in her last stanza in “June First” that “it’s hard/ to be in between spaces” (Shikaki 27-28). It is clear that just as the poet did not favor one of her two women characters in the first poem, she writes somewhat objectively here about living not in one place and thinking of another but living “in between.” The poet does recognize that leaving a place that she connected with is hard, as her poem concludes with an image of a person packing, in tears. Yet, as the second stanza mentions, she knows she will go back to
Palestine and witness it become free, and she will return not because she is forced to, but out of love.

This kind of personal narrative that tells a collective political story offers a poetic analogue to the writings of the Palestinian female autobiographers discussed in the beginning of this chapter, where women feel the need to document their personal stories, mention family members, and expand their writing, making it read like a collective story. In Shikaki’s poetry, and especially with the organization of the three poems discussed, it becomes clear that even a student living in California for two years could create two characters, each living a specific way and needing specific things; she could feel a connection to two places at once. A young poet can appreciate and understand the importance of writing, as well as write about family members without overshadowing her own self and experience. Shikaki’s poems tell her own story, but they also narrate an image of family bonds, missed homelands, and need for writing that is shared by many other Palestinians, and which I will discuss further in my coming chapters.
Chapter Two: The Saids: Different Self-Representations Away From Palestine

Introduction and Book Summary

Rarely do readers get a chance to read similar narratives from different points of views, especially when it comes to a father and a daughter. Although their books differ largely, Edward Said and his daughter Najla Said share their struggle with identity, as well as their love and knowledge of Palestine and the Arab world. Their two respective autobiographies Out of Place (1999) and Looking for Palestine: Growing up Confused in an Arab American Family (2013), while written at very different moments of American history, focus on issues pertaining to their interests, age, and place of birth. These two autobiographers speak in harmony, however, about certain issues that I will discuss in this chapter. Both discuss their Arab or Arab American identity and how living in the United States has shaped their character. While Edward was considered an American in the Arab world where he grew up (due to his father’s U.S. citizenship), Najla is considered an Arab (not by choice) in the United States where she was born and raised. Both writers discuss their relationship, or lack thereof, to Palestine, and other Arab countries they both had visited at crucial moments of their respective lives. Both dissect their relationship with their parents, and finally both discuss their relationship to their body, as they each suffered from illnesses. In this chapter, I will focus on the authors’ representation of their various selves and identities, and the way these two texts diverge and meet regarding this representation. I will show how Said the father uses a more complex, nuanced understanding of his previous life and selves, while his daughter’s personal “I” does not reflect a maturity in emotions or a clear understanding or depart from her younger represented self. Furthermore, I will show how familial relationships have long lasting effects, and how the
love of Palestine was transmitted from one generation to the next. I will also focus on how Palestine is represented and seen through very different eyes, including mine at the end of the chapter.

The main differences in the texts go back to the authors, those who are writing and those whom they are writing about. Even when it comes to writing about their previous selves, Said the father has a more honest, complex, respectful way of dissecting his life and speaking about his family, while his daughter’s text is more individualistic, and lacks a critical analytical aspect. While the father was exiled as a teenager, the daughter found herself growing up in an upper-middle-class predominantly white and Jewish neighborhood in the United States, with a famous father who helped establish a field of postcolonial studies (that deals with the process of alienation or othering, and ways that native individuals react back). Edward Said goes back to his childhood and narrates his special relationship with his mother, a relationship he did not share with his father, who came to the United States, fought in the First World War, and became a U.S. citizen through naturalization. Najla Said, on the other hand, focuses on her childhood, how she felt she could not fit in, how she dealt with the war in Lebanon (where her mother is from), and then focuses more on her relationship with her famous father. While Edward Said’s book ends with the writer feeling somewhat comfortable being out of place, Najla Said writes about finding her voice in theater with an Arab group after Sep. 11th, 2001 while still unable to fully embrace her two identities.

The aim of this chapter is, thus, to ask questions regarding how Palestinian authors position themselves when living away from their homeland. How do they write about Palestine? How does the parent share his Palestine with his daughter? How does a
“visit” change the way Palestine is perceived? How does the daughter deal with her two identities? From the two titles, one can see the similarities (feeling not at home), yet Najla Said addresses in her title living in two places and being an Arab American. Edward Said, on the other hand, discusses his unfamiliarity and discomfort being in different places he had lived. Eventually, he writes that he is content with living (and dying) in New York City, a place very alienating and less settling than other cities. One reasoning for this seemingly different interpretation of belonging is their age, but also the place they grew up (Edward in the Middle East, and his daughter in New York City). Political reasons, especially the 1967 war, contribute to Edward Said’s pessimism and need to document and reflect on his Palestine, while Najla grew up during different political atmospheres starting with the Lebanese and Gulf wars and the aftermath of Sep. 11th, yet she never really states her reasoning for writing.

The last section discusses my own understanding of Palestine and myself while living away from home. I clearly state that although I am not writing as an exiled person, feeling homesick is alienating and, at times, feels permanent and endless, as living away from home affects a person’s psyche. In the closing section of this chapter, I focus on my published poems “My Palestine Stands Still,” “Watani: My Homeland,” and “I Stop Writing,” written while pursuing an MFA in Creative Writing in California. These poems state how uncomfortable it is to live abroad, yet they are also nuanced and show that although one is distanced from their homeland, one still has hope and still writes and expresses, just like Edward and Najla Said do. They write as they long; they write as they survive away from and inside their home.
While Edward Said is mostly known for his numerous theoretical works, especially in the field of postcolonialism and the ways he centers Palestine in his research, a lot of attention has been given to his only autobiography, *Out of Place*. Some of the criticism claims that there was a huge separation and distance between Said’s suffering and the plight of Palestinian refugees who were forced out of their homes in the Nakba of 1948 and Naksa of 1967. Said positions himself and his readers in the beginning of his narrative by stating his reasons for writing, a trait seen in other Arab autobiography discussed in this dissertation. “Several years ago,” Said begins, “I received what seemed to be a fatal medical diagnosis, and it therefore struck me as important to leave behind a subjective account of the life I lived” (Said i). Said does not dwell on his chronic lymphocytic leukemia, especially at the beginning of his narrative, as he mentions how writing his book while sick, gave him “a structure and a discipline at once pleasurable and demanding” (Said ii). Said’s preface explains how after finishing his autobiographical manuscript, he traveled to Palestine and Cairo and truly understood the need and importance of his narrative. Said does write a personal narrative but mixed in it is a hint of communal and collective writing since Said does not only write about himself, but he discusses the life of his parents and relatives, as well, creating a story about the generation before, for the generation after. After meeting his old butler in Cairo, Said states, “how fragile, precious, and fleeting were the history and circumstances not only gone forever, but basically unrecalled and unrecorded except as occasional reminiscence or intermittent conversation” (Said v). Because of that meeting and Said’s fear of losing such a history, he writes about his conviction of his project:
This chance encounter made me feel even more strongly that this book, which revealed as much as I could of life lived in those days...I found myself telling the story of my life against the background of World War II, the loss of Palestine and the establishment of Israel, the end of the Egyptian monarchy, the Nasser years, the 1967 War, the emergence of the Palestinian movement, the Lebanese Civil War, and the Oslo peace process. (Said vi)

Said writes, like his sister Jean Said Makdisi writes after him, about his tumultuous life as it occurred during the political upheavals he mentions in the quote above. Since these political events did not only affect Said’s life, his autobiography can be read as an example of many others’ experiences. His personal life might be unique and privileged as he traveled outside of the Arab world and received a good education, but the events that shaped it affected other Arab lives before and after him. While Said’s narrative is meticulous and thorough, my main focus in this chapter is on specific instances that show certain themes I want to focus on, such as identity, representation of Palestine, and discussions around body. The first is Said’s understanding of himself and the world around him, for the Edward Said in many people’s imagination as a studious intellectual does not come to the surface until many years after his childhood. Said is even surprised at his intellect and writes about the surprise of his classmates as well: “Is that the same Said? He was the way we all were; amazing that he turned out like that” (Said 205). Said logically begins his narrative at childhood, and immediately shows his alienation, which is a theme that controls the narrative (and not just a flashy title for his autobiography, as I later claim about his daughter’s title). Although Said was born in Jerusalem, he was born during the British mandate, and studied under strict British schooling. His father was born in Palestine but fought with the United States in the first World War, receiving an American passport. His father did not want to return to Palestine but was forced to by his mother as her last
dying wish. In his narrative, Said shows his father’s lack of commitment and disappointment in his return to the Arab world.

Said spends a few pages discussing his English sounding name and his relationship to the Arabic language, two issues that affected his identity and understanding of self in *Out of Place*. He writes: “The travails of bearing such a name were compounded by an equally unsettling quandary when it came to language. I have never known what language I spoke first, Arabic or English, or which one was really mine beyond any doubt” (Said 4). In fact, Said writes about the difficult journey of translating moments in his childhood that were spoken in Arabic, into English, the language through which he expresses his intellectual abilities, and the language he wrote his narrative in. It took Said many years to come to terms with his name, an English first name, and an Arabic sounding last name. Said’s name encompasses his multiple identities. He shows how he has been made to feel Arab when everyone was British, or American when everyone around was Arab. He spends a lot of time critiquing the schools he has been to, starting with elementary school, and ending with Princeton which he has harsh critiques for. In every school, he suffers. He is often bored and believes to have been treated unfairly, at times beaten by his principal or classmates. His feelings are due to either usage of language and dialects he did not perfect, his name, or his behavior. Edward⁵, after all, was not a docile boy, at least not at school. He compares British and American systems, as he discusses how his literary instincts and love of music began, yet what really haunts this narrative, and what shapes Edward’s

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⁵ I try to differentiate between Said the writer and Edward the representation character embodied in the text. While they mostly intertwine, it is important to understand the difference between them. Said is the writer; Edward is the character being written about.
character is his relationship with his parents, which will be useful to compare with his
daughter’s narrative about her relationship to her famous father and her mother.

In “Transcultural Autobiography and the Staging of (Mis)Recognition in Edward
Said's ‘Out of Place’ and Gerald Vizenor's ‘Interior Landscapes: Autobiographical Myths
and Metaphors,’” Katja Sarkowsky discusses how readers like to recognize others’
autobiographical moments and feel a sense of familiarity with the characters they read
about in autobiographic writing. In her discussion of Said’s book, she focuses on his
portrayal of his family, but claims that because Said is an intellectual who understands
critical theory and is “well aware of the conventions of autobiography, narrative structure,
and the theoretical frameworks to which [he] refers,” he has a certain ability to reflect on
his past and position himself as a marginalized out of place character in his narrative
(Sarkowsky 630). For example, she analyzes Said’s first chapters when he begins to discuss
his parents by writing:

While this beginning indicates the possibility of further reflection of the
autobiographical genre, however, Said sticks to the narrativization of relations and
shifts the emphasis to his own 'invention' by others; he continues: ‘There was
always something wrong with how I was invented and meant to fit in with the world
of my parents and four sisters’ (3). Not only does the autobiographical narrator
present himself as an 'invention' of others, he immediately points to the falseness
of the invention, a violation of what Taylor would call authenticity. (Sarkowsky
631)

This reading of the intellectual Said complicates his text. As I discuss in the introduction
to this dissertation, as well as in chapter 1, authors of autobiography write about their
previous personalities (when they were younger, when they first started writing their
narrative…etc), portraying their own self as characters in a book. According to Sarkowsky,
Said understands not only his character as invention, but also his family as a creation based
on society and social constructs. He portrays not being able to feel emotions he perceives others feel in family settings and shows how he was able to pick up on these emotions as a child. The emotions Said portrays in his text of feeling misplaced, even in his family, create a nuanced way of understanding his title. As Sarkowsky indicates “‘Out-of-placeness' is thus the logical thrust of the overall narrative- geo-politically… but in the first instance in a family context” (Sarkowsky 632), so Said’s feelings of a lost identity or an unrecognized stable personality is due to the world around him, but also and beginning with his family.

In Said’s journey to self-discovery and understanding of his identity, he portrays his father as physically and emotionally unavailable, yet dominant and overbearing, while he portrays his mother as both giving and taking, understanding and short-tempered, loving and selfish, available and emotionally manipulative. Said’s portrayal of his parents in *Out of Place* remains distanced and thoughtful because of Said’s unique understanding of literature and critical writing, and because his book is written in hindsight and after their deaths. In “Writing Selfhood—from Taha Husayn to Blogging,” Valerie Anischenkova writes how “Autobiographical identities are formulated *in the process* of narrative self-representation channeled through a particular modality” (Anischenkova 5). There must be authenticity and honesty in writing about one’s self, as that is at the core of autobiography, but writing is a mode, a medium, through which authors sieve their past, choosing what they please and removing what they decide. Yet, the action to remove and replace information as Anischenkova discusses, happens en route, as a person is writing; and so as Said writes about his now deceased parents, he is able to represent them with a distance.
Reading *Out of Place*, one senses a close bond between the only son and his mother, while, typical to some Arab households, his father is portrayed as extremely brutal and devoid of emotional support. Said writes about his father’s presence in his life and its effect, as part of his character building and self-representation: “My father came to represent a devastating combination of power and authority, rationalistic discipline, and repressed emotions; and all this, I later realized, has impinged on me my whole life, with some good, but also some inhibiting and even debilitating effects” (Said 12). He writes that his father instilled in him a rigorous routine and discipline, forbidding him to do most things that made him happy, like reading and listening to music, especially when punished. This quote also shows the long-lasting effects of his father’s punishment. An example of an unjust treatment of the father was when he had asked the unknowing Edward to sign an illegal contract while filling in for his father at their shop, which put the son in danger in Egypt and did not allow him to return for over 15 years. And yet, Said still writes, “I always assumed that the Egyptian police were to blame, and that it was their zeal, not my father’s ostensible indifference to my fate, that had led to my being banned for fifteen years from the one city in the world in which I felt more or less at home” (289). Edward’s understanding of the situation and his forgiveness tell a lot about his relationship to and reverence for his father, but it likely speaks volumes about the way Edward perceived himself and his place in his family and the world. Perhaps Said’s father did not know of the attachment his son had to Cairo since he himself returned to Jerusalem unwillingly, and only had attachments to the United States, yet was able to find a place in Egypt. Maybe the father wanted to mold his son’s character even further. What is notable here is that Said never shows real resentment or anger, not while writing, or even indicates anger at the
moment the event happened. He does portray himself as the weaker link, someone who is unable to free himself from the shackles of his traditional family and the world around them. He does eventually go to therapy as an adult, and it is there that he finally is able to let go of some of his issues, and perhaps become more able to write about his emotions. He seems to almost understand his father after those sessions, as well as attribute his father’s action to his unhappiness in Palestine and his way of understanding life. Said admits to being “defensive” and unable to stand up for himself, yet eventually he shows his understanding (Said 262). Edward focuses on his father’s harshness, but he also discusses his work ethic and how he was able to raise himself from the ashes, especially after losing his stationary shop in Cairo. Said’s writing, then, is respectful and shows maturity and introspection. I will soon compare Said’s style of writing to his daughter’s narrative, which is often disrespectful or offhand, and lacks the understanding Said gives his family members, his past, and even himself at that time.

Throughout his narrative, Said focuses on his relationship to his mother, even showing that when he was first diagnosed with cancer, he started to write her a letter, a year after her death. It is there where Said mentions that he and his mother had exchanged letters, written in English, for over twenty years. Said attributes most of his emotional comfort, especially in dealing with his father’s coldness and ill treatment, to his mother who knew and understood him. Yet, although he does not seem to harbor any hatred, he does mention an unfulfilled relationship, a relationship based on secrets. One of the harshest instances in the book is when Said writes about the time his mother states that her children were a disappointment. He writes of the aftermath:

“Please tell me why,” I continued. “What have I done?” “Someday perhaps you will know, maybe after I die, but it’s very clear to me that you are all a great
disappointment.” For some years I would re-ask my questions, to no avail: the reasons for her disappointment in us, and obviously in me, remained her best-kept secret, as well as a weapon in her arsenal for manipulating us, keeping us off balance, and putting me at odds with my sisters and the world. Had it always been like this? What did it mean that I had once believed our intimacy was so secure as to admit few doubts and no undermining at all of my position? Now as I looked back on my frank and, despite the disparity in age, deep liaison with my mother, I realized how her critical ambivalence had always been there. (Said 57)

I have decided to quote this section in its entirety because it conveys many issues that are critical in our discussion of Said’s identity and how his parents played a role in shaping the person he became. The shock and denial that Said mentions in his questioning, even stating that he had wanted to ask his mother if he, too, was part of the “all” mentioned by the mother in a previous unquoted line, show his emotional state and reaction. The fact that he had not forgotten the statement and kept asking his mother years after, is another important point that shows how the parent’s effect is not momentary, but often lasts a long time. Most importantly, I believe, is his mother’s response. She kept the statement alluring, and as Said mentions, “an arsenal for manipulating us.” It is indeed distressing to hear a son admit that his mother’s goal was to keep him and his sisters apart and to “put me at odds…with the world.” While not the aim of this dissertation, I can conclude that the mother’s upbringing and her tough life (mentioned briefly in Said’s narrative, but much more in detail in his sister’s narrative discussed in chapter 1) are the reasons for her, at times, misleading and uncaring behaviors. Another important point to mention here is that, just like therapy helped Said understand and come to terms with his father’s behavior, writing has helped him realize that his relationship with his mother, at once seen by him as wholesome and complete, was manipulative and, like his relationship with his father, overbearing. There are indeed many other factors which have shaped and built Edward Said’s identity. My insistence on focusing on his parents is because Said mentions them
and their effect on his life several times. In fact, in his article “Edward Said and the Space of Exile,” John Barbour argues that Said’s exile comes not only from his political surroundings but also his familial relationships. He states that “In *Out of Place*, Said explores certain dimensions of exile that he does not discuss in his theoretical reflections or political writings. His sense of being out of step with others is rooted not only in the political situation of the Middle East, but also in the specific dynamics of a particular family” (Barbour 297). This notion that Edward has of feeling disoriented because of his place or lack thereof in his family makes sense as family connections are the first markers of communities individuals make, and to feel alienated and isolated in your own home by your own parents as a child creates a sense of exclusion. It also shows the importance of personal writing as it seems to be the only place where Said writes about his family and their relationships. This section becomes more important and relevant when compared to Najla Said’s writings and the way her narrative reflects her relationship to her parents, and lack of communication.

Historic political events also affected Said’s identity and the way he saw Palestine and the world around him, which is my second theme in this chapter. Edward was 13 years old when the *Nakba* of 1948 happened. He mentions living in Jerusalem for a year (1947) where he was born, after the Belfour Declaration which allowed Jewish immigrants rights to huge parts of Palestine. Said laments his city in his writing, unable to accept the entry of European lives and the erasure of Palestinian ones (Said 111). Yet, while living in the city for several months, their home being Cairo, Said mentions that his parents were not very political. He writes how “It seems inexplicable to me now that having dominated our lives for generations, the problem of Palestine and its tragic loss, which affected virtually
everyone we knew, deeply changing our world, should have been so relatively repressed, undisputed, or even remarked on by my parents.” Said here is showing the impact the events of the Nakba had on all Palestinians, whether they secretly discuss it, like his parents, or clearly mention it like in other autobiographical writings discussed in my dissertation. Said even mentions his family’s nervous reaction when he started to become political and started writing about Palestine, many years after. In her chapter, “Revolutionary Silence: Edward Said and Najla Said,” Tahia Abdel Nasser comments on this contradiction in Said’s life. She states that: “Although the subject of Palestine was taboo, the dominance of the problem of Palestine and the dispersion of Palestinians permeate his memory of his youth” (Abdel Nasser 102). This luxury, the ability to build a different life in Cairo and almost carry on as if nothing had changed after the catastrophe of Palestine is a sign of the family’s socioeconomic status, but also the secrecy of the parents and their style of parenting. This scene continues to show how the parents did not share real events or emotions with their children, creating a strictly demarcated parent-child relationship that did not involve mutual decisions and discussions. This contradiction of a family that is silent when it comes to Palestine, and a young adult slowly understanding and becoming vocal about his country, is juxtaposed with Najla Said who shows in her autobiography how she did not necessarily feel a connection in her youth to her Arab or Palestinian heritage, although surrounded by a family who were very open about Palestine, using its language and commenting on its news. While Said’s parents were not articulate when it came to Palestine, one family member did affect Said’s understanding of his country of origin, which solidified and changed his entire life after the brutal 1967 war with Israel. He writes: “It was mainly my aunt Nabiha who would not let us forget the
misery of Palestine” (Said 117). Aunt Nabiha dedicated her life to helping Palestinian refugees and creating dignified lives for them in Cairo and other places.

What exacerbated Said’s feelings of alienation and feeling out of place was living in exile, in Egypt first, and then forced to move to the United States as a teenager to pursue his high school education and then college, never living in the Middle East again. Said creates a relationship between his personal writing and Palestine’s political situation, as he explicitly writes that his family did not suffer like most Palestinian refugees did, since his family were not technically kicked out of Jerusalem. Anna Bernard discusses Said’s exile in comparison to the plight of other refugees whom he discusses but clearly separates himself from: “By calling up collective experiences that are clearly not equivalent to his own experience” she states, “Said simultaneously links himself to the collective (politically) and distances himself from it (experientially): he asserts an emotional and moral sense of belonging while also intimating the mildness of his own unhappiness in comparison to Palestinian suffering” (Bernard 52). Here, Bernard shows how the personal intertwines with the collective in Said’s writing, as he is not only writing about his small inner world. Connecting himself to the cause of the Palestinians is Said’s first entry into the world of politics. Said proves that you do not need to have faced similar consequences in order to commit or connect. He also shows how, although he had faced a lot in his life, he cannot compare his struggles to the struggles of other refugees and exiles. As I explore below, Najla Said also tries to connect with refugees in her narrative, almost connecting her struggle with theirs, an exaggerated, far-fetched attempt.

Edward becomes more aware of his social status, but also his political situation and relationship to himself in Out of Place, especially in Egypt. His distaste for the Egyptian
word “Khawaga,” meaning foreigner, that his family was called after 1948, shows Said’s continuous understanding of his family status. It is here in this moment of memory that Said clearly begins writing about his relationship to and understanding of Palestine. He writes that his father accepted the term Khawaga, “whereas I chafed at it, partly because my growing sense of Palestinian identity (thanks to Aunt Nabiha) refused the demeaning label, partly because my emerging consciousness of myself as something altogether more complex and authentic than a colonial mimic simply refused” (195). Although it takes Said a few years to fully engage with what he likes, especially while pursuing higher education, what remains constant is the rapid loss of his country. He eventually writes about the disappointment of the 1967 war by connecting it to his own understanding of himself and his identity:

1967 brought more dislocations, whereas for me it seemed to embody the dislocation that subsumed all the other losses, the disappeared worlds of my youth and upbringing, the unpoltical years of my education, the assumption of disengaged teaching and scholarship at Columbia, and so on. I was no longer the same person after 1967; the shock of that war drove me back to where it had all started, the struggle over Palestine. (Said 293)

Said discusses his apolitical years and creates, perhaps, a dichotomy between what was going around him and his lack of reactions, which were promoted by his parents’ lack of political engagement. Said’s understanding of himself and his country began with what he was able to witness, what he heard or saw with his own senses, what he heard from his aunt Nabiha, and eventually what he learned through his own research and writing. His academic work stood in defiance of a biased understanding and representation of Palestine, prevalent especially in the United States. Said ends his paragraph above by connecting himself to the political events, showing how he not only became a different person, but also got involved with communities, conferences, and other Palestinians. It is out of such
a horrific event that Edward Said the political commentator, the Palestinian spokesperson in the United States, and the analyst was born. Born, yet out of place still. In her analysis of Said’s autobiography, the Egyptian writer and Said’s friend Ahdaf Soueif discusses Said’s place in the world. She concludes that “Perhaps the role of the public intellectual is the only one that will allow (perhaps necessitate) Said's fluid identity, the only ‘place’ where he can be not out of place. In the same way, his advocacy of the Palestinian cause is the closest he can come to regaining the homeland he never had” (Soueif 95). Soueif indicates that Said’s role as an intellectual, the person who writes about Palestine and is critical of the world around him, is the role that might give him true belonging. She ends her statement by addressing his lost homeland, maintaining that Said’s writing about Palestine might return Palestine to Said, but I would argue, not Said to Palestine, as he dies in NYC, and is buried in Lebanon near his mother’s grave.

Another theme that haunts Out of Place is Said’s chronicles of his body’s journey through illness, also seen in his daughter’s narrative. In Said’s self-portrayal, he connects his body and its ailments to his relationship with his parents and the way he saw himself, to politics, and eventually to his autobiography, which he starts to write after seeing his life flee away from him. Said’s first discussion of his body starts with his childhood, where he mentions several visits to the doctors, and the cautious manipulative eyes of his parents surrounding him, making him feel self-conscious. Said mentions several incidents, starting with chopping his curly hair that made him look “sissy,” taking him to a special doctor for his back, his hands, and much more. As I had mentioned before, Said is able to look back with generous, forgiving eyes, yet he writes bluntly about his relationship to his parents as it pertains to his body. Discussing his feelings, he writes, “What I cannot completely
forgive, though, is that the contest over my body, and his [Said’s father’s] administering of reforms and physical punishment, instilled a deep sense of generalized fear in me, which I have spent most of my life trying to overcome” (Said 66). This reflection by Said exemplifies one of my mini themes in this chapter, which is the long-lasting effects of parents. At times, it becomes difficult to read what Said had to endure, even as a young adult, especially with certain private matters that Said delves into for, I believe, the sake of honesty and documentation. Yet, there is never an incident that is mentioned that seems to be mentioned out of callousness or in order to shed a bad light on a family member. The same honesty is used by Najla Said in her portrayal of family members, yet with different effects, as I analyze later in this chapter.

Edward Said does not only connect his body to the way his parents treated him or saw his minor illness or deforms, but he connects his cancer with political events happening in the world, as well. Edward first finds out about his diagnosis while abroad, hosting a conference with other Palestinians about the Madrid Peace Talks. While he shows his disappointments with the political vacuum after the emergence of the Palestinian Liberation Organization and the end of the Gulf war, he deals with another disappointing news regarding his own health. This minor detail connects the personal with the political, once again. These two different events, the Palestinian cause and Edward’s cancer, are two losing battles, at least in his lifetime. Regardless of how much Said works on issues regarding Palestine, as well as his body with chemotherapy and medicine, he is not able to cause much effect, or show real tangible results.

Finally, Said connects his cancer to his creativity and specifically to writing his autobiography. As Said describes the only journey he underwent back to Palestine (that is
also written about in his daughter’s autobiography), he explains his timeline. He writes:

“These details are important as a way of explaining to myself and to my reader how the time of this book is intimately tied to the time, phases, ups and downs, variations in my illness” (Said 216). This is not Said’s first time addressing his readers, which gives an element of friendliness and closeness. Said’s commentary about the relationship between his illness and writing could explain his fixation with his body in the text, and the many details regarding the way he and others saw it. He connects the two by stating: “Both tasks resolved themselves into details: to write is to get from word to word, to suffer illness is to go through the infinitesimal steps that take you through from one state to another” (216).

Stating that both writing and suffering are processes that take steps is a unique way of comparing his illness to his writing. There is something mechanical in Said’s way of writing about his illness; the same could be told of writing and discussing his book. While at certain moments we feel sadness or pity towards Said, he does not allow the readers much room to delve into their emotions as he himself does not. I would not say that Said’s writing is devoid of emotions, but there seems to be an urgency, a need to fulfill his task of writing about a lost world, perhaps before he loses his own life. Regarding his trip back to Palestine, we actually get more details, especially about the famous incident of him throwing a stone towards an abandoned Israeli outpost in his daughter’s book.

Said’s Out of Place is both personal and collective. We hear the voice of Edward the child, the young adult, and the one that everyone knows: the academic, the Palestinian advocate, the professor. Yet we also get to know his family members, especially his parents, and his aunt Nabiha. We hear about other famous Palestinian figures, specifically Charles Malik, whom Said names and discusses his betrayal to the Palestinians, especially
in the Lebanese civil war. Said shows how his identity was affected by his parents, by language, and especially by exile where he concludes his life in this short sentence: “To me, nothing more painful and paradoxically sought after characterizes my life than the many displacements from countries, cities, abodes, languages, environments that have kept me in motion all these years” (Said 217). Here, Said connects his exile to movement. Edward was in constant motion, whether as a young adult moving from Palestine to Cairo, to Lebanon, from one school to the next, from one house to the other, or even as an undergraduate becoming a graduate student. Even as an academic, stationed in NYC, he was trying to affect and shift (move) the perspective on the Palestinian cause. Said’s identity revolved around his understanding of himself, where he came from, and his body. Lastly, Said writes in his autobiography about the loss of Palestine, and how it took him years to be able to fully be involved with the cause, the year 1967 being the catalyst. Through his many detailed examples and studious personality, Said is capable to present his different selves in a critical, deep, yet also honest and authentic way.

**Arab American Identity: A note from the dissertation writer**

I want to shed light on the sometimes hyphenated identity of “Arab-American” before moving to the autobiography of Najla Said. This identity, in its limited manner, does define both the father and his daughter, yet it seems it is discussed much more in the writings of Najla, perhaps because she was born and raised in NYC. Hosam Aboul-Ela brings examples of why it is important to read Edward Said’s *Out of Place* as an ethnic autobiography, that of an Arab American, arguing in “Edward Said's Out of Place: Criticism, Polemic, and Arab American Identity,” that what connects the experience, but
also the writings of many Arab Americans is their dissidence toward US foreign policy, especially of areas of the Middle East. In *Out of Place*, Said sheds negative light on imperialism and colonialism seen in the American and British academic systems, the collapse of the Egyptian monarchy, and ending with the Nakba and occupation of Palestine. Aboul-Ela’s major example is of Said connecting his personal narrative to global politics. He writes: “Unlike many other American memoirs of that moment, these interpersonal scenes and events are inextricably tied to global politics” (Aboul-Ela 25). Reading Edward Said’s book in this way, that of an Arab American, creates a tension in understanding his daughter’s text because although she does mention global politics, there does not seem to be any opinion about the action itself or the driving force of much of US politics. Najla Said only writes about how these actions made her feel, usually ashamed or scared of her Arab identity. There is, thus, no opposition to U.S. foreign policy, only a reaction to it, which I will show shortly.

Said, however, always grappled with his identity, as my analysis above shows, especially as a child living in an Arab country. He writes of a difficult childhood in Egypt as he grew up knowing he is Arab, yet he did not speak Arabic much, nor was his father considered Arab by other Egyptians because of his U.S. citizenship. Said’s father’s understanding of his status is puzzling, yet I believe it relates back to that moment in time. In a way, Said’s father was defying the British mandate of Palestine, by fighting for and with the U.S. Said even mentions how his father often hung a U.S. flag outside their business. He writes at the beginning of his narrative about all his mixed feelings: “Could ‘Edward’s’ position ever be anything but out of place?” (Said 19). It truly becomes easy to understand why Said names his book *Out of Place*. In comparison to his daughter, Said
later has a moment of surrender, writing how he feels content with being out of place, maybe because he has never truly felt *in* place, not in his body, not with his name, and not around his family. As Alan Confino, who was born and raised in Jerusalem, writes: “As a Palestinian, Said has written a testimony more eloquent than all his political writing; the personal is often more powerful than the purely political” (Confino 196). This sentiment shows yet again the importance of personal autobiographic writings as Said is only able to shed light on his familial relationships through such writing. And while there is consensus on the beauty of Said’s personal testimony, his daughter’s personal narrative does not compare well to his, as it becomes less communal and therefore less effective. I show how and why in the coming section.

*Looking for Palestine: Growing up Confused in an Arab American Family*

**Summary and background of Looking for Palestine and a note from the dissertation writer**

In *Looking for Palestine*, Najla Said writes about living in New York City, discusses her socioeconomic status, compares herself to her classmates, and deals with body issues, a famous father, as well as a brother interested in politics and history. She states that being a child of both Palestinian and Lebanese parents is the cause of her identity issues, as she writes about growing up perplexed in the United States, especially during difficult historical events such as the Lebanese civil war, the Gulf war, and finally Sep. 11th. While Edward Said wrote his autobiography in order to document a fleeing world, as he himself saw his body dealing with a relentless cancer, there seems to be no specific reason for Najla Said’s book, other than perhaps to transfer her one-woman play
“Palestine” into a book. Najla⁶ seems to have identified Lebanon as her country of origin, and while she may have found Lebanon, her search for Palestine does not come to fruition. Her title, while eye-catching and exciting for those interested in Palestine, and/or those in love with Edward Said, may easily come off as a disappointment for anyone who comes to the book wanting to find the legacy and brilliance of Edward Said’s critical thinking in his daughter’s writings about her life, or even to find writings about him and the way he parented. In “The Autobiographical Situation,” author Janet Gunn writes about the creation of a self, an “I” that is used in autobiography, and whether it is reimagined or represented in personal narratives. She states that: “The self…displays, not distorts, itself by means of language” (Gunn 9). In this quote, Gunn is responding to many autobiography theorists who claim that the self used in personal narratives is an invention, a creation that almost does not really exist. This creation, they argue, is due to the use of the medium of language, as well as memory and distance in time that may in some cases affect the authenticity of a narrative. Gunn claims that the self is displayed, meaning portrayed and represented, and not in fact distorted or merely created for the sake of writing. I have used this understanding of autobiography throughout my dissertation, and especially in this chapter as I discuss the important work of Edward Said, whose autobiography received much backlash and received fabrications, especially regarding his house in Jerusalem, and whether it truly belonged to his family. Palestinian identities and the selves they use while writing cannot be looked at as mere inventions that can be manipulated in order to receive more attention, since our country is claimed to be an invention as well, a land that had no people. Especially

⁶ I try to differentiate between Said the writer and Najla the representation character embodied in the text. While they mostly intertwine, it is important to understand the difference between them. Said is the writer; Najla is the character being written about.
for reading marginalized ethnic narratives, Gunn’s analysis and understanding of autobiography and the self is important. I aim to show in this coming section that the self that Najla Said portrays in her autobiography is not as developed and matured as her father’s or as other Arab women autobiographic selves. I will focus on the inconsistencies and lack of depth in the representation of a character that reflects a real human, regardless of who the writer’s father was and how important his writing and life meant to the Palestinian people.

In *Looking for Palestine*, Said depends on herself as the narrator and character of her book, yet she does seem to be using her father as a crutch, changing the norm of most female Arab autobiographic writing where women depend on their secondary characters for insight and support. By only spilling out secrets, especially about her father’s last days towards the very end of her book, Said shows that she is a smart writer who uses chronological order in her book for her advantage. Her manipulative tactics crystalize more when we compare her autobiography to her father’s, especially the way he presents himself and the way he has respect to the memory of his parents who have indeed caused him harm, whether or not knowingly. It is true that we do not have an account of Edward Said’s writing about his daughter to compare the two, but there is something seemingly disingenuous in the writing of Najla Said that I found important to discuss before beginning my analysis of her book. My reflection of her book is indeed personal and based on my own perception of the notion of family and Palestine where I was born and raised. This somewhat biased understanding of the book, however, will not taint my analysis, but perhaps enrich it and ask questions that offer deeper discussions of her book that barely has any reviews and critical articles discussing it.
Confusion about Confusion: Najla Said’s Identity Struggles

The most important aspect and the topic discussed the most in *Looking for Palestine* is identity. It is clear, even from the title, that Najla found it hard to fit in her society, the same way her father found himself out of place in his narrative written years before hers. Said’s first sentence, in fact, states it all: “I am a Palestinian-Lebanese-American Christian woman, but I grew up as a Jew in New York City. I began my life, however, as a WASP” (Said ch.1). One can see here how Najla uses most of the possible identity words that can fit in two sentences. Throughout the narrative, Najla discusses her relationships to the Jewish people of her neighborhood and her friends. There is a contestation that is not clearly understood by Najla, especially as a young woman. She is not yet able to discuss how her awareness that the Israelis instigating the war in Lebanon where her mother is from, and the Israelis occupying Palestine where her father is from are of the same Jewish faith, affects her personal life. Said focuses her discussion much more on how others perceive her, than how she saw life around her. Said writes about her confusion: “I struggled desperately to find a way to reconcile the beautiful, comforting, loving world of my home, culture, and family with the supposed ‘barbaric’ and ‘backward’ place and society others perceived it to be” (Said ch.1). Here Najla shows that she is comfortable with the homey Arab atmosphere of her family, but perhaps only inside her house, as she explains how her culture was represented or seen by her society outside. While one expects a young adult to seek refuge in her parents, or even her older brother, Said does not share moments where she sat down with her parents and asked them questions or told them her

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7 While both share the same religion, it is important not to conflate Jews and Israelis. While some Arabs and Palestinians use “Jews” to mean “Israelis,” they are fully aware that Judaism does not mean Zionism.
feelings. I am not insinuating that Najla, the young adult, is to be blamed, yet it does seem that the narrative is one sided, and perhaps this is how autobiographies operate, for they are representative of a person’s past self. However, as mentioned above, this book deviates from female Arab autobiographies discussed in chapter 1 of this dissertation where women seek other women’s support or value their families more, possibly because it is written by an Arab American, who lives in a society that encourages individualism and self-reliance. Whichever the reason, this narrative shows us how deeply confused Najla was (and continues to be for the most part), as if she had been raising herself on her own. Rarely are her parents present in her analysis, which focuses more on her mind and what was going on in her head.

Said discusses another aspect of her identity struggle, her embarrassment or shame at her living situation, comparing herself to her classmates who lived closer to each other and away from her neighborhood on the Upper West Side. Said writes about understanding, at an early age that “I didn’t need to be well versed in social stratification to figure out that among families I lived near, mine was one of the ‘fancier’ ones, but among the ones at my school, mine was one of the shabbier ones. It was all pretty well laid out for me by geography” (Said ch. 4). Said writes about her classmates not walking that deep into her area, and not even being allowed to visit her house unless her parents would pick them from school. She internalizes all those feelings, once again focusing on what the outside world tells her or makes her feel. Said as a narrator never shows her younger character relaying her confusion to her parents. Even at a young age, she feels different. Said writes about her insecurities: “But as I grew older and progressed into the first, second, and third grades, a sense of shame about my differences—my hairy arms, my weird name, my
family’s missing presence on the Social Register—took over my thoughts. My grandmother’s once ‘fancy’ accent began to sound simply ‘foreign’” (Said chapter five). This understanding of identity, and the easy shift from appreciating one’s difference to being estranged because of it, coming from a very young person’s perspective, shows how small details affect kids and it shows how the social structure of schools, regardless of how fancy or liberal, always seems to make some parts of society, usually people of color, feel inferior. It also portrays Najla’s inability to share her thoughts with her parents or family. While she tries to show lack of understanding when it comes to her parent’s political situation, she is very aware of the socioeconomic situation of her family. At one point, Najla shows insight by comparing her body issues (which I will discuss in the coming pages) with her father’s cancer, showing how she realizes at that age, that her own problems were insignificant in comparison to her father’s, almost giving her parents a pass for neglecting her. One is not sure if Najla’s feelings were internalized as a young adult, or if someone had told her that her issues are secondary. I will repeatedly discuss this introspection and show how it affects the narrative.

In “Writing Selfhood—from Taha Husayn to Blogging,” Anischenkova defines the author’s usage of the pronoun “I”, discussing how she understands writers as subjects, by stating that “I view autobiographical subjectivity as an individual’s metatextual accumulative construct of selfhood, a synthesis of one’s life experience, a highly complex hybrid of our various selves (gendered, national, linguistic, social, religious, and so on) that are in the state of perpetual transformation through time and space” (Anischenkova 4). This definition of autobiographical subjectivity shows how multiple selves unite when a person writes an autobiography, and how difficult it is to pinpoint who is speaking when, but
Anischenkova’s understanding of the subject who is writing is similar to Gunn’s understanding of the self I discuss above. I base my readings of Looking for Palestine on these understandings of autobiography and the self. There is no indication that Najla’s “various” selves as portrayed in her narrative are in constant “transformation” as Anischenkova discusses. We rarely get any update on Najla’s documented thoughts she had as a young adult and a person who was not too involved in politics, or perhaps understood the world around her. There does not seem to be a separation between the young Najla and the adult Said who is writing. What seems to be causing Said confusion, as mentioned above, is her triple identity of being Palestinian, Lebanese, as well as an American by birth and place of living. The political situations happening around the world, especially regarding Said’s nations of origin, caused her to always shy away from one of them. She writes about feeling embarrassed or scared of one of her nationalities or places or origin: “As a little Chapin girl in the early 1980s it was Lebanese that I never wanted to be” Said writes, and then adds: “The ‘Palestinian’ thing never made sense. It was this funny word that my dad would use to describe himself, and I didn’t even know it referred to a place. It could have been a dietary practice, a blood type, or a disease.” One is not sure why Said would disclose this insight, or not revise it as her writerly self. Yet of course autobiographies are written by one person, and we do not hear from the parents about how Najla reached that conclusion. Once again, there is no indication in the text that Said now looks more profoundly on her identity as a Palestinian, leaving her readers to assume that her old thoughts are her now believed ideas. What is clear in Said’s statement, however, is that the young adult was aware of the world around her, maybe through the conversations she heard her family have around the news, or through her teachers and classmates. In the
1980s, Lebanon was going through the aftermath of Israel’s invasion, and dealing with a brutal civil war that put it in the news, reasons that (very) few might agree would make the American younger Najla shy away from her identity as an Arab.

Understanding herself as an Arab, a huge part of Najla Said’s identity, was not easy, and in the following passage Said explains why she did not feel a connection or much of an understanding of her Arabness, yet once again her writing lacks depth and clear explanations. She states:

And was I really Arab? I didn’t understand how I could be. My father, the English professor, spoke Arabic sometimes with my mom and had family in Lebanon but sounded and seemed perfectly American to me. In addition, we were, as I have explained, Christian—Episcopal Baptist Presbyterian Quakers. Many of the girls I went to school with were Episcopalian, and I clung joyfully to the fact that I was a baptized Episcopalian. (Said ch. 5)

It is clear that Najla, the young adult and perhaps the writer of the narrative, understood being Arab as the very basic traditional understanding of someone who speaks Arabic, and that is why she uses her parents’ knowledge of other languages and their occasional speaking of Arabic as justifications of them not necessarily being Arab, in her mind and imagination. Once again, she is explaining her need to cling to a common factor, creating a link with the society of the school she was part of. This insistence is not present in Edward Said’s writing, as he did in fact critique his teachers and knew the differences his classmates insisted he had, yet it did not seem that he felt the urge to cling to specific similarities the way his daughter shows in the passage above. Said calling herself “sensitive” might be an explanation or justification of her thoughts and feelings at a young age. There is no indication, however, that these feelings change.
While Said shows that she was not able to connect and feel at ease with her identities, she shows an example of her brother who was able to reconcile all of these identities and become an exquisitely curious young man who was interested in politics and his origins. However, even in her descriptions of her brother, there is a sense of jealousy and blame. Perhaps opposite to many younger children in Arab families, for they are usually known to be the spoiled, more loved child, Najla felt that her older brother was different, but most importantly liked more by her parents. She has many lines of comparisons and complaints, but this sentence is a good example: “As far as I was concerned, Wadie was there to understand the things I could not, or did not, want to understand. He also seemed to me to be the more loved child” (Said ch. 1). Said’s explanation was that her parents had more picture albums of her brother. This instance crystalizes Said’s writing. There are a lot of general statements in Looking for Palestine, like this one, that do not have clear explanations. It is as if Said the writer is unable to present and critically understand her past in hindsight, or Najla has not come to terms with her present self. Once again, I attribute this inability to be introspective to her lack of a clear message or reason for writing. A person does not need to be dying in order to write a good autobiography (like her father), yet in comparison to the other authors this dissertation discusses, Najla Said is the youngest, and her writing lacks the depth of the older generation. What Said’s writing also lacks, I argue, is the technique of communal writing that many Arab autobiographers, especially women, use in representing themselves. While Said compares her childhood and identity crisis to her brother, her narrative is very individualistic. This approach is present in Arab and Arab American autobiography but is extremely limited. In Anischenkova’s concluding chapter, “Arab Autobiography in the
Twenty-First Century,” she summarizes the basic tenets of Arab autobiography, showing that the connection between personal and collective is one of these main points. She explains how “the authors strived to depict their life stories as representational of their environment and, therefore, as contributing to the history of their milieu, rather than ‘narcissistic’ self-portrayals that zoom in on their individual personas.” On the more modern autobiographies like Najla Said’s, she states: “In more recent works of the genre, the collective aspect is well suited to those modalities of autobiographical transmission where communal identities play a crucial role in the autobiographical process” (Anischenkova 198). I am not claiming that Said’s writing is “narcissistic,” but her narrative is individualistic, whether this may be a sign of her American personality, her young age, or something else entirely.

Of her brother’s complicated relationship at his school, Said continues, again separating herself from her brother: “Wadie felt out of place at his school too, but for a reason I didn’t yet understand: because he was an Arab boy surrounded by Jewish ones whose parents were wary of our family. The result was that, as I grew increasingly embarrassed by our background, Wadie grew more defiantly proud of it” (Said chapter 5). And in another place, she states: “He did not have the luxury, as I did, of hiding behind the shields of childish ignorance and female preciousness. But perhaps, in the end, this helped him avoid some of the identity issues I stumbled over later” (Said chapter 1). In these two quotes, Najla is struggling to understand why her brother found it easier to go through his life, or even more importantly, why she found it hard to do so. Slowly, she shows more maturity and a better reflective “I” than previously shown, yet only when comparing herself to her brother. Eventually Said uses the excuse of being the youngest, but also being female
as reasons for her extra layers of confusion. In her first statement, she recalls her brother’s state of being out of place because of being the only Arab among Jewish classmates, yet, perhaps until much later, she is not able to understand why. In the second statement she claims Arab traditions put more pressure on him to become a person who was more interested in politics and thus Palestine, and to understand it better. Said does not explain her usage of “female preciousness” and as I mention above, she seems to generalize again, by not giving clear examples. While it is understandable that the younger Najla would feel these feelings, the writer Said should have been able to provide justifications and explanations.

Looking for and Finding Lebanon

While Said uses Palestine as “clickbait” in her title, her narrative does not seem to be concerned with finding this Palestine she was looking for in that title. Said mentions Lebanon several times and even visits the country with her family, and then alone, as a way to heal her broken self and her body after her father’s passing, in the place he was buried. There is no mention why Palestine was not visited that frequently. Said does spend a few pages discussing the famous and only trip to Palestine she took with her family, and because she was suffering from an eating disorder while on that trip, issues with her body haunt that section. As a result, I have decided to discuss representation of Palestine and body images under one section in discussing Looking for Palestine. Said describes how because she was overwhelmed by her eating disorder and her mental condition, she was not able to enjoy going to their relatives’ houses. She hated being followed by a reporter who was documenting her father’s first journey back to Palestine (knowing it might be his last). Even the way Said writes about the journey and the reasons her father embarked upon
it lacks emotional and cultural understanding, especially, again with no examples or justification, as she blames her culture and family for her own indifference and lack of interest in politics. Said writes about her brother’s ease into treading the line between East and West by stating that:

He was also, I am not going to lie to you, the son in an Arab family, and no matter how unconventional and mixed-up we were, I knew that for my dad the return to Palestine was a lot more about him and my brother bonding than it was about me and my edification. Sure, my daddy adored me, but I was kind of like his little doll. Little girls like me didn’t need to know about serious things; that was the message I received. And it was one of the reasons I hadn’t felt more motivated to learn about my culture. Wadie, the son, was going to carry on our name; why should “little Naj” be burdened with the knowledge of her history? This was clearly the family’s thinking, and for much too long, I accepted it. (Said ch. 11)

We never hear or read, from this narrative or Edward Said’s brief description of his trip to Palestine in *Out of Place*, that it was a bonding exercise between the father and son. Said claims she had received “the message,” but never explains who told her this, or why she felt this way. Writing that it “was clearly the family’s thinking” above is ironic as neither the thinking, nor the clarity is evident in this narrative. It is true that in most cultures, men carry their family’s name, but that is no reason for a woman to not be interested in her ancestral culture, especially since we see a lot of Arab and American women keeping their family name, no hyphenation needed. Being unable to carry the family’s name does not connote mistreatment or lack in the ability to connect to a culture. Once again, Said writes general statements, blames others for what she thinks are mistakes or negligence or lack of motivation, and expects the readers to go along with it. The only justification I have of Najla’s thinking is that she was younger and the time period was different, perhaps with more hostility towards Arabs in the United States. Once again, there does not seem to be separation between the writer Said and her younger self Najla who felt these feelings, at
least none that is clear in her narrative. Perhaps it was different to console two identities before, especially for women, yet I do not believe that Said was able to show why she felt uninterested in politics or rejected from the discussion, especially since a few pages after the paragraph above, she mentions her father motioning to her to join the men’s circle while in conservative Gaza. They were discussing politics, and this action, I would argue, is her father ushering her into “their” world, making sure his daughter and son were both involved in political discussion (Said ch. 11).

The Palestine that was transmitted from Edward Said’s family into him, especially through his aunt Nabiha and the year that changed it all (1967), is not the same Palestine that Najla sees when she visits. Dealing with an eating disorder, she was more inside her head and perhaps thus unable to understand the significance of the trip. Nonetheless, she writes, quite poignantly, about expectations: “There it was, speeding by my window: the Promised Land. It looked to me like nothing but a horrifically frightening place. There was greenery, but I noticed only shrubs. There was water, but I noticed only desert. And everywhere that there was a small Arab town it seemed to be surrounded by concrete slabs of unmovable earth. These, I learned, were the ‘settlements’” (Said ch.11). This analysis of Palestine is personal, and clouded by an emotional physical disease, is not an analysis so much based on expectations versus reality since it does not seem that Palestine was very much in the imagination of Najla⁸. In a rare moment, Said, the writer, shows how Najla, her young, troubled self, only saw the negative, only saw the settlements and dry land.

⁸ Read more in chapter 3 about real and imagined Palestine.
There is, however, a moment of deep connection that Najla draws with other Palestinian children. She starts:

They, like me, were silent. They very clearly had no control over their surroundings. They were simply born into this history, and just like me, they had no memories of a Palestine other than the one in which they lived. But unlike me, they knew no other outside world, and in their ignorance of another reality, they seemed so sweet, so innocent, so playful, so normal. (Said ch. 11)

This creation of a connection between Najla and Palestinian children is, nevertheless, far-fetched. Stating that both “had no memories of Palestine other than the one they lived” is confusing since she had just arrived and did not carry any memories (that as readers we know of), while the children she observes were born into a land that knew them and knew their generational lineage. Said’s understanding of and connection to the refugees stands in stark contrast with Edward Said’s narrative where he distances himself from the plight of refugees yet represents them. Najla’s guilt is understandable, since she continues to reflect on her reality and the children’s suffering, yet again it seems she blames her circumstances and place of birth. Said later states that her trip to Palestine “added yet another dimension to my anorexia: I wanted desperately to suffer, not just for my daddy but for all of Palestine as well” (Said ch. 11). Eventually, a few days before she starts college and after her trip to Palestine, Najla has a meltdown and tells her father that something is wrong with her, and it seems that only then do her parents see her ailing body and protruding bones. They take her to a therapist, and she goes on a diet and slowly improves. Said writes about that moment: “When we got home, my parents continued…asking me repeatedly how they had failed me, why I wanted to hurt them, hadn’t they given me everything? And, perversely, for the first time in a long time, I felt acknowledged” (Said ch. 13). It seems Najla felt acknowledged because for the first time
she was honest and had finally told her parents how she had been feeling. She does not state why she eventually spoke up to her parents, but only that she was pleased that they felt some guilt, and that she received attention, appropriate feelings for someone her age. Perhaps connecting her journey of starting college with a new chapter of honesty and working towards a healthier body show maturity and wanting to create a new self for that period of her life.

Najla’s journey and experience in Palestine is limited, and what eventually causes her to feel physically and mentally better are therapy and time, but also Lebanon and her connection to her mother’s family. In her last chapters, Said shows how she slowly starts to belong to Lebanon, while still unable to come to terms with her multiple identities, showing how being Arab American is different than Palestinian or Palestinian American, and eventually she shows how the events of Sep. 11th made her more aware of her identities, perhaps forcing her to come to terms with how people now perceived her. Said writes about going to college and feeling like the daughter of a famous man, but not knowing what to do with her emotions. Writing about creating “exotic” caricatures of herself, she states: “I knew what Orientalism was about, and I was perfectly happy to let a nice all-American boy see what I was like for a minute or two, and then go back to his girlfriend” (Said ch. 13). This shows Najla struggling with her perception and finally beginning to understand her father’s work and place in society, as she grew up. Said’s personality shines and her writing becomes a bit deeper and more sophisticated, however, when she goes to Lebanon. She, like her father before her, connects politics with her ailing body, yet she does it in a more positive way. She writes about going back to Lebanon and “As the country flourished and reemerged from the ashes of the fifteen-year civil war, I found myself flourishing too.
It took some years, of course, but I slowly began to be able to nourish myself, not only with the food my relatives fed me but with the love that they gave me, and the opportunity to be part of a culture that embraced me fully” (Said ch. 13). This connection to the body is similar to the notion her father uses in Out of Place in connecting the personal with the political. What is different here is that Najla is somehow finally able to belong to a place. It is not the Palestine she was looking for, but it is an Arab country, and her self-confidence seems to grow, especially since she writes that after the Oslo Accords, people who were not Palestinians assumed that the conflict had ended, and she could easily “avoid” her “Arab-ness” while in the United States (Said ch.13). Her connection to a homeland became stronger, yet the notion of being Arab in America or even liking other Arabs (especially men) did not solidify. In the next chapter, after Sept.11th, which of course created the largest separation between the two identities for most Arabs and Muslims (and forced other people of color to do the same), we hear Najla surprised that her new Palestinian American friend likes Arab men. She writes that she was “fascinated” upon hearing the news (Said ch.14). Said does not discuss her fascination nor her confusion as to why an Arab would feel surprised that other Arabs liked each other!

Said’s Palestine seen through Looking for Palestine is a broken country with scattered refugees; perhaps not a place to be visited, since she does not travel there again. Maybe she did not have close family she could visit, but her text never mentions her reasons. Only in her last chapter does Said write this sentence about the existence of Palestine in her head: “Though I never returned to Palestine, Palestine always returns to me.” This return, incidentally, happens while she is in Lebanon, and while she thinks of Palestinian refugee children there. She, however, creates a separation between herself and
the Palestinians in Lebanon by questioning their differences, and discussing how she is not seen as Palestinian there. She ponders their differences in a set of questions, where she asks: “because I am not ‘one of those people’ in the camps? Because I have a U.S. passport and a famous father? Because I am a Christian? I hate that the Palestinians in the camps are becoming refugees again, and I am drinking wine on a balcony” (Said ch.15). Najla appears to be questioning her privilege here. She wonders if her father’s fame or her Christian faith contribute to her disconnect and difference when it comes to Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. While Najla’s feelings, seen in this section, are understandable, and she is slowly able to present a separation between herself and the refugees, there seems to be a one-dimensional understanding of Palestine in her text. It is the image of Palestine that is hurt, that is seen on the media as broken, its citizens refugees. She does not give this treatment to Lebanon, which has also seen wars and civil unrest, yet to Said, Lebanon is able to rise again and provide her with nourishment. She writes after seeing white women holding signs and protesting for Palestine in NYC, while she is unable to or not sure how: “that words are so powerful, because ‘Palestine,’ that word, makes me want to cry” (Said ch.15). This awkwardness in dealing with her emotions regarding Palestine and her inability to even protest show her continuous confusion and struggle.

Tahia Abdel Nasser reads Looking for Palestine in a positive way, claiming that Said does reach a moment of acceptance, alluding that her solo show “Palestine” is a sign of that conclusion. She writes about Said’s connection to her identity: “By the end of the memoir, she has become Arab American in concert with that particular post-9/11 historical moment and, although she has found solidarity with an Arab American theatre group, she directs her creative energies to a solo show devoted to Palestine” (Abdel Nasser 108).
Using the word “although” here shows that Abdel Nasser believes that Said is not only accepting her new identity as both Arab and American, but also seeing herself as Palestinian, and thus the title and focus of her play, which brought about her autobiography. While I agree with Abdel Nasser that there is some sort of “surrender” that she calls acceptance, I, like everyone who has reviewed the book, attribute Said’s change to the events of Sept. 11th, where the creation of a hyphenated Arab-American identity was crystalized, and Arabs in the U.S. became Arab Americans. Perhaps if Najla visited Palestine more, she would also see and hear a different Palestine, a Palestine that is thriving although bombarded, a Palestine that produces genius literary works, and a Palestine that welcomes its exiled citizens. In my poetry analysis in the next section, I discuss my own understanding of Palestine, describe its multiple faces, and show how a Palestinian poet sees and writes these nuanced understandings of Palestine that Najla Said’s writing lacks.

Said concludes her last chapters by mentioning her connection to an Arab American theater group where she finds some solace. She writes about losing her father and his last days, which is extremely touching and haunting. In fact, in the book’s review in *The Journal of Holy Land and Palestine Studies*, Ron Dart writes that the “tale so well told by Najla is the extended period of her father’s death and the final phase of his journey – touching and tender, moving and painful were the final days of Edward Said – Najla entered this difficult period in the best way she could at the age and stage she was in 2003” (Dart 137). Here, Dart is continuing this idea of a writerly self and an autobiographical self that is separate in autobiography, which is one of the main themes in this chapter. Dart makes clear that whichever way Najla presented her reflections, especially about her father’s last days, she did so at the age she was at the time. This is, then, the younger Najla speaking.
While I agree with Dart’s description of this powerful section, I feel that some of these moments could be perceived as private. However, that is the beauty of autobiography, I believe. It tells you what you want and do not want to hear. It forces you in some instances to be blunt and present the private. Perhaps this happens to writers of autobiography as well, where they feel somehow obliged to narrate certain moments, even if it sheds a negative light on them, or in the case of Najla, on others, since she wanted to be authentic to the self she was when she was younger and had witnessed these moments. As I have argued in this chapter, this is almost the same self she continues to show in her narrative. While Edward Said ends his book stating that he has become accustomed to feeling and being out of place, his daughter Najla writes at the beginning of her narrative that: “Letting go of the idea that I had to have one identity, one way to describe myself, one ‘real me’ hasn’t left me any less confused about who I am, but it has certainly left me inspired, engaged, interested, complicated, and aware. And I’d rather be all of those things than just plain old ‘American,’ or plain old ‘Arab’” (Said ch. 1). There is a sense of contentment and understanding in Najla’s sentences, and although she seems wary of happy endings and still insists that understanding herself is perhaps an ongoing process, she is maybe better equipped to handle her confusions. Said, in the present moment, the one who is introspective and only seen a few times throughout the text, writes about how theater has helped her and how she felt connections and has helped other young women with their body issues. Yet, again, she insists: “None of that has made me less of an Upper West Side princess. None of it changes the fact that I started and finished school in America, that English is my first language, that I still live in New York” (Said ch. 15). It is not clear if Najla thought that connecting through art with other Arabs or speaking about her identity
would change where she is from, but what is evident, I argue, is that the Said who is writing is still confused and unable to accept both of her identities without confusion, or to understand that so many people live intersectional lives and are, one way or another, able to be themselves and seamlessly transition from one identity to the next.

In her concluding sentences in her book review, Annie Bostrom writes in Said’s defense: “Said's memoir is both a dear tribute to her father's work and proof that acceptance of one's roots—the hurdle to success and success itself—is most always hard earned” (Bostrom 12). While I agree that it is difficult to come to terms with one’s identity, Said does not seem to have been able to admit success. What Said’s book lacks, I think, is more contextualizing, and perhaps a little bit of an outward look, instead of only focusing on what is going on in her head. Some critics, on the other hand, view Najla Said’s work as lacking the political criticism Arab American writers often portray. Other critics accept Najla’s role as merely a storyteller. The editor Jenny Davis concludes her review in the Wesleyan Argus by discussing Najla Said’s role, stating that: “Said does not take sides or resolve her feelings about international conflict, nor does she dwell on it…Said is not an intellectual like her father. Rather, she tells stories: most notably, her own, distilling enormous conflict into personal experience.” Davis then quotes Said saying: “I don’t do [my father’s] work…. I’m an actress, I’m not an activist. I hate going to protests…I’m a storyteller” (“‘Looking for Palestine’: Memoir Explores Politics of the Mind”). It is true that Said translates conflicts into personal narratives, and while storytelling is an honorable task that most writers excel at, when it comes to autobiographies and personal narratives, the stories told somehow always mirror society and perhaps explain how the individual interacts with their societies. Said’s narrative does not show in-depth analysis of her
interactions. Her writing only showcases her lack of contextualizing and her hyper focus on internal issues and surroundings, like her anorexia and her lack of communication with her family. We only get the result of the circumstances, and not an explanation or justification. As a literary text, Said’s book is written with a clear, concise, yet uninformed voice. While I see her confusions as a result of her ignorance and lack of communication, others see them as human, and perceive her honesty enticing. Amy Frykholm, for example, writes positively about Said’s confusions, coming to the conclusion that “As we watch Najla stitch together an American identity from the patches of cloth that have been given to her, we begin to see that the wounds inflicted on Najla by a complex family history and a misunderstanding culture are the source of her gifts” (Frykholm 55). While I do agree that out of pain comes learning, and often art and creativity, I do not think that what wounded Said was her “misunderstanding culture.” There is no clear answer as to why Najla did not feel like she belonged in her society, while other members did.

Reading Edward and Najla Said’s autobiographies, with their levels of difference, shows a diverse understanding of Palestine and Palestinian autobiography that changes according to the writer, the time the narrative was written, and the personal reasons for writing. Themes such as identity, relationship of body to politics, and the representation of Palestine vary accordingly. Both Edward and Najla were able to show how families affected their perception of themselves and the world around them; both used different kinds of representational “I,” which Said the father uses more critically and complexly than his daughter; and while Edward found his Palestine, Najla is still looking. My poems that I will analyze in the coming sections show similar notions of representing the homeland.
Laila Shikaki’s Poetry: Nuanced Poetic Versions of Palestine

The three poems which I will discuss in this chapter all share a nuanced expression of Palestine, as seen through the eyes of a Palestinian student about to return home. In “My Palestine Stands Still” we are introduced to a speaker answering the call of her country, in “Watani: My Homeland” a speaker is almost reprimanding her country for the things she has lost, and in “I Stop Writing,” Shikaki continues her trend seen in chapter 1 of meta-writing, as well as missing her homeland and writing because and despite of it. Read together, these three published poems show Palestine in three different ways, at first as a lover who needs her writers; then as a country that takes away people; and lastly as a missed entity that creates tension and harm. These are three unique poems, yet there is harmony in them and through them. Shikaki’s poems show Palestine in its different phases, never missing an opportunity to show her love and need for her country, and while the story is not one dimensional, the love remains unconditional. It is worth mentioning that Shikaki’s life and experience differ from Edward and Najla Said’s, but this is exactly what I am arguing here. I am not stating that every Palestinian writer, especially those I have chosen to discuss in this dissertation, share similar life stories, or even write about Palestine similarly. I am arguing instead that because these modes of writing differ, we can find a diverse set of writing and representation that allows for a better understanding of Palestine and its writers. Palestine is no longer seen as a broken, fragile woman in need of protection, nor is she represented as a romanticized image of a lost past and a magical holy place. Palestine and its representation depend on the person, her sociopolitical background, and mode of expression.
In “My Palestine Stands Still,” the speaker describes Palestine as a brutalized lover. She writes that her female lover is being poked and shaven. This image of Palestine as a female lover mirrors many descriptions of Palestine used by male poets, yet in this poem, and because its poet and narrator are females, it is seen or looked at differently, as perhaps unique. There seems to be a bond here, a relationship between two females, a sisterhood of some sort. This lover has her memory removed and “her rough exterior” destroyed (Shikaki 5). The second stanza describes how lands full of olive trees “that were once with care/ and delicate hands rooted in her brown/ skin, were uprooted with bulldozers,” showing the effects of the occupation (Shikaki 6-8). This lover is also “sprinkled with blood,” a verb seldom seen in such a dark way, as “sprinkle” usually connotes to something happy and positive (Shikaki 9). The first two stanzas are heavy in somber and concise images. Mixed with the possessive pronoun “my” in the title, they collectively create a violent atmosphere that is rarely seen in poetry about Palestine. Usually, Palestine is portrayed as a female in need of help9, but this lover, although brutalized, appears to be strong and demanding.

Shikaki continues the rough description by discussing the requests of this lover, once again creating an image or representation of an active, demanding entity. She writes in stanza three about how she responds to these requests:

coming back home isn’t enough anymore;
she demands blood.
thirsty she knows it won’t suffice.
she asks me to write about her,
and shyly I hold my pen down. (Shikaki 11-15)

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Shikaki’s response to her country wanting revenge and blood is through writing. She hears the calling to write and she obliges, shyly. The speaker then shares her process of writing, reminiscent of Said’s narrative about the process of writing his autobiography, especially while sick. The persona first asks questions about how to quantify her love for her country, calling her “first…and last love,” and describes how hard it is to remember other lovers and moments that one partner might forget because of distance and time. However, there is a strong relationship between this speaker and her country here, since she clearly states that her country knows her name, even without her memory intact. Shikaki writes as her concluding sentences: “my lover/ remembers my name/ she asks me favors/ I hold my pen; and I recall/ moments when I learned that she is not like any other lover” (Shikaki 18-21). This description of a lover that is both brutalized, yet still able to remember her lovers even when her memory is removed, is both sensitive and strong, violent and soft. Shikaki’s last line emphasizes the importance of writing as a way of resisting. Shikaki’s lover is thus a country that is far away, hungry for change, demanding revenge, and asking the writers to talk about her. The poet ends her poem by clearly writing that this lover is not equal to any, and she herself now remembers moments that solidified that knowledge. Shikaki responds to the calls of her country by writing, again a continuation of the resolution most Palestinian authors, in Palestine and abroad, reach. This poem and the autobiographies discussed in this dissertation could be an example of these demands answered. This description of Palestine is not the same that Najla Said briefly writes about in her book. What is clear here is that Shikaki’s depiction of Palestine is of a strong woman who knows her worth, regardless of her physical torn condition. This poem fits into our discussion of the representation of Palestine discussed above. Just like Edward Said had encounters with
different versions of Palestine as a child living in Jerusalem, as a nephew to his aunt Nabiha who cared for refugees after 1967, as an adult during and after his trip to Jerusalem, and after becoming a famous scholar who wrote about Palestine, Shikaki in her poem is describing one version of Palestine that asks her to write.

Shikaki’s second poem, “Watani: My Homeland,” creates another image of Palestine, one that is equally demanding, yet met with a little bit of resistance, especially at first. The poet begins with a shocking line, especially when it comes to the image of Palestine, which is usually represented as a martyred saint, a messiah on the cross, in most poems. Shikaki writes in her first lines: “Watani, my homeland/ because of you I have lost many lovers” (Shikaki 1-2). Read on their own, these lines are confusing and show some reprimanding, while the following lines explain the theme of the poem which Shikaki shows throughout her stanzas. The speaker shares how she lost these lovers:

they couldn’t leave their havens to live in my heaven.  
they refused to leave the land of water  
for a land that has none. (Shikaki 4-6)

Shikaki strategically uses the words “my heaven” to describe this version of Palestine, yet this heaven is lacking, in technology, in resources, and more. Shikaki continues to give examples of her lovers who have either left Palestine, or those who were not able to continue staying, and thus left the poetic speaker. This poem, however, shows different kinds of love and expressions of love than those between human lovers. In lines 11-16, the speaker shows how Palestine is portrayed by other poems and singers in many songs and poems, showing that the speaker is not the only one who perceives her country as a beloved, nor is she the only poet who expresses her love creatively. Her country does not lack lovers, and immediately in the following stanza, the speaker admits that she wants to apologize,
maybe for the embarrassment of leaving a place she grew accustomed to for the last two years. She mentions tears and apologies, but also a line that states the situation or place of the speaker, making the feelings more understood and real. Shikaki writes:

    the tears that are falling
    now are making me guilty.
    I shouldn’t cry; nobody cries before they see their lover. (Shikaki 18-20)

The words “now” and “before” state that Shikaki is in a liminal place, torn between two places, two feelings. Sentiments of this guilt and confusion can be found in the autobiographies of the Saids discussed above, especially the confusion Najla feels where she wants to belong to a place or an identity, but not being able to. Although Shikaki was born and raised in Palestine, even leaving her country for two years has caused her confusion and given her the ability to present her mixed emotions creatively, showing again that the representation of Palestine changes, just as writing and expression change.

Shikaki appears to be reprimanding her country for progressing without her, as she feels she has missed out. The representation of Palestine in this poem is of one that hurts, one that takes, and the speaker shows this clearly when she writes that her country promised to wait for her, yet it completely changed. Shikaki addresses her country and says that:

    “you built more streets/ buildings with blue windows reflecting the sun/ I’ve been told is everywhere, but I can’t feel it like that/ not here, not without you, not outside you.” (28-31).

In other poems, Shikaki writes about her friends’ children being born without her present and even her brother getting engaged while she was away, yet here Shikaki writes about the changing infrastructure of her country—fundamental, rapid changes. She is also displaying how she is unable to live a content life away from Palestine, only to contradict herself in the last two stanzas, showing yet again how unstable and uncomfortable a poet
feels away from her country, and how the representation of that country changes, ebbing and flowing, from anger and resentment to admiration and understanding. These contrasting emotions could be compared to Najla Said’s feelings regarding her Arab identity. She feels a connection sometimes, yet runs away from it; she visits Lebanon for a few weeks in order to heal her soul, but then she is surprised that her Arab friend likes Arab men. Said and Shikaki see Palestine differently, and they both represent Palestine and respond to its calling distinctly.

Shikaki’s second description of Palestine in “Watani—My Homeland” is different than the first description in “My Palestine Stands Still,” of a demanding lover who remembers without her memory intact. Both poems have similar elements of complying with the call to return and representing different mixed feelings about both the homeland and the current geographical place the speaker occupies. These similar emotions and more are conveyed in Shikaki’s last poem, “I Stop Writing,” which describes both the process of writing, and similar feelings about occupying two spaces and wanting to return home.

In “I Stop Writing,” the speaker finally explains her process of writing poetry. What is unique in this poem, however, is that it lacks the positive resolution shared by Shikaki’s other poems discussed in this chapter and the chapter before. Shikaki states, even from the title, that she stops writing “for an entire day” (Shikaki 1). Her following lines, especially in the first stanza, set the scene. Here we have a poet who seems to have writer’s block, and although she continues to write after pausing and giving herself space, she keeps on producing the same idea. There is a circular emotion represented in words such as “still” and “accustomed” where the speaker in the second stanza complains about only producing “words on paper” (Shikaki 7).
In Shikaki’s short and concise stanza, she summarizes her feelings which others in exile might also have. She writes:

I’m still away from where I belong.  
I still look downwards when I walk  
in Anaheim, California. (Shikaki 8-10)

And here for the first time, we have a name given to the other space that the poetic speaker occupies. Here, Shikaki confesses that she does not belong, and although in her previous poems she was torn between two spaces, in this stanza, at least, we do not see this. We see a poet stuck and unable to heal herself with poetry, we see a person unable to blend in with society, opting to look downward as she walks. Yet, familiar to Shikaki’s style, the poem is still more nuanced and complicated. Although the speaker does not belong, she hints at wanting to, just like Najla Said writes about wanting to identify and feel connections with her two cultures. Shikaki writes in her last and longest stanza that she sheds tears at night and she finally discloses her true feelings, although she writes that she will “never admit” them. In this stanza, Shikaki professes that she wants to be away from the occupation, but immediately acknowledges that she knows she has to fight it by returning back home. She writes about wanting to have an airport so she could travel on the spot, hinting at how easy life was for her in California.

Shikaki’s last lines below are worth quoting in their entirety because in them she does two things. The poet writes about what she wishes for, or dreams about first:

fall in love with a man who doesn’t know  
politics. write words about happiness,  
and nature.  
yet here I am.  
same words, on the same paper. (Shikaki 18-22)
Shikaki discusses love, but this time she shows the futility of being with someone who is apolitical. Here Shikaki creates a distinction between herself and Americans she meets, who might not even know where her country is, let alone its political background (Shikaki repeats this notion in her other poems, especially the ones I discuss in chapter 3). Secondly, she discusses how she wishes to write about “happiness,/ and nature,” yet of course it is clear that she is unable to let go of the idea of needing and then wanting to write about her country. Here, and for the first time, we see another aspect of writing. Whilst Shikaki does respond to the calling of her country, it seems she is frustrated with it in this poem. She wishes to write about other things, to casually fall in love, yet she remains unable to. The circle continues, because she writes in her last lines “yet here I am/ same words, on the same paper” (Shikaki 22).

Shikaki’s last poem does not explicitly discuss a lover in demand of writing, nor a country taking away its citizens’ lovers, but it does show that sometimes even a lover gets frustrated with writing only about her beloved. Here, we see genuine feelings about living in two places, imagining going home, and regretting unshared emotions, yet it does not seem like Shikaki blames any person for her feelings. In Shikaki’s three poems, we see unique descriptions of the poet, her country, and her mode of expression. This way of expression is similar to and also different than the autobiographies mentioned above. Through writing, Shikaki is able to detangle from the web of desire and guilt. Her poetic expression both frees and captures, once again showing that writing about a country while away from it has its complications and different representations on paper.

Shikaki’s three poems complicate the idea of representing Palestine. While Edward and Najla Said write about their respective understandings of Palestine, through analyzing
themselves and their background, Shikaki writes through her limited experience of traveling away from Palestine and homesickness. Edward sees many Palestines, Najla rarely sees one. In Shikaki’s poems, the poetic speaker makes of Palestine a personified lover that is endearing, but mostly demanding and possessive. It seems the more one reads about Palestine and its writers, who complicate and simplify their representational “I,” the more complicated the image and representation become.
Chapter Three: Lost Homelands: An Exilic Journey from Abstract to Real

Introduction

Nowhere is the journey back home to Palestine with its ups and downs and imaginary and solid pictures clearer than in Mourid Barghouti’s 1997 book *I Saw Ramallah*, which was translated into English by the Egyptian writer Ahdaf Soueif, and its sequel *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here* (2011). This chapter aims to show the contradictions that arise when a poet writes a memoir about a lost homeland, battling both his memory and a country changed by occupation, showing how a country becomes real through a journey back home. It centers family connections as the poet brings his son to visit their homeland, displaying a relationship between a father, a son, and a land. It showcases how politics can become personalized. Later in the chapter, I will discuss the poetry of Tamim Al-Barghouti, Mourid’s son, in order to show his representation of Jerusalem, Palestine’s capital. I will analyze how the understanding of and love for Palestine that his father carried, affected Al-Barghouti. The poem addresses Jerusalem as a female lover who tells Al-Barghouti that she only sees him, even though he is not allowed to visit her often. The final part of this chapter examines my own poetry that discusses similar issues of imagining a homeland with all of its contradictions, using family as a source of connection to the homeland, as well as reflecting on politics, thus showing how Barghouti and myself translate the sights, images, and emotions into writing. While Barghouti writes his accounts after taking the journey, his writing interweaves the past with the present; and while my poems that I have chosen for this chapter draw images from both temporary chosen separation and moments of return, they are written away from home, in anticipation of return.
Summary and background of *I Saw Ramallah*

*I Saw Ramallah* is an autobiography written about a moment of return to a land that was confiscated thirty years earlier. Barghouti recounts events of his return to Palestine in 1997 as he had left Palestine to study and could not return after the 1967 war. Mourid Barghouti discusses his first journey to Palestine, as he gives glimpses of his past and present and discusses family relationships, creating a distinctively told narrative of return. *I Saw Ramallah* is unique because it is written by a poet who discusses his writing processes, quoting lines of his poetry in his autobiography as he demonstrates the importance and value of writing, in a meta-writing style. In the introduction to *Metawritings: Toward a Theory of Nonfiction* (2012), Jill Talbot discusses this concept by saying: “in metawriting, writers admit, via self-consciousness, self-reference, and self-reflection, the artifice, the representation of the I, the author, the narrator, the essayist, and how that artifice shapes the artist’s reality. And vice versa” (Talbot xxii). Barghouti’s writing and the trip he undergoes reflect this process of narrating the self, and later I show how his manipulation of the present and past also shapes his autobiography. *I Saw Ramallah* takes the reader into a journey seldom taken before: to Palestine after the Oslo Accord that allowed a sham return for some of its exiled citizens. Barghouti writes in the present about a trip he had taken in the past, and this is a technique in autobiographical writing. What makes Barghouti’s writing exceptional is that he creates out of a very political place and life experience, a writing that can be enjoyed for its many nuances. In
his introduction to the book, the renowned Palestinian critic and writer Edward Said hints on this idea, writing: “Necessarily, there is a good deal of politics in Barghouti's book, but none of it is either abstract or ideologically driven: whatever comes up about politics arises from the lived circumstances of Palestinian life, which, most often, is surrounded by restrictions having to do with travel and residence” (Said ix). The everyday lived occupation is what concerns Barghouti as he discusses factual concrete images that he sees, coupled with his emotions and memory.

It is hard to imagine discussing *I Saw Ramallah* absent of the political situation that created it, however. What Barghouti gives his readers, instead, is a narrative that moves beyond the politically mundane, as Said suggests above, which is not easy to do, especially in writing about Palestine. Barghouti internalizes his mixed emotions as he returns home, telling personal stories, but weaving them with the stories of others, allowing the readers to witness a journey that is interesting, and at times mixed with disappointment, sorrow, and surprise. *I Saw Ramallah* is born out of the occupation and in response to its cruelties. This, I argue, makes it suitable to discuss under the realm of postcolonial literary studies. It is indeed a story about a return to a land that was stolen, that shows the concept of writing back that many postcolonial critics focus on in their analysis of postcolonial texts. The eighteen-year-old Mourid Barghouti should have been able to return to his country after receiving his education in Egypt, yet his country ceased to be his and as he writes, he could not find a wall to hang his diploma (Barghouti 2). Barghouti shows how he was asked to leave Egypt after he got married because of his political dissident views, how his brother passed away out of sorrow before returning to Palestine, and how his son was denied an Egyptian passport because of politics and was deported for a few weeks. Throughout his
journey back and even while he is in his country after finally returning thirty years later, Barghouti continues to discuss the occupation. He mentions martyrs, road signs with changed languages, and the new political class having returned to Palestine after the Oslo Accord of the 1990s. Even though Barghouti vehemently disavows the unequal peace process, he understands that his return to Palestine, and later the return of his son is made possible through that accord. Even though Barghouti is allowed to return for a visit, he begins his autobiography in a liminal place, that of the bridge, reminiscent of other postcolonial writings, especially ones that discuss journeys such as *The Return: Fathers, Sons, and The Land in Between*. In *The Return*, the Libyan author Hisham Matar begins his narrative in the airport, as he is returning to the country that imprisoned his father and kicked him out. And so while both authors are able to return, their journeys are not complete, nor their demands of a free country and ease of travel is guaranteed.

In Tahia Abdel Nasser’s chapter “Palestine Song: Mahmoud Darwish and Mourid Barghouti” from her 2017 book *Literary Autobiography and Arab National Struggles*, she suggests that the autobiography of Mourid Barghouti (and that of Mahmoud Darwish) be looked at as breaking geographic boundaries and steering away from traditional Palestinian autobiography. She writes about their distinction: “They represent a condensed experience rather than an extended narrative devoted to the totality of the poet’s life and focus on introspection rather than the narration of events” (Abdel Nasser 63). I will be thoroughly looking at Barghouti’s introspections, but also on his manipulation of narrative timeline in utilizing the past to reflect on the present. This is done, I later argue, in order to run away from certain emotions, but also to eventually create a more solid real picture of Palestine.
My main focus in this chapter, thus, is on the connection Barghouti has with the land, the interpretation and understanding of the journey back home that Barghouti undergoes, and how the image of Palestine starts to crystalize as he witnesses and writes, using the technique of time manipulation. This chapter also looks at family relationships and discusses generational understandings of Palestine. I also focus on the reasons why and how Barghouti’s two autobiographies *I Saw Ramallah* and *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here* differ, hinting to a less tense second writing because the pressure of the first return had already been discussed by Barghouti in the first book.

*I Saw Ramallah: Complicated Journey to a Real Palestine*

Barghouti begins describing the trip he has been on in *I Saw Ramallah* in a transitional place, on the bridge that connects Jordan to Palestine. Stating a sensory reality, he writes: “It is very hot on the bridge,” situating the readers in the present with factual statements (Barghouti 1). The chapter continues with a straightforward narrative about Barghouti’s backstory, as if he needs to get the weight of it off his shoulder so he can begin narrating the difficult journey he just came back from. By the end of the first few pages, he has explained how he became an exiled person. He writes, somewhat void of emotions, about graduating but not having a place to hang the degree. “I am awarded a BA from the Department of English Language and Literature,” he states. “And I fail to find a wall on which to hang my certificate,” showing his status and his young age as he was exiled from his home country (Barghouti 3). While mentioning the meaning of an exiled person, Barghouti foreshadows his journey, the one he has been on. He writes about the exiled displaced person as being “the one whose relationship with places is distorted, he gets
attached to them and repulsed by them at the same time” (Barghouti 3). It is in this perplexing description of places that I want to begin my analysis. According to Edward Said, an exiled person himself, “Exile is never the state of being satisfied, placid, or secure” (Said 290). It is not clear if in Barghouti’s description of the exiled person’s relationship with places quoted above, he means himself in Palestine, but this analysis will aim to show that a journey back to a place not seen for over thirty years, a journey of return, is no doubt created by a swirl of emotions. These emotions are complicated further when the land visited is an occupied territory that has been shaped and reshaped by the occupation. It becomes more difficult to describe scenes, as one is affected by desire and loss, all combined in one. While Barghouti sits in a taxi on his way to Ramallah after crossing three borders, he continuously takes the readers on trips of the past. He focuses on previous family trips and encounters with Israeli soldiers. Throughout each of these narrative moments, he starts to question his memory, wondering if he had been seeing Palestine and describing it in a romantic way, void of reality. He writes of his confusion: “I used to tell my Egyptian friends at university that Palestine was green and covered with trees and shrubs and wild flowers. What are these hills? Bare and chalky” (Barghouti 28) And here Mourid\textsuperscript{10} tries to rationalize with his thoughts and introspections, like the ones Abdel Nasser discusses in the quote above. He asks himself: “Had I been lying to people, then? Or has Israel changed the route to the bridge and exchanged it for this dull road that I do not remember ever seeing in my childhood? Did I paint for strangers an ideal picture of Palestine because I had lost it?” (Barghouti 28). Here he becomes wary of his memory, stating: “I said to myself, when Tamim comes here he will think I have been describing

\textsuperscript{10} I try to differentiate between Barghouti the writer and Mourid the representation embodied in the text. While they mostly intertwine, it is important to connote the difference between them.
another country” (Barghouti 28). For the first time, Barghouti mentions his relationship with his son, and how he has been sharing his love and knowledge of Palestine with him. Barghouti discusses their relationship with their land in his second book *I Was Born There, I was Born Here* where he shows Palestine to his son. I will discuss this generational understanding of Palestine shortly, but these few lines thus far show how confusing and full of contradictions Barghouti’s first trip back home is.

What is clear about Barghouti’s musings, however, is that the reason for him feeling “let down” about his journey back home is the occupation. For the first time, he was able to truly see how much Palestine has changed since his exile. Barghouti was taken aback by seeing Israeli flags and settlements. There is no single clear answer to Barghouti’s questions about remembering a land being luscious and then finding it bare. It is true that memory does play with the brain, making a person doubt his past, especially after so many years, and emotions do cloud remembrance, and so his dismay may have been personally related to his own memory. Yet, it is as true and well-documented that the Israeli occupation has been confiscating Palestinian lands and shaping roads. And when Barghouti continues to negotiate with his mind, asking it questions about his memory, he offers some answers, but in the format of questions. He wonders if he had been remembering his village of Deir Ghassanah and thinking of it as the entirety of Palestine. He wonders if he knows enough about his land, and then he focuses on what materializes in front of him: reminders of the ongoing settler colonial occupation. Barghouti even states: “You have to see them for yourself,” here addressing his readers and creating a moment of solidarity where he invites others to witness the changes, that are clear to the eyes, that have happened to
Palestine (Barghouti 28). And so already the en route return is distorted and filled with agony and disappointment.

Barghouti writes about Palestine becoming less of a physical place and more of an “Idea” as he discusses his return, thus creating a distinction between the real and abstract. At one point, he discusses the devastating effects of the occupation on thousands of Palestinians born away from Palestine, by writing: “This is it. The Occupation has created generations of us that have to adore an unknown beloved: distant, difficult, surrounded by guards, by walls, by nuclear missiles, by sheer terror” (Barghouti 62). And it is in this image of Palestine as a beloved that is far away, that Barghouti reaches a conclusion about what the occupation does: “The long Occupation has succeeded in changing us from children of Palestine to children of the idea of Palestine,” which could refer to his status before entering Palestine and writing about his journey. The term “children of Palestine” is interesting as Barghouti is seemingly seeing himself as a child of Palestine, showcasing a familial relationship between his homeland and himself. There is a mother-son relationship created, whether with the imagined or the later real sense of Palestine. On the other hand, Barghouti himself is a father to his real son, a child of Palestine himself. His son’s understanding of Palestine is as important in Barghouti’s books, and for this chapter, and I will discuss it in the coming sections. What is important in our discussion here, however, is that Mourid thought of the idea of Palestine, and it was an idealistic romanticized version. He shows his poetic idealistic side when he writes at the beginning of his narrative about the abstract understanding of both Palestine and exile. For example, he writes: “Displacement is like death. One thinks it happens only to other people” (Barghouti 3). It was only when he returned, through taking a physical journey back, that
the image of Palestine materialized. He became able to see the reality and became better equipped to form concrete sentences about his homeland. In fact, Barghouti writes specifically about his own village becoming less abstract and more real in *I Saw Ramallah*. He writes in one incident, “Now Deir Ghassanah is about to leave its place on the documents and become real” (Barghouti 65), and later: “Deir Ghassanah is no longer an idea or an entry in a file. She comes out of abstraction and looks at me as I cross her” (Barghouti 66). Here Barghouti creates an intimate relationship with his village, as it looks directly at him and welcomes him. This is the importance of embarking on such a journey.

As argued in the beginning of this chapter, the journey back home that an exiled person takes, if lucky, is not a journey one sided, full of happiness and joy. It is a nuanced journey filled with mixed emotions, more questions than answers, and fit to be written about, as it allows both Barghouti and the readers to witness and understand the brutality of an occupation that does not allow rightful citizens of a country, access to their land and past. Maha Habib states in her article, “Writing Palestinian Exile: The Politics of Displacement in the Narratives of Mahmoud Darwish, Mourid Barghouti, Raja Shehadeh and Fawaz Turki: “This movement backward, the return, is essentially a movement forward” (Habib 85). My aim for this section is to show that Mourid’s journey back home was filled with surprises and met with realizations that speak to both the journey itself, but also the way the poet decided to document it. Going back home, and even thinking of the past, and especially writing about it and documenting is part of this “forward” movement.

Barghouti discusses Palestinian symbols as he continues his analysis of the abstract and the real in his understanding of Palestine. Many Palestinians carry keychains in memory of their lost houses, wear chains of the map of historical Palestine on their chests,
and bracelets with the colors of their flags. Of these symbols, Barghouti writes: “Palestine at this moment is not the golden map hanging on a golden chain adorning the throats of women in exile.” When he writes this, of course, it is the moment of return, the moment Barghouti is inside his country, undergoing the journey of familiarizing himself with the swirl of emotions and images around him. What makes Palestine materialize and become real, Barghouti tells his friend, is “when we walk on Palestinian dust, and wipe it off our shirt collars and off our shoes, hurrying to conduct our daily affairs—our passing, normal, boring affairs—when we grumble about the heat in Palestine and the dullness of staying there too long, then we will really have come close to it” (Barghouti 23). Here Barghouti is stating that Palestine becomes real, and Palestinians close to it, not when they wear symbols on their chests, but when it becomes real for them, meaning when they visit and have the option to stay. Supporting this idea, Anna Bernard writes in her chapter, “‘Who Would Dare to Make It into an Abstraction’: Mourid Barghouti’s I Saw Ramallah,” that “Barghouti’s repeated refusals of a Palestinian national narrative which takes the Palestinian landscape as a static entity represented by an established set of signifiers present a cogent challenge to the idea of a Palestinian national consciousness based on a vanished national past instead of a shared civic future” (Bernard 78). So, Barghouti’s refusal to see the land as abstract, or its symbols, means not his refusal or rejection of its importance, but his need to see it as it is, without the romantic nostalgic look he has harbored for a long time. It is his need to see a future where he can stay, where Palestine can become his. Maha Habib writes about the exiled authors of Palestine: “The works of various exiles, various Palestinian wanderers reflect this sensibility: they represent the desire to regroup, recollect and redefine their present in an effort towards a movement forward” (Habib 72).
forward movement is based on a material understanding of Palestine that Barghouti comes to terms with as his narrative progresses.

What makes Barghouti’s return joyous, yet still filled with mixed emotions, then, is his relationships with Palestine through its people, not its symbols. In *I Saw Ramallah*, Barghouti continuously mentions family members, those who passed away like his late brother Mounif, whom Edward Said mentions in the introduction to the book as someone who “haunt[s] the book” (Said x), and national authors who were friends with the writer, but were considered like family. At one point, he weaves their deaths and birthdays, announcing that he stopped celebrating his wedding anniversary because years later, his friend and great Palestinian cartoonist Naji al-Ali was assassinated on that same day. He writes about not celebrating his birthday as well since it became the anniversary of the assassination of the Palestinian writer and thinker Ghassan Kanafani: “What anniversary after today, Naji?” Barghouti writes. “And what birthday after today, Ghassan? What should we remember and what should we forget?” (Barghouti 171). I am arguing here that this repetitive pattern of writing about people and relationships while discussing home connects the two together: it is as if a huge part of the uniqueness of Palestine is its people and their relationships, as if Barghouti deliberately mentions other people to share a wider more diverse story of his journey through Palestine.

It is through this mentioning of family members, friends who are like family, and other acquaintances that the journey home is completed, or at least presented to the readers. Barghouti is haunted by the ghost of his brother, as Said mentions in the introduction, and as readers, we get to hear other people’s journeys as well. *I Saw Ramallah* slowly becomes
a communal narrative, a narrative told by one person, but about so many. He starts his narrative by mentioning his brother’s, and by interlacing the past with the present, he takes his readers into a journey through home. From the beginning of his narrative, Barghouti mentions his grandmother, starting a trend of showing female relatives who are smart and strong. Later, he focuses on his mother, as well as his wife. As Barghouti is about to enter the borders of Palestine, he remembers deceased family members. He begins with his grandmother, and then uses the same line to introduce his father, then his brother Mounif with these lines: “they ruined the beauty of his heart and of his intentions. They destroyed forever his dream of seeing Ramallah—if only for a few days” (Barghouti 16). “They” here refers to the Israelis, and throughout the narrative, we get to hear his brother’s story as well. What is unique about this section in the book is that, once again, the relationships that Barghouti cherishes are not just familial. After mentioning his father and brother, Barghouti uses the same line to introduce both Ghassan Kanafani and Naji al-Ali, taking the reader on a tangent in such intense moments where, as readers, we are expecting to hear about the writer’s encounter with the Israeli soldiers on the border. Yet, we are taken to another intimate moment where Barghouti compares the posters he sees in the Israeli office, with the diverse intellectual posters of Kanafani’s office that he saw years before. Barghouti, I believe, continues to mention family members and past stories because he is making his narrative less abstract and more real by mentioning real people and real connections he has. He creates from his encounters, stories. From his disappointments, he creates lessons. He is making this journey as real as it can be while understanding that the people he mentions have passed, and he only has memories. But because those people are
well-known in the Palestinian scene, and their art is eternal, Barghouti’s connection to and understanding of his country becomes less abstract.

There are many moments where, as the narrative intensifies, Barghouti takes his readers on what appears to be a tangent but is actually a continuation or beginning of untold stories, thus manipulating a chronological narrative. When Barghouti was mentioning his mixed emotions in the beginning of his journey back home, discussed in the section above, he writes about the depression he feels as he sees Israeli flags in front of him, and then shifts to the first moment his entire family met in Jordan after the war of 1967. He writes about the reasoning of these shifts in narrative, saying: “Here I am, entering Palestine at last.” And before the reader rejoices and is able to breathe a sigh of relief, Barghouti continues: “But what are all these Israeli flags? I look out of the bus window and I see their flags appearing and disappearing at the repeated checkpoints. Every few meters their flags appear.” Eventually Barghouti states, after his disappointment: “My eyes do not leave the window. And images of times past and ended do not leave my eyes,” and it is here where he mentions having the best breakfast of his life, united with family, after months of separation, years ago (Barghouti 24). It appears that whenever Barghouti is overwhelmed with what he sees in his present, like the materialization of the Israeli occupation embodied in the flags, he internalizes his emotions, and is taken to a previous past (abstract) moment. He is taken to another moment, to another event, that does not necessarily need to be less traumatic or less intense; it is just not the incident he is facing at the moment.

Barghouti weaves the past with the present, discussing earlier moments of his life, houses he has lived in outside of Palestine, both his nuclear and extended families, yet this
narrative is full of guilt and disappointment. Barghouti’s whole journey revolves around revisiting old houses and his childhood village in order to recreate something. At times, Barghouti is almost self-deprecating, lying about remembering roads to his village, writing: “Embarrassment taught me to lie. Each time Husam asked me about a house, a landmark, a road, an event, I quickly replied ‘I know.’ The truth is I did not know. I no longer knew.”

It is expected that a person who left his village thirty years prior would forget its roads, but because Mourid carried a romanticized vision of Palestine and of his relationship with it, he feels embarrassed and in need to lie. Barghouti even resumes doubting his poetry and words of love he has ever written about Palestine by writing: “How did I sing for my homeland when I did not know it? Should I be praised or blamed for my songs? Did I lie a little? A lot? Did I lie to myself? To others? What love is it that does not know the beloved?” (Barghouti 61). It seems that Mourid is having moments of doubt, yet the readers can surmise that Barghouti does love and does know his country, even if its shape and monuments have changed. Had Barghouti not truly known Palestine, he would not have been able to write such a narrative about it. He was humble enough to admit, at least within himself, that being away from Palestine did change his relationship with it, but maybe also with himself. Through his journey, Barghouti presents an authentic realistic representation of his lost homeland. In I Saw Ramallah, he deconstructs both his memory and land, as he comes to terms with a unique relationship between him and his country, which he discusses further in his second book. Regardless of the complexity of that relationship, it nonetheless remains with him and it is even transmitted to his offspring, since Barghouti’s second book is a journey of love between father, son, and land.
Summary of *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here*

*I Was Born There, I Was Born Here* is Barghouti’s second book about Palestine. The book was published in Arabic two years prior to its 2011 English publication, and it reads like a sequel to *I Saw Ramallah*. Although the two books are similar and discuss the same subject of returning to a homeland, I argue in this section that Barghouti’s second book reads differently. The tension of visiting the homeland after a long period here has been removed, and now a new tension arises, but also a braver more focused writer. In this book, we see more of Mourid the person, Moruid the poet, Mourid the father. In this book we go on a journey to the homeland, but this time with Tamim, the son, introduced by Mourid, the poet. John Berger’s introductory remarks set expectations, as he writes: “It’s a book that begs for an answer to the question: why write poetry? And, in begging, it gives its own lacerating, literal and sometimes lyrical answer” (Berger i). Berger, himself a critic and poet, then discusses how “unclassifiable” the Israeli occupation is, even critiquing words that are often used to describe the situation in Palestine, such as “colonization” and “annexation.” Through his description, Berger writes a beautiful summary of the book: “It’s a book of heartrending stories, a book about poetics, a personal memoir, the history of a family, a journal of confessions, an uncompromising political tract attacking the state of Israel, the corruption of the so-called Palestinian Authority, and the self-serving dictatorships of the surrounding Arab countries. It is also a book of love…” (Berger iii). The book is, of course, all of that, and I intended to include Berger’s analysis to show the vast, nuanced, ways Barghouti’s book can be understood, but my main focus is on how this book is a testament of how the father carried his love for Palestine and transported it to his son. It is still a book about familial matters, but also a book about the craft of writing in
general, and specifically poetic writing. Here, much more than the previous book, we see how Barghouti writes his poetry, and not just why. We are able to get inside his mind and write with him. This new level or insight into writing, I argue, is a result of the emotional release that Barghouti did in his first book. Now, it seems, he is more able to showcase his creativity and focus on himself as a writer, and not just as an exiled person returning home, carrying emotional baggage and contradictions.

**I Was Born There, I Was Born Here: Seeing the Land Through the Eyes of the Son, Narrated by the Father**

*I Was Born there, I Was Born Here* starts with a journey that Barghouti undergoes, but this time back to Jordan and from there to Palestine again, with his son Tamim. He starts his second book with a chapter entitled “Mahmoud,” about a taxi driver who is able to take Mourid and other passengers through the difficult roads of Palestine during closure, safely reaching their destination to the crossing in Jericho. And before the readers wonder about the beginning of the book (for it could have started with him and Tamim en route to Palestine, yet Barghouti starts it on his way back from Palestine to Jordan) Barghouti mentions his reasoning for this chapter, perhaps the book in its entirety: “I say nothing to Mahmoud. To myself I say, ‘I’ll write him. I’ll write the driver Mahmoud. And I’ll put down exactly what he did and how he did it. I’ll write him. It’s my duty. I’m a writer and that’s my job. He did his job and one day I’ll do mine too.’ And here I am doing it” (Barghouti 26). This is the first time in these two narratives that we get a sense of Barghouti the writer explaining his craft or acknowledging its purpose, which allows the readers to get into the mind of Barghouti the poet and feel a closer connection to him and his art.
Even though Barghouti shares more of his craft and introduces himself more comfortably as a poet and a writer, he does not allow the comfort to cloud his guilt or monologues, seen in his first book. This book discusses many of his returns home, but focuses on the return with Tamim, as the title of the book hints to a father pointing where he was born in the past and showing it in the present (there, and here), which I will discuss shortly. Continuing with the theme of discussing the craft and the poet himself, Barghouti writes at one point: “I say to myself, I’m just a poet. Why should I have to wait at all the different types of border?” (Barghouti 28), but immediately and on the next page, he feels guilty for not getting used to the waiting, as the rest of the Palestinians have, on borders, on checkpoints…etc. He writes, acknowledging how his position as a poet is not different than any other Palestinian: “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,” insinuating again that words, although very important, are not all that Palestine needs. As with the first book, he removes once again the romanticized notion of understanding Palestine from afar, arguing against just merely writing about Palestine without experiencing it (Barghouti 28).

Throughout the narrative, Barghouti appears to be more in tune with himself and his surroundings than in his first book, especially since he spends more time in Palestine, even accepting a position that he eventually resigns from. There are many more incidents where Mourid answers the question of why people write poetry, asked by John Berger in the introduction of the book. At one episode, while describing moments with Tamim, he writes: “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). One could easily sense that Barghouti is not only speaking on behalf of his
son and himself. Anna Bernard discusses the sensory details Barghouti uses in his book *I Saw Ramallah*, but these details can be migrated to his second book as well, especially here in the words “our senses,” showing how Barghouti uses the five senses in his writing to make Palestine and his return to it more real, and less abstract. Bernard writes about the result: “The ‘truthfulness’ of the senses is conveyed not only by what the eyes and ears take in, but also by the way in which Barghouti, as the human subject at the centre of the narrative, assimilates and interprets this information” (Bernard 74). This of course becomes more clear with Barghouti’s sudden interruptions as he would shift from the present (sensory) to the past (more abstract) in his two books, mixing in his many interpretations of himself such as the writer, the witness, the father, the poet…etc.

Barghouti mentions his son many times before he begins narrating their journey on the border. Chapter 4, entitled “I Was Born There, I Was Born Here,” however, recalls the exact moment Tamim finally enters their village, Deir Ghassanah, and it is worth focusing on as it shows the relationship among the father, the son, and the land. This chapter contains the moment that gave the book its title. In the beginning of the chapter, Barghouti mentions how the occupation stole from his son the ability to see his village for over twenty years. About how the occupation distorts distance, he writes: “Now only twenty-seven kilometers separate Tamim from Deir Ghassanah. He knows that I was born ‘there.’ In half an hour I’ll be saying to him, ‘I was born here’” (Barghouti 79). This sentiment, of wanting to show a son where his father was born should be a given right, yet it took Barghouti twenty-one years to be able to say this sentence. This shift from “there” to “here” communicates the closeness this trip has brought Barghouti and his son to their country. Finally, the abstract can become real in this one word “here.” The following pages discuss Palestinians’
attachment to their place and where they were born. Barghouti writes: “The Palestinian is forbidden to enter his own country by land, sea, or air, even in a coffin. It is not a matter of romantic attachment to a place but of eternal exclusion from it” (Barghouti 81). This sentence reminds us of Barghouti’s statement in his first book *I Saw Ramallah*, where he asks: “What is so special about it except that we have lost it?” (Barghouti 6). Once again, the two books connect and diverge at certain moments, with the second giving more details about the author and his relationship with his son, but it is out of loss that the writing is happening; out of frustration and disappointment it is written; out of the womb of exile it is felt.

Barghouti narrates another incident that happened on their way to Deir Ghassanah but before they enter it. The driver, their friend from the village, forgot his license and was stopped by an Israeli soldier guarding a nearby settlement, and he was held there until his permit was presented. Barghouti mentions being disappointed that this is the welcome his son is receiving: checkpoints and humiliation from soldiers once again affecting his time in Palestine. In their article, “Narratology at the Checkpoint: The Politics and Poetics of Entanglement,” authors Susan S. Lanser and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan discuss how “Checkpoints—and therefore narratives about them—arrest time by obstructing space, turning the foundational Bakhtinian chronotope of the road, with all its rich possibilities for ‘chance encounters’ and ‘new departures’” (Lanser and Rimmon-Kenan 243). In the incident mentioned above, Barghouti and his son are allowed to go back to retrieve the driver’s permit, but it does seem like the time dedicated to arrival and happy feelings before entering their village, stops and pauses as they have a mission to return and rescue their relative, but when they go back to the place they left him, they find him waiting alone.
without the Israeli soldier. Tamim’s joyous journey home to their village is thus put on hold until their friend is released, and so time does seem to pause, even though they are literally moving in order to bring their friend his ID. The incident, although frustrating, is told with an irony, since the driver himself who was stopped was an avid Palestinian Authority supporter, one who believed in the Oslo Accord, and here he was being stopped while going home boasting about his village and himself. Lanser and Kenan write that “When the checkpoint becomes a space for positive encounters, it usually does so either through the creative inventiveness of Palestinians—as in the markets that spring up at major barricades—or through the intervention of human rights activists” (Lanser and Kenan 252). In this case, it is the writer’s humor and his son’s sensibility which adds another layer of understanding. It seems that through their ironic humor, they are both taking charge of the situation, and in a way manipulating it, by releasing their tension through laughing.

Barghouti compares his emotional journey to his son’s, at times projecting his own feeling, while showing his son’s actions and emotions. While writing about his son’s experience at the moment discussed above of disappointment and harsh reality, Barghouti states: “I say to myself, he’ll go through what I did the day I first returned two years ago. His fingers will gradually exchange the touch of velvet for that of cactus—the mountain top of the imagined for the valley of the actual,” reminding us again of Mourid’s experience in his first book, and his dichotomous understanding of Palestine as both real and imagined. Yet, as any parent, he soon realizes that he was projecting his emotions onto his son’s experience. Knowing the difference between their visits, he concludes: “I come burdened with my past. He starts from the white page of the future. I think, this page is his; it’s his
to color as he chooses and to narrate as and when he wishes” (Barghouti 88). This way of thinking shows the character of the father. He is understanding, knowledgeable, and empathetic, realizing that just as he has seen Palestine through two different lenses does not mean his son is obliged to do the same.

Although we do not read an autobiography written from the point of view of Tamim, we do see or hear his reactions told through the father. Barghouti draws Tamim as an observant character, a polite respectful young man who is curious, full of questions, but also very knowledgeable. At one point, he is able to lead his father in the streets of the village, naming houses and monuments. This, of course, is a testament to the father who was able to transfer the love and knowledge of the village, as an extension of Palestine, to his son through what Marianne Hirsch coins “Postmemory.” She summarizes her theory with an interview with Columbia University Press stating that “‘postmemory’ 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 by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up.” This resonates with the experience of many Palestinian refugees and exiles after the Nakba of 1948 and their offspring. Hirsch continues to give credit to the first generation, like Barghouti, by stating that “these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right” (“An Interview With Marianne Hirsch”), which explains Tamim’s connection to his land and his knowledge, all of which were transmitted through his father.
In a moment of similarity between the father and son that shows the importance of family values and connections, we see Tamim’s embarrassment when, as they were walking in the village, a very old man asks Tamim to lead him to the mosque. Barghouti writes: “Tamim says to me, ‘I didn’t know what to tell him. How could I explain to him that I’d only set foot in the village two hours ago and I didn’t know where anything was? I was too embarrassed to explain so I took his hand and said to him, ‘This way, please’” (Barghouti 94). This incident shows family ties and relationships, and the values that the son has inherited from his father. Although the old man was not related to the father, Tamim knew to treat him like family. When the old man asks Tamim for his name and the name of his father and grandfather, the one man replies: “Ah. I know him. He was my friend. Your grandfather’s grandfather was my friend, son. And he was a poet. The whole village knew him” (Barghouti 95). Here, again, more ties are created, between Mourid and his son, as he sees him acting like a member of the village, between Tamim and the old man; as well as a connection between the father, the son, and their old relative who was a poet. Barghouti ends his chapter with mentioning that after nine years of this incident, Tamim will return and read his poetry in the village, like he did before him, creating yet another link between the two. The importance of this scene, then, is that it shows how the relationship between the father and son is strengthened because of being in Palestine, as well as being surrounded by family and community members. Chapter five ends with Tamim receiving his identification card and insisting they stay a little longer in Palestine, even if that means being late to his university. Once again, Barghouti is showing how intrigued and happy the son was to be in Palestine, making connections, and creating memories.
We see Palestine in *I Was Born There* through the eyes of the father, but also the son, told through the father. While crossing the bridge, which as every Palestinian who travels out of Jericho through Jordan or vice versa knows is not really a bridge, Barghouti narrates how his son was looking outside of the window of the bus, focused, and then as the father was telling his son about the bridge, they had already crossed it. Barghouti writes: “He turns to me in surprise— ‘Where’s the bridge?’—and laughs out loud when I say to him, ‘It’s a bridge shorter than a sentence.’” (Barghouti 42). This is ironic as it hints at the absurdity, not just of the name, but of the crossing itself, as it creates more trouble for the Palestinians and adds distance and time, creating a trip that could be easily taken in a car. Perhaps Barghouti is hinting at the inability of language to convey the absurdity of borders, as well. In her chapter “Crossing The River: Home And Exile At The River Jordan,” from her book *Hydrofictions: Water, Power and Politics in Israeli and Palestinian Literature* (2020), Hannah Boast writes about the usual significance of rivers, “The power of rivers as national symbols derives from the potential of water to suggest the movement, hence the continuity, of the nation through time” (Boast 57). This is again ironic since there is no water at the bridge, but also there does not seem to be time to meditate and reflect on the significance of the water (as suggesting “movement” in Boast’s quote) that no longer exists, nor on the crossing itself, creating another modern element of irony. The laughter that father and son share works as both a funny anecdote, but also a laugh out of misery and indignation.

Barghouti writes in *I Was Born There*, like he wrote in his first book, about the idea of Palestine becoming real. Showing the knowledge of his son, he declares: “The Palestine of school books, stories, newspaper headlines, and CNN images will come to an end and
the tangible Palestine will be born in his senses” (Barghouti 42). While Barghouti describes their first moment together, as they are crossing the Israeli border, he mentions how anxious he was, giving his son many pieces of advice and explaining to him every moment. “I think to myself,” he writes, “that Tamim is as anxious about me as I am about him, perhaps more so,” and here he ends his reflection with a sentence that accumulates all the emotions. He writes: “Such is the crossing point into Palestine” (Barghouti 43). This short sentence encompasses a lot of emotions. The small word “such” comprises all that has been written before in I Saw Ramallah and in this book, but also all that has not been written, but felt and seen as one crosses the border into Palestine. In this sentence, we learn not only of the political situation, but the emotions Mourid carries, especially when traveling with his son for the first time to their homeland. Slowly, we see and hear more about Tamim and his relationship with his father. But just as the narrative intensifies, Barghouti brings the readers on another one of his tangents and declares this statement about Palestine as they are going through the valleys of Jericho, the lowest points of the world: “I tell myself, some homelands are like that: getting into them is hard, getting out of them is hard, and staying in them is hard. And this is the only homeland you have” (Barghouti 39). Here, Barghouti interrupts the thoughts that have disrupted his present moment of crossing the bridge, to ask himself: “Am I using this trance to escape the anxiety I feel about Tamim’s entry?...Am I shifting the focus of my anxiety so I can bear it? Am I changing the direction of my thoughts to drive out my worries?” (Barghouti 41). Through telling the readers his thoughts, we are again seeing how Barghouti’s brain works, not as the poet in this incident, but as an author and father. Throughout I Was Born There, we see the multiple dimensions of Mourid Barghouti: the poet, the writer of the autobiography, and the father of Tamim.
Tahia Abdel Nasser states that Barghouti’s writings “invoke the personal and the national, the poetic and the political, through the appropriation and reworking of the autobiographical literary form to restage the drama of loss and return” (Abdel Nasser 85), and I would argue the reworking of time, as well. Barghouti manipulates time, playing with the emotions and anticipation of the readers, as he recalls his past and memory when the narrative arc intensifies.

Barghouti continues to create connections between himself and his son, even after their departure. One very touching moment happens when Barghouti was remembering the time his son, like him, was arrested by the Egyptian government and deported a few days after for his activism and for participating in demonstrations during his college years. Since Tamim was born to a non-Egyptian father, he did not receive an Egyptian ID and Barghouti writes an ironic sentence: “Tamim, who had been given his rights in Palestine, a country he didn’t know, would lose them in Egypt, the only country he knew” (Barghouti 200). Here, Barghouti critiques Arab regimes, making their brutality akin to that of the Israelis, which takes us to Berger’s introduction to Barghouti’s second book where he mentions how the author’s criticism extends beyond the Israeli occupation. Throughout his two books, Mourid’s nuclear family comes to light frequently. He mentions how much his wife had to suffer, practically raising their son on her own, while he was deported. He feels connected to his son, as well, who had to endure like he did. Barghouti’s books thus connect his life to his son’s, and through their collective narrative, he weaves the personal with the collective, the political with the emotional, drawing an image of a journey that is difficult, yet needed, conveying what many Palestinians wish to say, but do not possess the words, artistic ability, and access to publishing venues. In her exhaustive research of fourteen
Palestinian autobiographies, “The Disguises of the Mind: Recent Palestinian Memoirs,” Terri DeYoung writes about Palestinian memoirs written after the Oslo Accord of 1993, as she discusses Barghouti’s writing, especially writing about others. DeYoung states, “The other element that is operative throughout both memoirs—and thus provides the necessary thread of continuity—is Barghouti’s constant evocation of his wife Radwa ʿAshore and his son Tamim as figures who give meaning to his personal experience” (DeYoung 19). This continuous mention shows Barghouti’s focus on familial relationships which I highlight throughout the chapter. Writing about his son’s imprisonment as if he is reliving the moment, Barghouti declares: “I, who am free today, feel exactly as though they are imprisoning me for a second time. As though I had never left their first prison,” showcasing how close he felt to his son, and how history repeats itself. Barghouti continues writing about the effects of that action: “As though I were in a never-ending prison that refuses to acknowledge any final act. As though the prison were my personal city. This time we will live in it and grow up in it together, my son and I” (Barghouti 202). Here, Barghouti is holding on to his relationship with his son, regardless of political and geographical boundaries, whether between himself and his son, or other family members unable to reach because of the occupation.

Thankfully, Tamim eventually returns to Egypt, and he continues to write many sharp poems about the situation there, especially after the revolution of 2011. The poem I will analyze in the coming section is entitled “In Jerusalem,” (English version 2017) and through it, one is able to see traces of Barghouti’s writing: romanticism of Palestine, political knowledge, and connecting the personal with the collective.
**Tamim Al-Barghouti’s Poem: An Outsider Becoming an Insider**

While Barghouti the father clearly writes about himself and family in his two autobiographical works discussed above, his son Tamim utilizes poetry in a less personal manner. In his poetry, Al-Barghouti usually uses language that is either colloquial, complicated, or filled with historical allusions. His poem “In Jerusalem” might be one of the very few examples of the contrary, where one can assume that Tamim is speaking about himself, about one of his few visits to Jerusalem.

“In Jerusalem” was written in Arabic and translated into English by Al-Barghouti’s mother, the late Egyptian author Radwa Ashour, and the Egyptian writer Ahdaf Soueif, who translated Mourid Barghouti’s first book. This insight adds to the familial setting discussed in this chapter. In an interview with the poet, Al-Barghouti mentions how difficult it is to translate his own poems, relying on his mother who has translated most of his poems into English (‘Sometimes People Write Poetry with Their Feet’: A Conversation with Tamim Al-Barghouti). Ahdaf Soueif, who writes in English herself, is able to convey more of the emotions of the poet, maybe because she has a personal relationship with him and his family.

Al-Barghouti begins his poem with the lines: “We passed by the home of the beloved/ but were turned back by the enemy’s law and the enemy’s wall.” Here, one can notice two things: the first is a mark of Palestinian poetry, which is the personifying and gendering of Palestine and its cities as female lovers, with words such as “dear,” and “beloved” mentioned in this poem which translate to female lovers in Arabic, especially if addressed by a male poet (Al-Barghouti 1-2). In Arabic, most countries and cities are
gendered and the pronoun “she/her” is used to address them. Rasha Salti’s article, “From Resistance and Bearing Witness to the Power of the Fantastical Icons and Symbols in Palestinian Poetry and Cinema,” discusses this element of portraying Palestine as a woman. She writes, “The gendering of Palestine, its land, its earth was a trope inherited from pre-1948 poetics. It became more explicit, elaborate, and sensuous with post-1948 poets” (Salti 43). Although the sensuous part is not clear in this poem, Barghouti does discuss Palestine and the city of Jerusalem as long-awaited lovers. Secondly, the “we” mentioned in this line could refer to Tamim and his father when they visited Jerusalem “illegally,” as Barghouti the father mentions in his second book. Barghouti writes: “I don’t know what of Jerusalem settled in his eyes forever and have no way to write of that. A few years later though, he will let all of Palestine know, when he writes his poem ‘In Jerusalem,’ which will become the most famous poem about the city in Arabic that I know of.” (Barghouti 78) This poem is both personal and collective, sharp and sweet, simple yet nuanced.

The “beloved” mentioned here could refer to Palestine, or the city of Jerusalem, specifically. Regardless of the way it is understood, the second line is still cold. Tamim mentions “laws” and “walls” of the “enemy” which sound very harsh and juxtapose the warm feelings exuded in the first line. Al-Barghouti the son continues to ask himself what is unique about Jerusalem and if he will be happy to see it, once again romanticizing the relationship he has with the city, continuing to call it a lover, and creating contradictions like his father before him did. Perhaps the use of the genre of poetry allows the poet to be more romantic and use more emotions in his expressions (which is a point I discuss in chapter 4 where I focus on autobiographical poetry). He concludes his first stanza by saying: “For once your eyes have seen Jerusalem/ You’ll see nothing else wherever you
look” (Al-Barghouti 11-12). In the first stanza, Tamim does not only write about Jerusalem and wonder if she, his beloved, would like to see him (it being his first time there), but he also writes that he knows he will not enjoy the sights, maybe influenced by his father’s first book about expectations and disappointing realities. He writes: “You’ll see everything you cannot bear to see,” and before the reader can surmise that the ugly face of the occupation and its residence in Jerusalem are meant by that, Al-Barghouti continues to mention who lives and has lived in Jerusalem, going through its history, knowing it belonged to him, even as he is unable to even see it (Al-Barghouti 5). One sight that he clearly does not want to see is mentioned in these lines:

- blond European tourists who never really see Jerusalem;
- but take photos of each other
- next to a woman who sells mint on the streets each day. (Al-Barghouti 21-23)

Barghouti here creates a tension, like the one Shikaki does between other subjects of her poetry and herself in chapter 1 of this dissertation. Here, Tamim writes about European women enjoying, not the sights of Jerusalem, since they are unable to “see” it, but themselves, taking pictures of themselves and not the city. This image is then contrasted with the sight of a hard-working Palestinian woman selling something meager like mint. Incidentally, Barghouti uses “radishes” in his poem in Arabic. I wonder why the change here. Maybe the translators thought mint suits the English language more or adds a musical detail, or a sensory one as mint smells better than radishes. The Palestinian woman does her job “each day,” while the young women probably take pictures and leave. Here is another dichotomy between what is fleeting, those who come to visit as tourists, and what remains all day, those who are trying to make a living: those who are in, and those who are out. These contradictions and the harsh honest way of presenting Palestine is similar to
Mourid Barghouti’s writing and honesty in showing his disappointment in his two autobiographies, especially when it comes to the real and the romanticized imagined version of Palestine. Regardless of the genre the father and son use, they present the love of Palestine, contradictions present, and themselves in similar way.

Slowly Tamim is forcefully removed from the city and its sights. It is not only the “enemy’s laws and walls” mentioned in the beginning of the poem that stop him from entering, but also history itself. Throughout the poem, the poet repeats a narrative that the personified history tells him, smiling:

Did you really think your eye could miss them and see others?
Here they are in front of you:
the main text while you’re a footnote and a margin.
You thought a visit could draw from the face of the city, my son,
the thick veil of her present, that you might see there what you wish?
In Jerusalem there’s every man except you. (Al-Barghouti 30-36)

Although the title of the poem refers to being inside “In Jerusalem” the speaker is seeing the “beloved” from a faraway place and realizing slowly how ostracized he is. Tamim is the “footnote and a margin” and the only one outside of Jerusalem. Like other poems by Tamim Al-Barghouti, “In Jerusalem” is filled with historical data and allusions. An interesting idealistic line is when Al-Barghouti shows how poetic and ancient the city of Jerusalem is. He writes: “In Jerusalem if you shake hands with an old man or touch a building/ you’ll find etched on your palm a poem/ my friend, or two” (Al-Barghouti 99-100). Yet our own poet is still unable to insert himself into the city, even though clearly out of that visit came this poem. This is reminiscent of his father’s writing about returning to a place that belonged to him, like his village of Deir Ghassanah, yet being both physically and emotionally away from it, slowly finding himself in that place, and realizing that he actually belongs, one way or another. Both father and son describe locations very well and
are able to use sensory details to position the reader. This ability allows both father and son to thoroughly document their experience, albeit in a different literary genre, using senses and personal narratives.

It would have been tragic, yet realistic, if Al-Barghouti did not find a resolution to both the poem and his feelings. However, as Tamim is on his way back, and the “beloved” is positioned behind him, he is able to see her from the car’s mirrors. He smiles and tells himself, or maybe hears Jerusalem tell him the famous line, “I see no-one in Jerusalem—except you,” preceded with:

Have you gone mad?
Let your eye not weep, you who’ve been dropped from the text.
Let your eye not weep, young Arab, and know:
In Jerusalem there’s whoever’s in Jerusalem, but
I see no-one in Jerusalem—except you. (Al-Barghouti 129-132)

There is a word play in the original Arabic of this poem that does not translate very well into the English, but the two lines “In Jerusalem there’s whoever’s in Jerusalem—except you,” used many times, and “I see no-one…except you” create a tension that is resolved here in this last stanza, when Jerusalem tells the poetic speaker that she only sees him. Like the writing of his father, Tamim’s lyrics could be interpreted as referring to more than just himself, since he does write “young Arab” after “dropped from the text,” here again referring to any Arab and not just the Palestinian Tamim. This statement could be understood as being about those who live outside of the historical configures of the land, such as exiled persons and refugees. This is a comforting stance where the capital of Palestine is telling Arabs and Palestinians alike that regardless of who occupies and who visits the land, the beloved herself only sees them, thus creating a collective understanding of one experience. It is not only Tamim who is exiled, but millions like him.
In her seminal work on Palestinian poetry (especially poems written in the 1970s), “The Contemporary Palestinian Poetry of Occupation,” the political figure and poet Hanan Ashrawi critiques the heavily symbolic poetry of that time, writing against repeated symbols that become clichés: “Palestine is Jerusalem, the lover (especially female) and the mother, with abundant sexual imagery... The diction and imagery, generally, are extracted from the past rather than the present or the future. Add to this the use of the subjective first person point of view, the individualistic tone...All these weigh the poetry very heavily toward the lyric” (Ashrawi 92). Although Ashrawi was speaking about specific poems of that time, she does allude to the repeated patterns new poets continue to use and calls against them. While Tamim Al-Barghouti does use Jerusalem as a lover, and he does use the first person point of view, embedded in his poem is both this traditional representation of Palestine, and a new representation that focuses on his unique relationship to the land, one that is built on exile, politics, and romance. It is written about a present moment newly taken, and the way he connects the past with the present removes any clichés. Tamim’s poem is unique because although it does contain exhausted elements of traditional Palestinian poetry writing, it still reads like a new manifestation of an exiled person’s relationship to the land.

**Laila Shikaki’s Poetry: Internal journeys Home**

Although I found many connections between my own writing and the analyzed works of the Barghoutis discussed above, the connections became closer when I decided to return home in the summer of 2020. Usually my journey back home to Palestine lasts three months every year, and then I go back to my life in the United States, where I am a
PhD student and an adjunct professor. This year, however, I returned for good. Due to homesickness, but also Covid-19, I decided to return home and begin writing my dissertation there (here). Surprisingly, like Barghouti, I have woken up asking myself if I had imagined a more romanticized homeland than what exists. Contradictions fill my head, as they had filled my poetry written years ago, before returning home from pursuing my MFA in Creative Writing/Poetry from California.

The three published poems I want to focus on in this section, therefore, are “Will You Stay?” “While They Discuss Politics,” and “Meeting,” all of which I wrote in California. I will start with the poem that explains the situation I had while living there, especially the last few months when the semester was about to end, and I started receiving questions about whether I wanted to stay or leave. The second poem is a guilt-ridden poem about the feelings I had living in California and wanting to better represent my country, and the third poem is an imagined situation about meeting an Israeli soldier when coming back, an indication at facing the reality of the occupation, a facet of life that could deter many from returning to their homelands or even being able to visit.

“Will You Stay?” begins by stating the questions the poetic speaker had received as she is about to leave the United States. These questions are followed by her pondering and stating that

I smile and think how easy it would be to say yes.
yes, I will leave my Palestine
to live in a land that is made to be consumed.
yes, I will leave the occupation behind,
forget about the soldiers I see in my dreams. (Shikaki 4-8)

The speaker has a harsh critique of the status quo in the United States by saying no “to live in a land that is made to be consumed,” followed by cold words that resonate a reality for many Palestinians, those of “occupation,” and “soldiers,” critiquing the two realities of
California and Palestine, respectively. This feeling of ease that the poet alludes to when deciding where to live does not necessarily mirror Mourid Barghouti’s writing since he did not have the luxury the poet did of only having two places to compare and live, nor Tamim Al-Barghouti who was not able to visit the capital of Palestine “legally.” Shikaki was born and raised in Palestine, and left, like Barghouti, in order to pursue her higher education, yet while Shikaki was able to return swiftly after, Barghouti’s journey back was uneasy, as related in I Saw Ramallah. Shikaki continues her poem with stating what she is saying “no” to. She mentions corporate names such as Walmart and Trader Joe’s, high speed internet, and libraries, three advantages of living in the United States, and adds a personal touch of stating that she indeed likes these places, as they are her “favorites” (Shikaki 12). She ends her second stanza with “no because I am not American/ no because I am Palestinian” (Shikaki 15-16). Clearly Shikaki here creates a tension between those who question her and herself. In her third stanza, the poet blatantly states that “because I have a country that waits for me/ I will not stay in yours” (Shikaki 17-18). Shikaki then finds herself becoming grateful for the people she met on her journey, yet she creates another tension, a divide between herself and the audience by mentioning the element of time. She writes, “but back home are childhood friends/ women who grew up with me” (Shikaki 23-24). While the speaker is indebted to her new friends, she wants them to know that childhood friends win as they had experienced growing up in the same Palestine. This reference to friends and family members resonates with the amount of love Barghouti has for his friends and family, evident through their repeated mention, again creating this notion that Palestine is celebrated with family and friends in a place that is familiar and carries memories.
“Will You Stay?” shares a tension with Barghouti’s writing in his two books, albeit with a different tone and reasoning. While Barghouti was allowed to visit his homeland, I had a Palestinian Identification card that allowed me easier access than Barghouti. Still, we both write about this need to go back, about changes we want to see happen. I felt the need to begin my poetry analysis in this chapter with this specific poem because it shows the tension felt as I was in between spaces, about to leave back home and yet involved both physically and mentally with California. In his well-known work, “Reflections on Exile,” Edward Said writes about his contrapuntal theory, where he claims that “For an exile, habits of life, expression or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment. Thus, both the new and the old environments are vivid, actual, occurring together contrapuntally,” which the persona in the above discussed poem feels exactly (Said 290). While clearly Shikaki’s journey away from Palestine was never that of an exiled person, since the option of leaving and returning were always available to her, the feelings of homesickness reflect a poet writing away from home or about home, like both Barghouti the father and son do. This poem shows the responsibility Palestinians, especially Palestinian students studying abroad, have not only in carrying the name of their country and making it proud, but also the feelings of awareness of the need for us to return and create change. It mostly shows, however, the feelings a Palestinian undergoes away from her homeland: guilt, pride, and longing. And in the discussion of the real and the imagined mentioned above regarding Barghouti’s writing, what is imagined here is Shikaki’s projected feelings about going home, as they are in a way internalized and idealized. What is real is what is in front of the poet’s eyes, which is her life in California, as well as her feelings of homesickness. This is quite
different than Barghouti’s writing since both his idealized and concrete feelings were regarding Palestine.

Shikaki’s second poem “While They Discuss Politics” mirrors these feelings of needing to go back home and knowing one’s responsibility, even while abroad for a few years. Shikaki humbly looks at her representation and familiarity of Palestine by beginning her poem with lines that show both her knowledge and ignorance:

I do not know dates and number of deaths;
there are many in Palestine.
politics is embedded in your brain;
you see too much to remember. (Shikaki 1-4)

Here, Shikaki refers to the knowledge of numbers and dates, probably of martyrs, resolution numbers, exact dates of horrific massacres, and names of lost towns, yet she regains some sense of self and recognition when she says that “politics is embedded” in her. Here again, like the previous poem, Shikaki creates a distinction between herself and the readers, because although she uses the pronoun “you” in the fourth line, she clearly means her as a Palestinian having lived in Palestine her entire life. Mourid Barghouti represents this sentiment about not knowing dates and numbers a bit differently in I Saw Ramallah when he writes: “Statistics are meaningless. Discussions and speeches and proposals and condemnations and reasons and maps for negotiation and the excuses of negotiators and all we have heard and read about the settlements, all this is worth nothing. You have to see them for yourself” (Shikaki 29). Here, Barghouti creates a paradox by considering the factual data, exemplified in statistics and maps, as abstract, encouraging his readers to come to Palestine to see the physical implications of the occupation to understand Palestinians living under it. Shikaki appears to be saying the same thing when it comes to visiting the country. Either politics is embedded in you if you are Palestinian,
or you must come see for yourself like Barghouti mentions. Shikaki proceeds to critique a question she receives about the many times she has crossed a checkpoint, and again the poet brings a mundane comparison with those living in California by flipping the question on them and asking about the times they had stopped at traffic lights and speed bumps, wanting to show the frequency of checkpoints. It is clear that the poet wants to simultaneously answer the questions, but also critique the inquiry. The fact that checkpoints, with their documented torture, are compared to a traffic light that literally only demands a driver to stop, go, and pause shows the vast inequality and unfairness of the question. The readers, thus, start to wonder why the question was asked.

Shikaki continues to show both the representation of the occupation, as well as her homesickness, elements that can be looked at through the lens of postcolonial theory which discusses life lived before, under, and after colonialism and occupation. About the first, she uses a poetic technique of positioning an end stop to disrupt her words as the occupation interferes and disturbs her life, with these lines:

I don’t remember the times my plans were not delayed.  
the occupation interrupts every  
step of the way. (Shikaki 10-12)

The poet refers once again to her art, like she referred to her dreams in the previous poem “Will You Stay?” by stating that even in her literary writing, the occupation plays a role by injecting itself in her creativity, once again showing that Palestinian autobiographic writing mentions politics, one way or another. As for the representation of homesickness in “While they Discuss Politics,” Shikaki creates another tension, a comparison between her life back in Palestine and the moment she is writing. She uses the present tense while
discussing the position she is in, as she creates her art away from home, bringing to mind

Mourid Barghouti’s writing style and his play with tenses, by stating:

I write about how much I miss home
right now as I read poems in a
library filled with fluorescent lights, single desks
and electrical sockets. (Shikaki 18-21)

These lines are juxtaposed with the description of her university’s library that she used to
frequent in Palestine that did not have Wi-Fi, yet it “had warmth,” a familiar familial sense
to it, once again bringing the idea of the connection between family and Palestine (Shikaki
23). Shikaki continues to explain that relationship and the existence of:

a nostalgic feeling of knowing that this chair
might have hoisted my father.
maybe my uncle, killed by the Israelis
learned his love of Palestine
while debating politics
on that table over there,
next to the bathroom door that smells of old bricks. (Shikaki 24-30)

The poet uses sensory details in her description, those of sight, smell, and hearing, similar
to the writing of Barghouti that Anna Bernard discusses in her article “Who Would Dare
to Make it Into an Abstraction.” Shikaki’s poem takes her readers to a library that might be
smaller and with less resources, yet what feeds the poet’s soul is recognition, family, and
once again time and familiarity. How the poet casually mentions and underplays her uncle
who was murdered by the Israelis, creates a tension, and stresses the effects of occupation.

The last stanza of this poem refers to the title where the poet continues to question
why she had felt a deeper sense of ease and happiness in a smaller library. She uses the
word “maybe” to further show her coming to terms with the answer, where she eventually
writes:

or maybe back home the library felt nice
just because it was twenty minutes away from my home.
no politics needed to explain the emotion.
no facts.
nothing on the ground to verify. (Shikaki 31-35)

I want to stop at the last sentence, and especially the last word, “verify.” Shikaki shows here that the questions she had received in California, mentioned earlier in the poem, whether of how many checkpoints she crossed, or if she hates “Israel,” were inquiries made to authenticate and validate her lived experience. The poet shows again that through family, and a shared experience of living and frequenting the same locations and crossing the same checkpoints, she feels at ease, with no need to “explain the emotion.”

It is clear that Shikaki starts the poem with an emphasis on dates and numbers and ends by accepting her own experience as enough proof. She begins her poem by stating her lack of knowledge in “I do not know dates or numbers” in her first stanza. As the poem progresses, however, she moves from a scientific qualitative inquiry into experience. Shikaki herself recognizes, and in extension her question askers and readers that her own knowledge, that of experience, is just as important as data and numbers. Here, once again, the discussion about the real and imagined is worth pointing out. Shikaki’s reality in this poem is her own lived experience back home, while what seems abstract are the numbers and statistics she claims she has knowledge about, a twist of a common understanding that what is real are numbers and data. This poem mirrors how Barghouti decides to document his journey back to Palestine. He believed that going back to his small village house, using sensory details, and mentioning family members, living and long gone, authenticates and validates his story, and in extension the story of many other exiled Palestinians. And in contrary to what many consider factual, he comes to consider statistics and data as abstract, and not showing the complete image to explain the life of Palestinians under occupation. I
believe the reason many Palestinians document their journeys is because they, like me, do not have a memory that holds scientific mathematical data, but they have lived firsthand experiences that are worthy of writing.

Shikaki’s last poem, “Meeting,” is where the readers finally meet that entity, the soldier who appears in both the dreams and art of the poet, once again resonating with other postcolonial writings that mention and discuss colonial objects. This short poem is direct, seeming almost void of emotions, and yet once again the poet’s family appear as she discusses her identification paper. Towards the end of the poem, it is clear that the soldier is a representation of the occupation, a face to the ugly system of settler colonialism. While the encounters with Israeli soldiers and settlers in Barghouti’s two narratives are lengthy and move between “good cop” and “bad cop,” and in Al-Barghouti’s poem it is solidified with the image of a settler holding a gun, here the encounter is brief, yet represents a larger issue. This brevity could be an element of poetry as in many cases poets use the short format to express deep emotions, but I argue that Shikaki intended to make the encounter brief, as she showcases the importance and seriousness of the situation by using a quick, brief description, shocking the readers.

Shikaki starts her poem by clearly mentioning the subject of the poem. She writes: “the last time I saw an Israeli soldier/ was on their section of Allenby bridge” (Shikaki 1-2). This bridge is the same bridge every Palestinian must cross in order to leave and enter Palestine. This bridge is the same bridge mentioned by Barghouti in both of his books. The poet, yet again, keeps a tense moment like being around an Israeli soldier direct and quick. She writes of being unable to remember if the soldier talked to her, or merely looked at her identification card, a routine stamping in most lucky cases.
It is through that identification card, and through the names written on it in both Arabic and Hebrew, that the poet mentions her family members, by name. She says about the information written in the document:

- age: twenty four at the time.
- born in Nablus
- to Khalil and Wafa. (Shikaki 8-10)

In a poetic yet direct way, the poet removes the romanticism of mentioning the names of her parents and adds the name of the city she was born in, Nablus, immediately followed with the names of her parents, proceeded with “to.” There is something simple, yet familiar and touching about introducing her parents this way. There are no preludes, no forwards, just the simple, cold yet comforting fact of being born belonging to someone, unified by her parents who stand on the same line in Shikaki’s poem.

The poet then envisions seeing that soldier again. It is apparent that in this poem, and other poems discussed in this dissertation, the poet starts to imagine going back home to meet family members, eat the food, and here in this poem, in a shocking manner, meet a soldier again. This incident appears to be mundane and almost normalized, yet with writing this poem, Shikaki clearly states that it is not normal to envision meeting a soldier, an occupying force, as one is dreaming of returning home. Again, the meeting is not unique to her, and it holds no special positive place in her heart, yet she finds it important to mention in her last few lines where she writes about the purpose of that soldier. Of course, he is not the same man, but: “in a different body, in a different size/ but same purpose: occupation” (Shikaki 13-14). Shikaki ends her poem with the word “occupation,” that which affects every Palestinian living inside or outside of Palestine, that which is mentioned in every Palestinian autobiographical writing, directly and indirectly. Here,
especially in this poem, the poet connects the personal with the political; she writes about a specific moment that has happened to her, and imagines the occurrence of the second meeting, while of course writing about the experience of many thousands of Palestinians who cross checkpoints and the Allenby bridge almost daily.

Shikaki’s personal writing showcases both the real exemplified by the literal crossing of the bridge and meeting the soldier on her way to California, and the imagined which will come true and has come true many times since, of meeting a soldier at the crossing coming home to Palestine. Both of these elements reflect Barghouti’s experience and way of writing. While he starts his book *I Saw Ramallah* on the bridge, he imagines crossing it with his son, and eventually writes about it in his second autobiography. Just as when someone reads the autobiography of Barghouti, as one reads the poetry of Shikaki, one understands that this soldier is not one and only, and this poet is one of thousands who face the same situation. Thus, in this poem, the imagined does materialize eventually when Shikaki returns home.

What connects the three mentioned poems is the focus on the familial as one is writing about the political and personal. Each of these poems slowly becomes political, slowly takes a question, or an incident, or a moment and creates from it something larger than the poet herself, and her own lived or imagined experience. Shikaki writes in a simple, at times cold, manner, about issues that affect her and the lives of many Palestinians. Her writing adds to our understanding of Barghouti’s narratives, it completes them, and adds another layer about her own experience as a woman living away from home. I argue that reading these poems immediately after reading Barghouti’s narratives and analysis can give another example of family relations, the political and the personal intertwining; and the
need for young and old Palestinian, famous and rising poets to document and inject themselves in conversations written and spoken about them.
Chapter Four: I Write Poetry, Too: Poetry and Palestinian Women

Introduction

This concluding chapter focuses on my own poetry regarding homesickness, the process of writing while abroad, and language. Before discussing my own poetry, however, I will analyze autobiographical or semi-autobiographical poetry by two famous Palestinian American poets, Naomi Shihab Nye (1952-) and Nathalie Handal (1969-). In this chapter I am interested in showing how these Arab American poets write about their homelands, their family ties to their land, living away from home, and language, especially in a very concise format such as poetry. This chapter, then, focuses almost entirely on poetry as an autobiographical tool. And while there is some research on the subgenre of autobiographical poetry, more attention has been given to reading autobiographical prose, which I have been doing for the past three chapters. Analyzing poetry that is autobiographical becomes more complicated because, while I am very certain that my published poems discuss and represent my own experiences, autobiographical poetry is rarely defined as such. Because many Palestinian poets write about their personal experiences in the form of poetry, I found it important to include their voices in this dissertation, as I aim to show a diverse understanding of self, Palestine, and also autobiography.

In autobiographical poetry, poets utilize the personal pronoun “I” in similar ways to prose, yet it is not always about the poet’s personal self. A poet might use a first-person persona or poetic speaker like an author uses a first-person narrator in their fiction. One could then say that there is no “Autobiographical Pact” between the poet and their readers about the authenticity of the pronouns used in their poems. In Autobiographical poetry in
England and Spain, 1950-1980:Narrating Oneself in Verse (2017), Menotti Lerro surveys the autobiographical genre, showing how the French author of the “Autobiographical Pact,” Philippe Lejeune, did not consider poetry as an autobiographical genre. Lerro quotes Lejeune’s following lines from his Autobiographical Pact: “In most cases, the “I” of the poems is an I without reference, in which everyone can identify oneself: it is the pret-à-porter of emotion. The universal subjectivity of lyricism is quite different from the autobiographical discourse, which assumes a communicative attitude between two distinct and separate people” (Lejeune 286). This interpretation shows a traditional understanding of poetry and its use of the personal “I.” While some poets could write their “I” about others, allowing readers to imagine their own lives subjectively, some might choose to document their personal experience using the genre of poetry. What helped me identity autobiographical poetry in this chapter, however, is the fact that the two poets I study have a wide range of autobiographical essays, interviews, and poems discussing their lives. I chose poems that discussed their family members or were dedicated to them (making them personal), or poems that mentioned their cities of birth or incidents that have happened to them, that are also discussed in their other works, in different genres. Once I became certain of the personal elements in the poems, it became easier to analyze them as individual experiences written in a different format.

In Autobiographical poetry, Lerro argues in favor of accepting some poems as personal, as he focuses on autobiographical poems and autobiography in verse in his book. He summarizes his understanding by stating that: “Simply, there is a difference between the two: “Autobiography in prose” – so to speak – hits the “target” in a faster, more direct way, while the one in verse is, as it often happens when talking about poetry, more indirect”
(29). Lerro argues, then, that both prose and verse are capable of carrying the responsibility of writing about one’s life, yet perhaps the language and images are less direct in poetry. I would argue that the difficulty of the language and whether it “hits the target” depends on the authors themselves. As I show throughout this chapter, the poetry of Nye is easier to understand than Handal’s. Although I do mention some elements of poetry in my discussion, especially showing the simple representation in Nye’s poetry, and the more difficult complicated imagery in Handal’s, my focus remains on the content of the poems, and how the poets represent their homelands and struggles with language, albeit in shorter sentences and with complicated language. This chapter will show that similarly to Arab women writing their autobiographical prose, in this chapter, our female poets discuss family and community members, even including their relatives’ own words and thoughts as they discuss their own.

This chapter acts as a conclusion since it focuses on aspects that have been discussed in previous chapters, but with a specificity and focus that is new and unique. This is a chapter about poetry, but it is also about Palestinian American women (including me) who use English to convey communal matters, discuss family members and nostalgia. It also delves into bilingual representation, while always focusing on Palestine and different kinds of homesickness. I will analyze three Naomi Shihab Nye poems which discuss her grandmother and father, concluding with her poem “Arabic” where she sheds light on issues regarding language and the inability to feel (or be made to feel) whole without connecting to one’s own mother language. Nye’s evocation of her family members reminds us of other female Arab autobiographers discussed in this dissertation, who use family members and communal themes in their writing. In “The Words under the Words” Nye
draws an image of her strong grandmother who misses her son who is in the United States and awaits his letters. In “My Father and the Fig Tree,” she depicts her father’s life away from Palestine and his attachment to a tree that represents his homeland and nostalgia. Nye’s poetry is diverse, yet her focus is unified, her attention is to details and images, and while her words are usually simple, they are always rich in meaning. Handal’s poetry, on the other hand, is almost always complicated, multi-layered, and nuanced as the poet herself lived in many areas and speaks multiple languages. “Bethlehem” discusses her city of origin, recalling her grandfather. Her poem “Blue Hours” discusses a persona’s difficulty in belonging, switching from language to the next, feeling a betrayal in both. “The Songmaker-19 Arabics” discusses Handal’s poetic ability, especially when it comes to bilingual representation.

Shikaki’s first two poems which I will analyze in this chapter are “I Miss Home the Most” and “House, not Home.” These two poems discuss homesickness, and how attached a person feels to their home and family, yet unable to live happily abroad. “A Language that is Mine” discusses being away from home and slowly feeling alienated from a language Shikaki grew up speaking. Nye’s and Handal’s respective poetry also discuss these notions of using language as a way and a tool of alienation and belonging. In a poetry event in Bethlehem University in 2014, for example, Handal read some of her poems, stating that they reflect her “diasporic life”. She ends her poem “Blue Hours,” which I will discuss in this chapter, with her country speaking to her, saying: “I’ll always find you/ no matter what language you are speaking” (Handal 38). Although the focus in this chapter remains on family ties and homesickness, I will also focus on language, and how being bilingual adds another level of exile and pain to those who have fled or were forced to leave
Palestine. Here, I will discuss Shikaki’s poem “Bilingual.” This idea of missing home as one is forced to learn or speak new languages and slowly lose her Arabic is an idea that enriches our understanding of exiled writers and their homeland. This is why I have chosen to focus in this chapter on works by Palestinian American poets, poets who have settled outside of Palestine, yet still write and represent the bitter-sweet melody of reciting poetry to and about their country.

Naomi Shihab Nye’s Poetry: Family Representation Through Village Settings

In Nye’s poetry that I have chosen for this chapter, she exclusively focuses on her grandmother and father, describing their personalities and their sense of belonging. She connects their lives to hers by quoting their words in her poems. Her third poem which I will discuss speaks about language, another theme in this concluding chapter. This writing about others, as previously mentioned, is a trend that Arab women use in their autobiographical writing, and I will show how this translates in poetry. In “The Words Under the Words,” a poem dedicated to her grandmother “Sitti Khadra,” Nye uses the village way of saying grandmother, “Sitti,” as opposed to “Teta.” Nye portrays a traditional Palestinian grandmother who is caring, kind, and smart. Nye showcases her grandmother’s wits and her tender heart as she misses her son who is in the United States, yet accepts and surrenders to God. Nye spends her first stanza discussing her grandmother’s hands and how they “recognize grapes, the damp shine of a goat’s new skin” (Nye 1-2), portraying a village living. Her following lines about how her grandmother’s hands “[cover] my head like cool prayers” (Nye 5), paint an image of a matriarch who can heal, as well as produce and make her own living. Nye’s second stanza continues with a description of a woman who is self-sufficient and makes her own bread, as “She waits by the oven watching a
strange car circle the streets/ Maybe it holds her son/ lost to America” (Nye 8-10). The image of an elder, especially a grandmother waiting for her offspring, is a reality often seen in Palestinian villages and cities. Nye then shows her grandmother’s attachment to the letters from the United States she rarely receives, and how she perceives them to be “a miracle” when they are read to her by someone else, indicating an appreciation of writing, and later, storytelling in general as a traditional element (Nye 14).

Nye’s third stanza is more philosophical, showing her grandmother’s intelligence and acceptance of her present moment. She delicately showcases both her nuclear family’s inability to stay connected with her grandmother in Jerusalem, as they live in the United States, but also the deep understanding on the grandmother’s part, with lines such as “She knows the spaces we travel through/ the messages we cannot send—/ our voices are short/ and would get lost on the journey” (Nye 19-22). The movement from describing her grandmother using the third person pronoun to using the first person “we” and “our” shows a shift in perspective here as Nye is personally discussing her involvement in the matter, as well as her grandmother’s perception at the same time. Since Nye dedicated her poem to her grandmother, it is safe to assume that the personal pronoun refers to Nye herself. Nye ends her stanza with these beautiful lines that use her grandmother’s mode of communication—farming—to show her surrender to her current situation, as well as her grandmother’s higher sense of acceptance:

the ones she has loved and nourished,
who fly from her like seeds into a deep sky.
They will plant themselves. We will all die. (Nye 23-25)

These lines show the sacrifice of the grandmother who knows that her family will be far away from her, but as long as they are rooted and stable, it seems she is accepting. The last
words about death are not as bleak as they first appear to be, as the grandmother knows that eventually things die in order to live again, as plants die one year, and become stronger the next. Nye’s ability to imagine her grandmother’s train of thoughts seems very genuine and close to the heart, illustrating Nye’s poetic experience and skill.

Nye’s poem ends with a description of her grandmother’s religious belief, perhaps an explanation of her understanding and clear submission to the present moment. She begins her stanza with “my grandmother’s eyes say Allah is everywhere, even in death,” ending her lines with the word “death” again, the ultimate test of belief for Muslims and other believers (Nye 25). Nye mentions “orchard” and “new olive press,” again hinting to a traditional Jerusalem setting, but also her grandmother’s livelihood. She mentions how her grandmother “tells the stories of Joha and his foolish wisdom” which will be repeated in Nye’s description of her father who also tells these stories about Joha, a character mentioned in Arabic folklore (Nye 27). Nye’s grandmother is thus shown to be a storyteller, a maker of things, a healer, and a philosophical being because Nye’s farewell lines quote her grandmother’s words:

“Answer, if you hear the words under the words—
otherwise it is just a world with a lot of rough edges,
difficult to get through, and our pockets full of stones.” (Nye 29-31)

In these lines, the grandmother is speaking to someone, her granddaughter, or anyone who would hear. She is letting them know that a literal world is difficult, and a person must understand what is beyond the words and between the lines. The grandmother states that life becomes difficult to live if we do not think beyond our words and situations. Nye’s last imagery of a pocket full of stones could refer to her grandmother, the farmer, holding seeds that appear as stones in order to plant them, or possibly to the Palestinians who carry stones
and throw them at Israeli soldiers, planting for the freedom of their country. If one stops at the literal meaning, then the stones are simply stones, yet Nye, and in extension her grandmother, wants to show that even stones are a vehicle, a tool to be used, just like seeds, just like words.

In “Images of Palestinians in the Work of Naomi Shihab Nye,” Marcia G. Kutrieh uses Nye’s essays, as well as a few poems to analyze the relationship between Nye and her grandmother and father. Kutrieh argues that those familial depictions could be generalized about Palestinians as a whole. In her analysis of “The Words Under the Words,” Kutrieh writes about the language barrier that led Nye and her grandmother to communicate beyond words. She states: “Nye’s grandmother has obviously been able to formulate messages to her granddaughter past any sort of restrictions imposed by cultural or linguistic differences. Their understanding has been, as Nye says, under the words, non-verbal meaning that would get lost if verbalized, communication that hovers somewhere between words and meaning, between the signifier and signified” (Kutrieh 12). These sentences reiterate how Nye’s poems are not only autobiographical, but representative of other relationships between grandparents who do not speak English, and their grandkids who live away from Palestine. While I understand the meaning of “words under the words” as the meaning between the lines, Kutrieh thinks of them as the words unspoken because of language barrier. Regardless of the literal meaning of the lines, Nye was, nevertheless, able to create a believable narrator out of her grandmother in order to show a representation of a Palestinian grandmother who has family abroad, yet remains hopeful, and is able to sustain herself in her homeland. This description of her grandmother, who is striving in her country, is juxtaposed in Nye’s poem about her father which I will discuss next.
In “My Father and the Fig Tree,” Nye draws an image of a homesick father who searches for a special fig tree, refusing to plant a tree until he finally finds one. Maybe then he would feel home for once in his life, I argue. Nye paints a picture of a traditional setting once again with a house with many trees around it. She writes:

For other fruits, my father was indifferent.  
He'd point at the cherry trees and say,  
"See those? I wish they were figs." (Nye 1-3)

Nye shares her relationship with her father, who like his mother before him “weaves folktales like vivid little scarves” (Nye 5). His stories, however, always have figs in them: for example, that Joha character his mother also has in her story, appears in the father’s tales, as well, but here Joha “Was walking down the road/ and he saw a fig tree/ Or, he tied his camel to a fig tree/ and went to sleep/ Or, later when they caught and arrested him/ his pockets were full of figs” (Nye 9-13). Already we have elements of similarity between Nye’s grandmother and her father, and while her grandmother is back in Palestine and the son is in the United States, he is searching for a tree that he remembers from back home, a tree he does not seem to be able to plant himself in order to recreate the feeling of home. Clearly from the two poems, we can see the presence of a domestic simple setting, such as the grandmother’s garden, and the father’s backyard. In “Counter Narratives: Cooking up Stories of Love and Loss in Naomi Shihab Nye's Poetry and Diana Abu-Jaber's ‘Crescent,’” Mercer and Strom discuss Nye’s usage of setting, arguing that “Nye's poetry hinges on the feminist notion that the personal is political. Her poems are often set in kitchens, gardens, grocery stores, and other domestic spaces traditionally associated with women and women's work” (Mercer and Strom 34). It is in her usage of the personal that Nye is both political, and moves from the personal to the collective, where one garden becomes all
gardens. Nye’s representation of the mundane and the simple is feminist, but also universal, as she writes about common, diverse, issues in her other poems. In the introduction to his book *Inclined to Speak: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Poetry* (2008), Hayan Charara also writes about Nye’s choice of place in her work: “The sense of place in Naomi Shihab Nye’s poems is undoubtedly international in scope” he states, “and she reflects this in her work not only as a poet but also as an editor, a children’s book author, and a fiction writer, boundaries crossing each other and at times disappearing altogether” (Charara xxiii). What is clear from this statement is Nye’s ability to connect what seems faraway and separate.

Nye continues her poem by showing her and her mother’s inability to completely understand her father’s obsession with figs: when the daughter eats a dried fig and does not necessarily see her father’s fascination, he shows his dismay and disappointment as he corrects her, stating:

"That's not what I'm talking about! he said,
"I'm talking about a fig straight from the earth –
gift of Allah! -- on a branch so heavy. (Nye 15-17)"

Maybe it is this “gift from Allah” that Nye’s father is looking for, because when his white American wife, asks him to “plant one,” he refuses (Nye 26). Nye continues to show a family setting where her practical American mother lovingly complains about her husband, stating “What a dreamer he is. Look how many/ things he starts and doesn't finish” (Nye 30-31). Maybe it is the ache of an immigrant who wants to begin many projects and busy himself, but he does not have the tenacity to finish. Kutrieh, in the article cited above, uses Nye’s essays and poems to conclude that Nye’s father’s inability to finish projects he begins is a trait in his personality: “This pattern of starting some activity and then stopping
or failing at it marks her father's character throughout Nye's work” (Kutrieh 9). In this poem, it is not clear why the father refuses to plant a tree himself, but Nye’s concluding stanza shows a happy father “in Arabic, chanting a song” because he had moved to a backyard that had a fig tree (Nye 33-34). Nye’s lines do not specify if the father had finally planted the tree, but I would argue that he did not. I believe the “gift from Allah” is an already planted tree that has been there before, maybe as a genuine, organic reminder of his country and the big trees already there.

Just like Nye ends her previous poem with a philosophical quote from her grandmother, in this poem, we also get to hear her father speak, as the poem ends with Nye understanding her father a bit more. In the last lines, she writes:

There, in the middle of Dallas, Texas,  
  a tree with the largest, fattest,  
  sweetest fig in the world.  
"It's a fig tree song!" he said,  
  plucking his fruits like ripe tokens,  
  emblems, assurance  
  of a world that was always his own. (Nye 36-42)

Nye’s concluding lines speak to her father’s search for belonging. I do believe that he was literally looking for fig trees, but, like Nye’s grandmother’s sentence about taking things literally, it seems that the father was also looking for a sense of attachment to a land that is far away from his place of living. Finding a house with an already planted fig tree is reassurance that there are people like him in the world, or that good reminders of his country exist. Nye’s use of thematic and stylistic elements is similar across her two poems. She writes in both about family issues; she shows her grandmother’s and father’s struggles with homesickness and attachment, and she concludes her poems in the same way—by showing how her relatives are able to survive and thrive away and inside of their country.
Palestine. What is notable in these two poems is how we literally hear both the grandmother’s and father’s words as they speak to the poetic speaker herself. Nye’s use of place is also intriguing here, as she is able to connect the Palestine of her grandmother with her father’s Texas. In addition, her use of a collective voice resembles the way Arab female autobiographers, and especially ones I have analyzed in this dissertation, use collective voices in their books. In the same way that Amiry quotes her mother-in-law, and Makdisi literally quotes lines from her mother’s journals, Nye quotes philosophical statements said to her by both her grandmother and father, creating a connection with her family. It is in Nye’s use of a traditional setting and the field of farming in these two poems that Palestine and the Unites States, as well as the grandmother and father connect.

Nye’s poems are thus simple yet deep, discussing her family and their inner battles. She, herself is not as present in these poems. Her third poem, “Arabic,” however, does mention Nye’s personal struggles with language and belonging to a culture without necessarily having full command of its language. Like her other mentioned poems, Nye begins her poetry directly and immediately. In “Arabic,” she narrates a story of an old man who tells her that “until you speak Arabic/ you will not understand pain” (2-3). Her poem is a retelling of the old man’s sentiment, as she explores the relationship with her language and with this idea of pain. She writes about the old man’s explanation, which shows the connection Arabs feel to their culture and language:

“Once you know,” he whispered, “you can enter the room whenever you need to. Music you heard from a distance, the slapped drum of a stranger’s wedding, well up inside your skin, inside rain, a thousand pulsing tongues. You are changed.” (Nye 8-14)
These lines reveal the innate connection between a speaker and their mother tongue. The old man tells the speaker to dig deep into her soul for memory, to get a taste of the language in order to feel its words and understand its hidden secrets. Maybe a poet needs to feel pain and that is why he tells the speaker, presumably the poet herself, that she needs to know Arabic “to understand pain.” In these lines, we hear again a person speaking to the audience or the speaker herself. This time, we hear from an old man feeling disappointment or sorrow that Nye does not speak the language well. It is not clear what kind of change happens when the speaker digs into her memory and “enter[s] the room,” but maybe her own understanding of life and pain changes when she is in command of another language, especially the language of her ancestors and grandparents. Maybe the old man means to give the speaker another pathway to writing poetry.

When the poetic speaker finally speaks in this poem, she admits some sort of defeat. She writes about this idea of pain once again, as it does haunt the poem, but she also expresses her own shame. Nye writes:

I thought pain had no tongue. Or every tongue at once, supreme translator, sieve. I admit my shame. To live on the brink of Arabic, tugging its rich threads without understanding how to weave the rug…I have no gift. The sound, but not the sense. (Nye 18-23)

In these short lines, Nye summarizes years of struggle. At first, she writes about pain and how she feels it exists in all languages, and perhaps more importantly transcends translation. She uses the metaphor of a rug to show how although she understands the language, she does not get, and let me quote her grandmother here, “the words beyond the words.” Nye admits that she is able to speak Arabic, using the lines “the sound, but not the
sense,” and “tugging its rich threads,” showing the history and importance of Arabic, yet she does not have the capability of really connecting with it, and truly getting the language. Nye does not surrender; instead, she reassures the old man that she will “work on it, feeling sad” (Nye 31). In her understanding of Nye’s poem, Lubna Safi analyzes the usage of a sieve in Nye’s poem. She writes in her article “On the Brink: Identity and Language in the Poetry of Arab American Women,” that Nye’s “Characterization of pain as the “supreme translator” and as a “sieve,” shows that she understands pain not as what needs to be translated but rather as the tool that translates among the differing tongues—the apparatus of translation rather than the material to be translated” (Safi 314). This understanding expands the meaning of pain and makes it a tool and not just a shameful sensation, but it also portrays the poetic speaker disagreeing with the old man’s statement about pain. I, however, see that by using the word “shame” and “sad,” Nye is able to understand her negative feelings that she either feels on her own or was made to feel by the old man and other Arabs who want Naomi to speak Arabic more fluently. In addition, this poem shows Nye’s awareness and pride of her bilingual abilities, even if without equal command of the Arabic language.

Nye ends her poem, once again, in a philosophical manner where she writes about recognizing pain, not by mastering the language, but by finally understanding the void of not having the ability to feel it. She writes:

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but later in the slick street
hailed a taxi by shouting Pain! and it stopped
in every language and opened its doors. (Nye 32-34)
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Here, Nye shows that she had learned the lesson of needing a language to heal and to make a person understand pain on their way to recovery. Stating that she screamed the word
“Pain” with a capital letter, also shows her appreciation of this idea or notion of human Pain and suffering, the capitalization indicating the notion of pain, and not the momentarily ache. What matters is that the poetic speaker is listening and that is the first step. Safi’s article makes the point that Nye’s resistance to “untranslatable” things makes her isolated:

Her exclusion is enacted by the fact both that she is told she doesn’t understand pain, but also by her own admittance that she is on the brink of a language and by extension of a cultural tradition. When in the end, she shouts “Pain!” the two forms of pain blend together and become one through this utterance. She has successfully translated that untranslatable element, and she affirms that pain is in fact “the supreme translator.” (Safi 315)

In these lines, Safi continues her focus on what can and cannot be translated, as she concentrates on Nye’s double pain, the implied and self-inflicted. Safi’s understanding of Nye’s resistance to “ideologies of linguistic idealism” (Safi 313) is made clear in the lines above. Safi and I both understand the poem’s conclusion to be positive. I see that the last image that Nye leaves her readers with is of a vehicle (a mode of change and movement) that opened its doors for her, allowing her access. It does seem that Nye is moving closer to understanding her own language, and with that her culture. Through that understanding, she is able to accept and learn about pain, and in the process become a better writer.

Naomi Shihab Nye’s poems are diverse and discuss many aspects of her life, especially her family in Palestine, as well as her relatives’ migrant lives in the United States. As my analysis showed, Nye is able to shed light on her family’s life, while using their own words and a village-like setting in a concise form such as poetry. Her last poem “Arabic” showcases what an immigrant loses when they have some command of a mother language, but not the ability to move in its terrains. Nye is very capable of mixing her personal autobiographical life with those of her grandmother’s, her father’s, and even an old man who advices her to learn the language in order to become more empathetic. This
connection that she creates shows the personal becoming collective mirrored in other female Arab autobiographical writings analyzed throughout this dissertation. Nye’s use of the everyday discussed in this chapter is a trait of her poetry that has been written about by Samina Najmi in her article “Naomi Shihab Nye's Aesthetic of Smallness and the Military Sublime.” Najmi writes that “Nye's poetry connects cultures and countries through emphasis on the small and the ordinary, insisting on the mundane and the everyday to stress human connections” (Najmi 152). It is through narrating the simple, such as her grandmother’s daily life, her father’s obsession with a fig tree, and her language struggles that Nye is then able to connect with others and to show life as it is.

**Nathalie Handal’s Poetry: Sophisticated Representations**

Nathalie Handal’s life is a typical Palestinian immigrant life. It is scattered, it takes place in different countries, and it has exposed Handal to many languages that she employs in her poetry. Handal’s lines are expressive, seldom are her images or words simple. Her poetic expressions shed light and discuss similar notions as Nye’s in her depiction of her family, herself, and her struggle with language. In the poems I have chosen to analyze, Handal discusses her origin city of Bethlehem, evoking her grandfather, and in her remaining poems, she explores living in between cultures and languages. It is difficult to analyze Handal’s poems because every line holds more than one meaning, yet what remains consistent is her ability to use the very concise form of poetry in order to showcase the difficulty of living as an exiled soul. While living abroad and away from Palestine, the poet always felt a connection to it. In an interview with Layla Al Maleh, Handal says that Palestine “was so present in my memory, or rather in the memory of others that I borrowed. It seemed so right to belong to all those stories my grandfather spoke about. I even forgot
they weren’t moments I had lived”¹¹ (Handal, quoted in Al Maleh 37). Through her imagination and poetic brilliance, Handal is thus able to deliver messages about the love of her country, as well as how language affects an exiled person, while miles away from her motherland.

In “Bethlehem,” Handal draws an image of a poetic speaker, presumably herself, in her grandfather’s city of Bethlehem. Handal does not see anyone, nor recognize the city’s marks in the poem. Unlike Nye’s poems, Handal’s first lines are not direct or immediately discuss her subject. In this poem she begins and ends with the refrain, “Secrets live in the space between our footsteps” (Handal 1). Handal mentions her grandfather and his city by hinting to a dream-like state she is in, as she writes:

> The words of my grandfather echoed in my dreams,  
> As the years kept his beads and town.  
> I saw Bethlehem, all in dust, an empty town. (Handal 2-4)

These lines already show the sophisticated tone of Handal’s writing. The simile in the second line “echoed…as the years” shows Handal’s connection and remembrance of her grandfather, whom she is able to dream of. The town of Bethlehem is different in Handal’s imagination and she roams the empty streets wondering: “Where could everyone be? Graffiti and stones answered” (Handal 6). This line shows the poetic speaker seeking elements of the urban environment in order to connect and understand the world around her. Handal’s use of personification in giving stones and graffiti the ability to speak and explain what is happening to their town is a notable technique, as it gives a scenario that a

¹¹ This is an example of Marianne Hirsch’s concept of “Postmemory,” where children remember certain events and places through the memory of the older generation who lived through trauma. Chapter 3 of this dissertation discusses the topic in more detail.
lot of people might wonder about, which is what would happen if ancient cities and their walls were allowed to express the injustice their city faces.

Handal’s last stanza concludes her poem beautifully. She writes about finally finding a human to explain the situation, and here she asks: “Aren't you the man I saw in my grandfather's stories?” (Handal 10). Handal again mentions her grandfather, but also discusses, like Nye before her, storytelling and how Palestinian grandparents use this technique to connect with everyone around them. The man that Handal sees, however, does not “weave stories” or even answer her:

He looked at me and left. I followed him- asked him why he left? He continued walking.
I stopped, turned around and realized he had left me the secrets in the space between his footsteps. (Handal 11-13)

These lines, which Handal chooses to end her poem with, are mysterious. We do not know the secrets the poetic speaker receives, but they are hers and hers alone. It is important to point out here that Handal creates a relationship between herself and her ancestral city, having heard its walls speak, and having received its secrets. Handal’s poem showcases her poetic ability and her connection to her Palestinian heritage. In Handal’s poem, we did not hear from her grandfather, like we heard from Nye’s grandmother in “The Words under the Words,” nor did we hear any human other than her speak in this poem. I would argue that this silence is intentional in order to show the bareness that surrounds Bethlehem—especially after the construction of the apartheid wall that separates Bethlehem from Jerusalem and neighboring Palestinian villages and cities. Perhaps also, there is a silence that contains a different meaning, like the one that tells secrets “in the space between [her grandfather’s] footsteps.” Handal’s “Bethlehem” continues the tradition of mentioning family members while discussing homelands. According to Lisa Suhair Majaj’s article “On
Writing and Return: Palestinian American Reflections,” discussing homelands is very important for Palestinian American poets because “For Palestinian American authors, the act of writing charts a multilayered search, a longing for return to Palestine, to the legacy of the past, but also to that space between "Palestinian" and "American" where "home" is as much created as found” (Majaj 122). It is this construction of a homeland that Handal excels at, as creating and looking for a bare Bethlehem while far away, is at the center of this poem.

Handal’s next poem considers another aspect of home, that of language. In “Blue Hours,” Handal continues with her complicated images that show her stylistic and poetic abilities. In this poem, which is from her newest collection, written while she was in Andalusia, Handal conjures the image of “the negrita,” a woman she eventually has a conversation with, and confesses her language barriers. Handal begins her poem with the negrita in tears, and the poetic speaker “hide[s]/ not to deceive the darkne...” (Handal 1-3). We do not know why she hides, but eventually the image of the speaker clarifies, and the poetic speaker wants to ask that woman:

have you ever heard  
your heart undressing,  
seen a stray dog at midnight,  
realize he understands this hour  
better than we will understand any hour?  
have you seen yourself in every woman  
with your eyes or in women with eyes  
more difficult than yours? (Handal 14-21)

These lines show the poetic speaker’s curiosity and her need to connect with the woman whom she seems to share some emotions and fears. The questions asked show a deep understanding of humanity and observation displayed by the asker. Understanding that an animal, a dog at night, has more knowledge of its surroundings than a person is probably a
thought not a lot of people have considered. Asking if the “negrita” has felt a connection with other women by seeing herself in them or acknowledged women with “more difficult eyes” is a question that indicates the harsh reality of both women in conversation. While the “negrita” never speaks, she does invite the speaker (whom we can again assume to be Handal herself) to drink. Here, Handal uses traditions from her Arab culture where she mentions: “we end up drinking coffee/ trying to reach the bottom of the cup/ unafraid…” (Handal 25-27). This picture could allude to the Arabic tradition of “reading the cup” especially Arabic/Turkish coffee cups. The fact that these women are not afraid as they look into their future shows their courage, but also hint to their past, showcasing a reason to be afraid of what is coming.

Handal’s “Blue Hours” hides more than it tells, and at certain moments, the lines seem jumbled and out of order. It is not clear why the speaker is afraid, for instance; it is not clear who the “negrita” is, and the lines before the ending mention language, but feel out of place and abruptly used. Handal uses the personal pronoun “I” to discuss her relationship to language, as she writes:

now, my teeth are stained, my English failing me, my Arabic fading
my Spanish starting to make sense… (Handal 28-30)

Could the stains be from the coffee? And what would that mean? No one knows the answer, but for the first time in this poem, the speaker mentions her command of English, Arabic, and Spanish, languages that Handal speaks, which is another way to see this poem as autobiographical. Perhaps Handal begins with English as it is the language she writes in and uses the most. Her Arabic fades, but we do not know why. Maybe it disappears so the Spanish language can settle in. Handal continues to write in English, and in her last stanza,
she ends with a line that I am sure resonates with many bilingual speakers, especially those who do not speak their mother tongue, or speak it shyly. In her concluding stanza, Handal reassures that she or her poetic speaker is safe, once again we are not sure from what, but she writes about her gratitude:

perhaps we are safe,  
perhaps we desire nothing else,  
but I can't stop bowing in prayer  
five times a day,  
my country comes to me, tells me:  
—I will always find you  
no matter what language you are speaking. (Handal 32-38)

This stanza shows Handal’s appreciation for a God that she bows to five times, a nod to Islam in Andalusia. What is most remarkable and touching in this poem, however, is her last lines about a country telling its exiled citizens that she will find them, “no matter” the languages they speak. I found this line very captivating, as it summarizes the struggle and fear of not belonging that many immigrants and exiled people, especially Palestinians, feel away from their homes. In an interview with the Palestinian American poet Lisa Suha Majaj, Handal explains her relationship to her homeland, by writing:

Palestine is the perfect lover because it lets me love him the way I want to love him. By that I mean, I have never felt rejected by Palestine, whether I have spoken kindly or upsettingly to him, promised something and not delivered, gone to his arms or stayed away. Palestine has loved me unconditionally. And he is also a she at times. And although Palestine is not free, I have only felt free in Palestine… my wings can dance in its sensual and furious winds, my heart can recite the verses of its shadows. (Majaj 615)

Handal’s lines add to our understanding of her relationship to her country, which is depicted in her poem “Blue Hours” as a country that is able to understand any language that expresses love. It is interesting that Handal perceives Palestine as both male and female. This is both similar and also different from how other Palestinian poets, especially
men see Palestine. Al-Barghouti, discussed in the previous chapter, writes about Palestine as a female lover. For Handal to perceive Palestine as both genders is intriguing and it shows her flexibility and unique point of view. In the lines quoted above from her interview, Handal adds that her country is also forgiving of any harsh words, which mirrors the way Shikaki sees her country in “Watani: My Homeland” discussed in Chapter 2, where the poetic speaker has reprimanding words for her homeland. Handal’s portrayal of Palestine as a country not free, but able to make a person feel free and not restrained, is a description that is of a motherly and grounded country or lover. Handal’s poem is complicated and mysterious, typical of her poetry, but the idea in her last concluding lines could not be simpler: Handal belongs to Bethlehem, and her country will always find her and understand her love. This poem shows Handal’s ability to utilize her different backgrounds and show her sophisticated images and style. Handal’s “Blue Hours” continues the discussion about language, but extends it, complicates it, and makes it more nuanced.

In Handal’s next poem, “The Songmaker—19 Arabics,” she demonstrates her command of both English and Arabic, but especially her native Arabic as she counts 19 synonyms of the verb “love.” This act of writing about two languages and keeping the Arabic synonyms as they are, but in italics, demands attention. In her essay “On the Brink: Identity and Language in the Poetry of Arab-American Women,” Lubna Safi writes about translations and the choice Arab American women writers make as they write poetry. She writes that “Working within the context of two languages, two poles of reference—essentially two identities: an Arab one, turned towards the Middle East, to the question of origin and tradition, and an American one, turned the other way—then one must deal
inevitability with the issue of what can be translated or made accessible” (Safi 312). Safi’s argument applies to both Nye and Handal (who writes from and about Andalusia in a book, but publishes in the United States, and identifies as Palestinian American) who either use translated words and phrases or translate their experiences. Translating emotions and reflections are not the only modes of translation, however; literal translation is what most bilingual people do in their day-to-day life, but also while writing poetry. In Handal’s poem, she chose not to translate the synonyms into English. She does translate the feelings and struggles she or her poetic speaker feels, however.

Handal’s “The Songmaker—19 Arabics” revolves around songs, poems, and connections, as she quotes the poet Louis MacNeice in the beginning of her poem and ends it with music. The lines she quotes are about MacNeice’s appreciation of variety, with these lines summarizing the entire stanza she quotes: “I peel and portion/ A tangerine and spit/ the pips and feel/ The drunkenness of things being various” (1-3 Handal). It is this variety that Handal uses in her Arabic lines. In this poem, we hear the poetic speaker’s voice earlier than in her two other poems. Handal begins her poem by speaking about a song maker using the pronoun “I,” and seamlessly moves to discuss the poetic speaker, once again presumably herself, as she writes:

Which one of us is free
—he asks his violin,
as he tunes its strings—
you or I?
Which past or present do I choose,
which exile do you remember,
which bedroom did I leave you in,
under which lemon tree did I compose 19 Arabics. (Handal 1-8)

These lines show the connection a creator has with their art. In Handal’s lines, the creator is a composer who plays on his violin and asks if who is more free, yet it is also a poet who
“composes” 19 Arabic words. Throughout the poem, who is speaking and to whom is not always direct and clear, yet the few lines of the stanza quoted above show a clear shift in the one who is speaking.

Handal proceeds to count the 19 Arabic words she came up with, with every few lines she mentions a few, as she connects them to a moment, to a place that is linked in her mind, or the speaker’s. In these following lines, she links her words and sends them to a “border,” and a “crossing,” by stating:

Yesterday I carried Hob Hawa Hadb Harara Hanan Huyam Jawa
to the border, and waited.
Today, I stood by Tahabbub Tahannoun Taraffouq Tatayyum Wajd
Walah
at the crossing, and waited. (Handal 9-13)

In these lines, the poetic speaker is personifying her words and using a metaphor to show her synonyms being “carried.” What is similar here is the process of waiting which Handal mentions in her other lines as well. The timeline in Handal’s poem shifts from the past to the present in the line where she says: “As for tonight, I will think of the nineteen ways I wait” (Handal 17). The lines that follow also mention waiting, but they have a Palestinian or an Arab setting with the mention of olive and almond trees. Just like in “Bethlehem,” in this poem, the poetic speaker is not able to see a familiar face, as she asks:

Where are the olive trees
why can’t I see the almond tree
or the sun
a wall hiding the light even from my shadow.
Is there a bridge anywhere? (Handal 18-22)

Could Handal be speaking about the apartheid wall that surrounds Palestinian cities? To not be able to see one’s shadow is a suffocating feeling, and asking if there is a bridge, or a wall masked as a bridge, shows the poetic speaker’s need for an escape, or a connection,
perhaps. One wonders if she is also speaking in this line about the bridge separating Palestine and Jordan.

The poetic speaker begins to ask questions and ends her poem with answers regarding ties with other people, and also art. It is still not clear who is she asking or if she receives answers, but she discusses religion in the lines where she addresses someone:

Are you tired? You look tired.  
Tell me which holy book is on your shelf  
—all of them—  
it’s language that keeps the land as it should be. (Handal 24-27)

Palestine is known for its multiple religions, so it could be that Handal is asking or is being asked about her religion here, yet she or the answerer responds that what unites people, especially in Palestine, is language. Maybe Handal is hinting that what links people to Palestine is the language and traditions, but also love, since the 19 words all translate that verb. Handal’s poetic ability and her sophisticated images and ideas are very clear in the ending of “The Songmaker—19 Arabics,” where Handal ends with the song that she alludes to in the beginning of her poem, with the conversation between the violinist and the violin as he tunes it. She concludes her stanza with lines demanding an answer to her question, yet Handal or her poetic speakers answer her questions by questioning the addressee:

Am I the songmaker  
or are you?  
Answer.  
Which bird did I speak to  
when we marched together,  
beyond—  
myth after myth?  
Who said we need to be strangers,  
when we listen to the same music? (Handal 36-44)
While still unclear who the speaker is addressing, there seems to be a tight relationship between her and the addressee, as she mentions them marching together. This friendship or closeness is negated and then reiterated again when the speaker mentions the word “strangers,” and then the fact that they “listen to the same music,” meaning they should not be strangers or foreigners. The music could be the violinists’ songs, or the Arabic language that is known to be musical and lyrical. This poem evokes the Arabic language, portrays the sorrow of waiting, as well as presents elements of Handal’s homeland. Handal’s three poems, then, show her sophisticated play with language and words, but also her portrayal of her country and its sorrows.

Both Nye and Handal demonstrate, through their autobiographical poetic writing, personal issues that are also collective, reminding us of Palestinian autobiographers who shed light on issues that affect them, but also their society, such as the effects of the loss of Palestine. Both Nye and Handal mention family members and their respective Palestinian towns or villages, and each mentions language and her need to connect and use Arabic. While Nye’s language and topics are simpler than Handal’s, their poetry is equally touching, poetic, and full of imagery and beauty. Both poets maintain their Palestinian identities and write about their relationships to their land. This connection to their land is a trait common to many Palestinian Americans, as Layla Al Maleh’s book Arab Voices in Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature (2009) discusses. Al Maleh states about the centrality of the Palestinian issue: “No matter what the actual proclivity towards selecting Palestinian themes is, it remains to be said that between mental images and political realities lies a primary desire to retain a Palestinian identity in the diasporic locus and to recount the Palestinian story in order to save it from oblivion in the
midst of a headlong mêlée of events” (Al Maleh 38). It does not take long to notice that the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands aims to destroy all notions of sovereignty, but also identity. This Palestinian need to document the past, present, and future aspiration, has been shown in each and every chapter of this dissertation. Laila Shikaki’s poetry which I will discuss next has similar notions of retelling the “Palestinian Story,” such as longing for home and language, as it mentions family members, while discussing a personal manner than can also be collective.

**Laila Shikaki’s Poetry: The Language of Homesickness**

While finalizing our discussion of Shikaki’s poems and especially in a chapter dedicated to poetry, it is important to pay attention once again to the organization of the poems. My discussion will begin with “I Miss Home the Most” which was nominated for the Pushcart Prize; it is the longest poem and one that uses every other element discussed in this dissertation thus far. Embedded in the poem is longing to a country while being away, showing different descriptions of Palestine, as well as discussing family issues. Similarly to other poems written by Shikaki at that time, it concludes with mentioning the importance of writing. While “I Miss Home the Most” discusses being away from home, Shikaki’s second poem to be discussed, which is also her most recent published poem, “House, not Home,” showcases living in New York City as Shikaki was working on her PhD. In it, she writes less about being torn about staying or leaving (emotions she writes about in her earlier Californian poetry), ending her poem, instead, with clear lines about not belonging and wanting to go back to a place she can call “home,” which eventually she does. The last two poems to be analyzed in this chapter will continue with a topic that has not been discussed much in this dissertation but analyzed throughout this fourth chapter: language and translation. In “A Language that is Mine,” Shikaki discusses having
command of both Arabic and English, and how words and meals largely differ in both, creating some sort of loss and longing. Shikaki slowly shows how she is losing not only the comprehension of her language, living in an area with no Arabs and hearing no Arabic around her, but the familiarity and closeness, as well. Shikaki’s most famous poem and the last poem to be discussed in this chapter, “Bilingual,” which has been shared widely and quoted on Facebook, is a nod and an ode to everyone who speaks two languages, but especially Arabic and English. It does not specifically mention living abroad, but it hints to it; while there is loss in “A Language that is Mine,” this last poem ends on a positive note where the speaker acknowledges that she is blessed to know, speak, dream, and even love in two languages.

Shikaki begins her poem “I Miss Home the Most” by discussing moments of weakness and longing she feels while studying in California. She mentions being sick, missing family and friends’ special moments, like the birth of a child, seeing other families and couples having special intimate moments, and even receiving a low grade. In every stanza, she elaborates on the situation and extensively discusses the setting. In her first stanza, for example, she mentions what her brother and mother would usually do when she feels sick. She uses visual imagery where she mentions the sandwich her brother would make her, and how her mother would sit close to her, but then leave. There is a homey feeling and sensation throughout these lines. This concise description of Shikaki’s family and friends is summarized in stanza four where Shikaki describes being upset about her grade. She writes:

I used to say that there are other things
that are more important
than grades: family, my friends, and Arabic food
but these are lacking as I sit on my bed
drinking green tea with a creased paper that has a red B (Shikaki 26-30)

Here, we can see the three important “things” Shikaki mentions as being more important than being upset, and especially about a bad grade. Of course, since the speaker is not home, she is unable to be with her family or friends, and she does not have access to Arabic food. There is simplicity and childlike description of home in these lines. It seems the poet is more focused on conveying the emotional toll longing has on her. The speaker then proceeds to mention, yet again, family members, creating a holistic and warm image. She writes about telling her father her bad math grades, as a fourth grader. In this poem, there is a return to the past and present, to moments that have happened while the speaker was in Palestine, but also to events that took place while she was in California.

The speaker slowly gets political as she describes some uncomfortable and discriminatory moments, especially in regard to her professors, one of whom “thinks Zionism is okay” (Shikaki 39). As was shown in her other poems, Shikaki usually takes a personal moment and creates from it a bigger collective issue that she shares in her poetry. In this long poem, she begins to discuss when and how she misses her home, and then she describes her strength and not needing to “justify” (Shikaki 37). Although the line that prompted her need to use the work “justify” was while discussing her professor who thinks she wants to “change the American way,” the speaker proceeds to discuss how she misses home when she realizes that there is no one to justify or explain these feelings to. She writes about being alone in her apartment, able to live by herself and even bring people over to her place, yet what the speaker does with this freedom is nothing more than continue to miss her home. She writes:
yet I find myself the same me
the person in jeans trying to match her *hijab* with the patterns on her shirt
the girl who has a thin skin with scars that are about to peel (Shikaki 48-50)

Once again, Shikaki does not shy away from her religious beliefs when she mentions her *hijab*. She, therefore, is able to look at her own life and share her experiences, the ups and downs. She shares her bad grade, and she shares the fact that she has “thin skin.” This humble personal outlook is needed when writing poetry, especially while away from home. Handal and Shihab share this sentiment in the poems mentioned above, where they both discuss their shame of not mastering the Arabic language, for example. Sensory descriptions and using imagery are also one of Shikaki’s staple techniques, and in stanza seven, she mentions missing her home when she would “write in poems/ about the smell of the streets near the Falafel shops/ old women in white shawls” (49-51), mixing both smelling and visual senses, continuing to create an easy vivid image accessible to the reader.

Shikaki concludes her poem with the line: “I miss home the most when I hold a pen,” showing the importance of writing, but also how it consequently brings ache and longing. She describes her homeland in the last stanza where she mentions names of cities she misses, cities she has a connection to, like Tulkarem and Ramallah, creating a more intimate description. The speaker uses the present tense when she mentions that she misses home, portraying a continuous longing:

```
I miss home the most right now while I write this, and while you read it
when you read this and while I write it
I miss Ramallah
I miss Tulkarem where I grew up, and I miss Nablus
where I learned about love
I miss Gaza although I haven’t seen it in years
I miss Jerusalem although it aches me when I am allowed to see it (Shikaki 54-60)
```
Here, we have a poet sharing her setting as she writes, clearly away from home, clearly writing in order to express her feelings, knowing paradoxically that the more she writes, the more she will miss her homeland. In Shikaki’s poem, one can see, at times, a childlike and easy description of homesickness, and at other times a complicated nuanced narrative of longing as one writes about homeland.

Shikaki’s second poem, “House, not Home,” was published in December 2019, written while she was pursuing her PhD in New York City. This poem shows a more complicated and mature description of homesickness and longing. Shikaki uses more negative descriptions of her current situation, in which the speaker explains her inability to settle in a place that many others dream about. Shikaki starts her poem by stating that she is unable to even list the word “home” on Google Maps in order to save her house location while in NYC. She continues to showcase examples of her inability to settle by writing in her first stanza: “I have a chiropractor and a mailbox and three library cards/ yet it’s house and not home/ here in New York City” (Shikaki 3-5). The speaker continues with indicating what home means to her, mentioning family members, a reminder of Chapter 3 as it demonstrates showing a close connection between Palestinians’ relationship to their country and their relationship to their family. And so, Shikaki writes about needing to hear her language in order to feel at home, writing that home is where her parents are. She continues to state that “home is where I sleep happy/ I wake up happy/ and I eat happy/ and I am happy there.” (Shikaki 8-11). When Shikaki mentions sleeping and eating, we are taken to her previous poem “I Miss Home the Most” where she mentions the “things” that could make her forget her worries and low grades but are unavailable to her. The usage of the words “here” where the speaker says: “here in New York City/ I found a frown line/
intact/ new yet resilient/ I resist this city while I love aspects of it” (Shikaki 13-17) clearly
shows a distinction between “house” and “home,” “here” and “there.” Shikaki once again
is able to open up about her experiences and is honest and clear about how longing for
Palestine and for feeling at home, affect her physical appearance. In her other lines, she
continues with her trend of discussing living in two places and admits to loving “aspects”
of New York City, creating a more mature complicated emotional state.

This comparison between feeling happy and frowning, between living in Palestine
and living abroad continues throughout the poem, creating dichotomous scenarios. Readers
get more glimpses of living in Palestine when Shikaki discusses laughing and talking with
her students with ease, immediately followed by feelings of guilt when she writes “NYC
is NYC, for God’s sake,” (Shikaki 30). This highlights that many others (including her
students) would love to be in her situation, living in NYC, even as she is stuck reminiscing
about the past. Continuing with her style of hearing and answering the call of her country
shown in Chapter 2, Shikaki writes in her last few lines about that calling, indicating for
the first time that she is writing her research about her country:

Palestine calls me
she speaks to me in lines of poetry
she checks how my dissertation is going
about her, I reassure. (Shikaki 31-34)

The description of Palestine, here, is of a personified, subtle, simple, and even forgiving
being. Shikaki states in the very last few lines of her poem that Palestine “forgives my
absence/ as do my family and friends” (Shikaki 35-36). There is a more mature
understanding of exile here that maybe comes with age. The speaker is aware that although
she is unhappy, she has a mission to accomplish before coming back home. Just like
Shikaki’s last poem ends with “I miss home the most when I hold a pen,” her most recent
poem ends with portraying the same emotions of needing the act of writing in order to survive. The speaker says: “Palestine forgives, promising it’ll be there/ but here I ache/ in this house, on this table I finally/ write/ and yearn for home” (39-45). Shikaki, like other autobiographers studied in this dissertation, suffuses this yearning in her writing.

As mentioned before, the last two poems discussed here depict homesickness, and focus on emotional experiences and moments, usually comparing past and present, happiness and loss. They focus on writing and how it slowly heals and is needed for survival and acceptance of one’s emotions, while simultaneously bringing difficult emotions to the surface. These last poems showcase the speaker in her many states of missing home; they reveal that in some cases, an exiled person (even a student away for a few years) cannot handle being away from her country, easily. Homesickness, then, is a real emotion that causes writers to document their journeys, either away from their homelands, or when they eventually can visit or return. They can be documented in childlike past reminiscing, or through more mature descriptions of the ache one feels while away. One way of documenting the pain and loss felt by a person away from her country as seen in Shikaki’s poetry, or an exiled person’s obsession with emblems of home like Nye’s father, is through creating images that compare the past with the present, belonging and feeling alienated, or happiness with sadness, as seen in Shikaki’s poetry. Yet, and as both Nye and Handal demonstrated, oftentimes poets show that language is at the center of their exilic experiences. Shikaki’s last two poems discussed in this dissertation add a new layer of understanding longing through language.

In Shikaki’s poem, “A Language that is Mine,” language is at the center. This is a poem written in a horizontal manner where the divide between English words and what
they connote in the mind of the speaker, and their Arabic counterpart is very clear. While Shikaki’s other poems focus on the act of writing, this poem focuses on the sense of hearing. There is a refrain on the left column where the speaker states, “When they say,” that is followed by Arabic words and sentiments such as “’asha” and “houb.” Every line describes and conveys different emotions and takes the speaker to a different place, whether emotionally or physically. When describing love, for example, the poet writes:

when they say love I think of boyfriends
husbands or partners
I think of Neruda
when I think of houb I think of unattainable things
animal eyes describe lovers who lived once in a desert
Bedouins who couldn’t touch each other
couldn’t write about love if they wanted to attain it
(Shikaki 7-13)

The English version of the sentiment or the understanding of the English words themselves are usually simple in Shikaki’s poem. They are described in minimal words, or even by evoking people’s names like that of the romantic poet Neruda. The Arabic connotation of the same verb, however, is more complex, taking the speaker to a more complicated place. In this incident, the word “houb,” meaning love, took the poet thousands of years back to the pre-Islamic Arabian desert, and described the delicate manner of falling in love in the Sahara. Even the act of reading what each word indicates is a process that needs the physical movement from the left to the right, perhaps indicating how the poet’s brain works when she processes words heard in English or Arabic.

The title of the poem comes into play in Shikaki’s last lines where she shares her relationship with her mother tongue. After describing how she feels when she hears certain words in the two languages, she focuses on her own language that is “away” from her
(Shikaki 14). Although she admits to not hearing her language much, due to the lack of Arab neighbors or friends around her, the language “is in me/ a language that is mine/ but I can barely hear it anymore” (Shikaki 15-16). The last line demands some more analysis and thinking, because not hearing a language does not necessarily only mean not hearing it literally spoken out loud. It might mean, in this case, not thinking in this language, not communicating with one’s self through this language, since as discussed in Shikaki’s other poems, she still remained in close contact with her friends and family back home, all of whom speak the language. I argue here that Shikaki’s last lines show some sort of loss, a loss of identity through the loss of a first language that is usually embedded in one’s brain, yet that loss was explored in her writing. This loss showcases a theme that has been discussed throughout this dissertation—the importance of personal narratives that result in writing about one’s self and society.

While Shikaki’s previous poem ends with some sort of loss, her last poem “Bilingual” ends on a more positive note. “Bilingual” is a poem that conveys a familiar moment for speakers of different languages, a moment where a person wants to express a sentiment with a word that is readily available in their mother tongue, but not translatable or understandable in any other language. In this poem, Shikaki sheds light on moments of confusion where she is unable to communicate in a deeper way with non-Arabic speakers. This poem, coupled with the previous one, illustrates the importance of not only having a connection to a place, but also the ability to use one’s own language to communicate and deepen a connection.

Shikaki begins her poem by showing her inability to use the word saha, said when one wants to wish a person a good meal, with her American friend. She writes in her third
line “my tongue tied, my hands on the keyboard stuck” (Shikaki 4-5). She explains in the following lines how other words such as “bon appetit” exist, yet they do not do her chosen word justice. The speaker uses other incidents and other moments to explain the inability of other languages to convey her emotions. In Shikaki’s second stanza, one can almost see an ease in her writing as she mentions speaking to her Palestinian friend, stating that although he is calling to whine about his wife, “I smile because the words I can use are endless” (Shikaki 15). Shikaki then proceeds to give examples of these words and situations. She describes again the difficulty of translating Arabic words in the following lines, where the speaker explains what *yaeteek il afya* means. She writes:

```
when baba comes home, mama says *yaeteek il afya*,
and when I see a worker at the office I say the same thing.
but in English I’m tongue tied,
and I have to say *good afternoon* or *have a good night*,
but I want to say *yaeteek il afya*,
as in may God give you more strength,
as in I appreciate what you are doing. (Shikaki 18-24)
```

Shikaki here, and once again like in her poem “I Miss Home The Most,” mentions family members, exemplified by her father and mother in this case, as she explains what “*yaeteek il afya*” means. There is a sense of stubbornness in these lines, as if the speaker, Shikaki herself, is annoyed that she wishes to use such an expression but cannot. It took the poet a long time and many lines in order to attempt to find the meaning of these words, adding to the experience of a person who left home a strain of language loss or inability to communicate using one’s own language.

“Bilingual” is not a simple one-sided poem with one message, that of the superiority of the Arabic language and its ability to house emotions, since Shikaki herself uses English to convey her own emotions and express her homesickness. This poem, instead, is intricate
and honest because right after the stanza mentioned above where the poet is frustrated with the lack of right words to translate her chosen Arabic saying, she writes about not being able to personally use specific Arabic words: those about love! In the stanza before the last, Shikaki writes that: “bahibak is too much to handle/ I like you sounds better to a friend and a potential lover/I miss you sounds less commitment-filled than ishtaqilak/ and poetry read in Arabic reads heavier on my heart/ and words written in English sound easier on my tongue” (Shikaki 28-30). Maybe because Shikaki feels a closer commitment and familiarity to her mother tongue, she is unable to use Arabic words that describe longing and love, fearing commitment. Maybe the poet here is not only commenting on the language, but also on the people she wants to be in close contact with, people she wants to tell that she genuinely loves and misses. One might assume that Shikaki does not want to use the sentiment of an Arabic word unless with an Arab.

In “Bilingual,” Shikaki does not give a clear-cut answer to which language she prefers to use, or which is her favorite; it all depends on the situation. This notion is similar to how Shikaki’s speaker does not favor one of the two women who reside in her head in “Two Women fight” discussed in Chapter 1. In fact, in Shikaki’s last stanza, one can see a moment of resolution, almost a surrender to her situation. She admits to being confused by her two languages, and she acknowledges that sometimes she has to “choose a language/ that suits a situation best” (Shikaki 36-37), here indicating maybe to her conversations with her friends back home who understand her two languages, or the few Arabs she might have met while studying, or even in her own thinking and speaking to herself. Shikaki continues to write about her moment of reconciliation by ending on a positive note where she shares
how blessed she feels. She writes about the way the two languages speak to each other, even if at different circumstances that she showcases below:

and so I live my life thinking in English,
feeling in Arabic,
writing in English and listening in Arabic.
and I dream in both.
I love in both.
I fear in both, and as the sun sets every night,
I thank the God that made me bilingual. (Shikaki 38-44)

Shikaki’s poem ends on a positive note, where the speaker appreciates the fact that she is able to function using the two different languages uniquely, while acknowledging that the journey to reach that road was not easy. Shikaki began her poem with a specific moment of an inability to communicate, followed by frustration of needing to explain, and then a cathartic understanding and acceptance of the chaos of knowing and communicating in two languages. Shikaki continues to write in English, but hear in Arabic, as well as dream in both languages, showing command and comfort in them both. This ability to use the two languages shows that her confusion about which language to use is both temporary and location-dependent. This poem’s significance and a reason why it has been shared hundreds of times on social media, therefore, is because it brings forth a fundamental debatable stance on the use of English in art and everyday life of Arabs. Shikaki reminds Arabic speakers of their language’s ability to house specific emotions and feelings, but she also shares that English as a second language is able to express less committed, but valid emotions, as well as create art and be used as a vehicle for communication.

Shikaki’s poems add a new understanding of longing and homesickness, that of a person who chose living abroad in order to pursue her academic endeavors, finding it hard to focus outside of her homeland. She relies on poetry to understand her emotions of
yearning and answer the calling of her country. While her first two discussed poems in this chapter show how difficult it is to belong to a place while emotionally reliving moments of the past in the other, her last two poems showcase how important language is and how difficult homesickness is without it. This chapter, overall, shows the diverse way Palestinian and Palestinian American female poets use the genre of poetry in order to convey personal and collective emotions about Palestine and living away, even if for a short amount of time. The poems presented here made clear that while there are similar notions of longing and exile used in describing Palestine and living away from it, every story is different, which is why it is important that the voices of Palestinian writers are heard, but especially women, as they contribute in creating the mosaic picture of Palestine that is usually not seen or understood.

As my introduction mentions, this chapter works as a conclusion as it brings forth ideas mentioned in all previous chapters. This chapter has shown female poets writing their personal and collective stories (as discussed in Chapter 1, yet with poetry), it has showcased the representation of Palestine, seen by different poets while away (continuing the discussion of representing Palestine and exile discussed in Chapter 2), and it has shed light on bringing family narratives and voices, while simultaneously writing about personal experiences (as Chapter 3 demonstrated). My dissertation discusses Palestinian and Palestinian American writers using the genre of autobiography and poetry in order to represent not just Palestine as a country, but themselves and the way they carry Palestine and hear its callings. It demonstrates that representing Palestine depends on the writers themselves, but also on readers and their experiences, since my own analysis and interpretation of the autobiographies depended on my own understanding of Palestine.
Choosing the quotes I used, and deciding the theories to be discussed all depended on my own experiences. And thus I wanted to prove in this dissertation that writing about personal issues and discussing one’s own writing does not take away from how academic it can be, as I discussed in my introduction. I believe that adding the layer of discussing my own poetry allowed me to think of myself as a contributor to the representation of Palestine, as part of its people and literature. Having the chance and privilege to write about my own poetry in conjunction with other brilliant minds and famous authors added to my own understanding of language, self, and my Palestine, to whom, as my first page inscribes, everything depends and belongs.


Works Cited Chapter One


Moore-Gilbert, Bart. “‘Baleful Postcoloniality’ and Palestinian Women's Life Writing.” *Biography*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2013, pp. 51–70.


Works Cited Chapter Two


Works Cited Chapter Three


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