



Melting of the Spaces of Memory: A Study of Raja Shehadeh's A Rift in Time

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Abstract

Conflicts mostly rip lives apart. But sometimes they extend beyond personal boundaries to encroach upon communal spaces. The century-long Israel-Palestinian conflict turned the Palestinian geographical spaces into debris. Along with the lost spaces, millions of memories that connected the refugees and their lost homeland were fragmented forever. This was melancholic for Palestinians who took to the aid of memory to eradicate the spatiotemporal distances. The cry for the lost spaces found a place in the personal narratives of the refugees. Their chronicles about the land of their memories gave them scope to relive their past. For Palestinians who lacked a national historiography, memoirs serve the purpose well. Over the years, Israel's nation-building projects drastically degraded the resplendent landscape of Palestine. Eventually, the ongoing conflict and its ramifications wiped out the heartwarming memories of many Palestinian refugees who found solace in the memories of their lost nature. Thus, everyday urbicide and spaciocide culminated in memoricide. This paper examines the depiction of the extirpation of memory in Raja Shehadeh's A Rift in Time. The memoirist places the autobiography of his uncle against his own experiences in occupied Palestine and laments over the huge transformation the country has undergone over the years. This conceptual study aims to bring to light how a landscape transformed and how the memories of the lost landscape evade Palestinians, through the lens of memoricide.

Keywords: conflict, Palestine, geography, spaces, collective memory, memoir, memoricide.

ذوبان فضاءات الذاكرة: دراسة لكتاب 'صدع في الزمن' لرجاء شحادة

لكشمي تشاندرا، راني ب ل

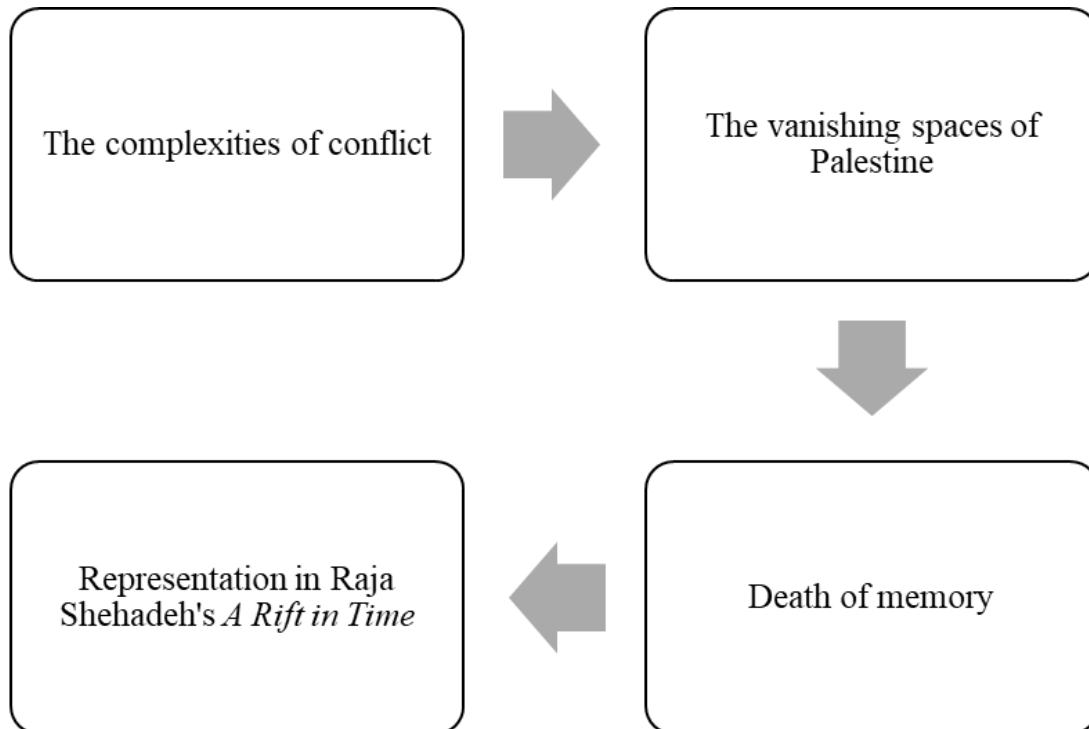
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ملخص

فى حين أنه من المألوف أن تمزق الصراعات أرواح الأفراد، فإنها تمتد إلى ما هو أبعد من الحدود الشخصية لتغزو المساحات الجماعية. حوّل الصراع الإسرائيلي-ال فلسطيني الذي دام قرناً من الزمان المساحات الجغرافية الفلسطينية إلى أنقاض. وإلى جانب تلك المساحات المفقودة، استحال ملايين الذكريات التي كانت تربط اللاجئين بوطنهم المفقود إلى شظايا متفرقة. وقد كان هذا أمراً محزناً للفلسطينيين الذين استعانوا بذكرياتهم للتغلب على العوائق الزمكانية التي تفصلهم عن وطنهم الأم. وقد وجدت هذه الذكريات المفقودة متنفساً لها من خلال سرديات اللاجئين التي أعطت لهم مساحة للتواصل مع ماضيهم. وفي غياب تاريخ وطني مسجل، تصبح المذكرات بديلاً عملياً يؤدي ذات الغرض، أدت مشاريع بناء الدولة الإسرائيلية على مر السنين إلى تدهور المشهد الطبيعي الباذخ في فلسطين بشكل هائل. وقد أدى ذلك في نهاية المطاف إلى القضاء على الكثير من الذكريات الدافئة التي ربطت الفلسطينيين بطبيعة وطنهم المفقودة لأن التدمير الممنهج للمدن وللمعالم المكانية يؤدي بالضرورة إلى محو الذكريات. تتناول ورقة البحث من خلال كتاب راجا شهادة "صدع في الزمن" كيف تتضافر الحكايا الشخصية والعائلية وتحلل الاختلافات التي يرصدها الكاتب بين ذكريات عمه التي يحملها من الماضي وبين التحولات في الأماكن التي يعيش فيها هو في الحاضر وما تحمله هذه الاختلافات من مخاطر محو الذاكرة الشخصية والجمعية.

كلمات مفتاحية: الصراع، فلسطين، الذكريات، سرديات اللاجئين، محو الذاكرة المكانية.



Introduction

Every conflict leaves indelible scars behind. It tears nations and lives apart forever. The most enduring and pernicious after-effect of any war is its irrevocably transformative nature, leaving every aspect of society, culture, or the human condition changed. The inscrutable complexities created by a combat cross over the social and cultural spaces to pierce into the psychological landscapes. The encroachment of the after-effects into the personal mental space chains victims to their lost spaces. The case of Palestinians is not different.

The ponderosity of the destruction that happened over the seventy years in the area has stirred up many theoretical and epistemological discussions. The continuing loss caused by the conflict is far beyond the statistics in the media. The century-long conflict has turned Palestine into rubble. Shattered dead bodies under every rubble mark the brutal tapestry of human suffering.

The ethnic cleansing of Palestine in 1947 changed the fate of the country forever. Among the various strategies adopted by the Jews to gain authority over the land, the targeted endeavor of urbanization is a cut above the rest. The transformation of the ethnic sites of Palestine in the disguise of development became a forced normality in the lives of millions of Palestinians. Even the Palestinians who managed to escape the migration no longer felt the spirit of nationalism. The newness of the familiar spaces made them unfamiliar. The uncertainty of the ongoing conflict created a blotch in the identities of the Palestinian populace.

In his book *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*, Ilan Pappé terms the systematic measures adopted by the Israeli government to change Palestine's geography as acts of 'memoricide'. In the chapter titled "The Memoricide of the Nakba", he explains in detail the multiple ways in which the Palestinian landscapes were drastically changed due to the occupiers' choices. The establishment of the State of Israel involved a series of actions aimed at altering the existing landscape, including toponymic shifts, the demolition of culturally and historically significant sites, the desecration of sacred spaces, and the displacement of indigenous flora with species more commonly found in European environments. These actions can be interpreted as deliberate attempts to efface the historical memory of the region. Aya Hijazi in her article "Toward Spacio-cide: Building the Museum of Tolerance over the Mamilla Cemetery in Jerusalem" argues that "The battle over Jerusalem thus involves not only soldiers and bulldozers, but also urban planners, architects, and engineers – all put to work not only to destroy the spaces inhabited by Palestinians, but also to erase Palestinian collective memory in places that Palestinians can no longer inhabit, such as West Jerusalem" (99). But the most important point to be noted is that Hijazi's observation is true to the marrow, not only with Jerusalem but also with the entire Palestine.

The erosion of Palestinian spaces has been a subject of long-standing debate. Ilan Pappé discusses the strategies adopted by the Israeli government and the Jewish National Fund to transform the familiar spaces drastically. In the article "Vanishing Palestine", Lila Sharif argues that Palestinian narratives are crucial to respond and react against the eco-occupation. Aya Hijazi, in her article "Toward Spacio-cide: Building the Museum of Tolerance over the Mamilla Cemetery in Jerusalem," throws light on the spaciocide and how these barbarities go mostly unaddressed. The prevailing literature on memoricide takes one more into the hypothetical domains of the term. Scott Webster, in the article "Revisiting memoricide: The Everyday Killing of Memory," states how memoricide operates on a more subtle, everyday level. It also emphasizes the need to recognize social forces that mold the individuals' understanding of the past.

This article studies Raja Shehadeh's *A Rift in Time* as an archetypal representation of memoricide in Palestine. Shehadeh, in this memoir, places his memory against his uncle's memory to cast light on the transformation of his native land. The drastic changes he experiences in the environment can undoubtedly be considered as epitomes of memoricide. The memoir was well received upon its publication for the

extraordinary approach adopted by the author to navigate through Palestinian history through the memory of two individuals. The memoir has spurred numerous academic discussions that include an article, “A dialogue beyond the nation-state: Darwish's Mural and Shehadeh's A Rift in Time: Travels with my Ottoman Uncle” by Hania A.M. Nashef in 2018, which examines how postcolonial theories failed to consider Arab literature well. The article also presents, through the analysis of the two texts, the richness of the Arab culture along with its resistance toward the present-day issues. In another article, “In Pursuit of My Ottoman Uncle: Reimagining the Middle East Region as One”, written by Shehadeh himself, he narrates the situations that led him to write the memoir. He explains in detail the background study he did to write the memoir and to give his interpretation of the different situations that happened in his uncle's life. This article studies the memoir through the lens of memoricide.

Postcolonial studies have spearheaded significant discussions on memoricide. As the term suggests, it is closely related to genocide and is proposed as one of the categories of killing among the typologies of genocide by Sarah Jane Meharg in her article, “Identicide - Precursor to Genocide” in 2006. In his article “Revisiting Memoricide: The Everyday Killing of Memory”, Scott Webster mentions how physically altering the space has become a tactic in conflicts. Memoricide is one of the greatest challenges that Palestinian refugees have been facing for a long time. Etymologically, ‘memoricide’ means the systematic destruction of the memory of a targeted group in support of ethnic cleansing. This includes deliberate acts of destruction of villages, cultural monuments, religious sites, and anything that connects individuals with the memory. The term was coined by a Croatian doctor, Mirko Grmek, in 1991. He coined the term to describe the bombing of Dubrovnik, which he considered a deliberate attempt to erase the remnants of the Croatian past. He used the term first in an essay published in *Le Figaro*, a French newspaper. According to Grmek, the new political strategy used to destroy one's memory through the destruction of familiar monuments of the individual requires a new term. He explains: “In this respect, I suggest that memoricide is a concept more appropriate to describe this reality, knowing that in ancient Latin, the term *memoriae* means not only memories but also historical monuments” (Mirko 158). Susan Slymovics has discussed in detail the great connection between structures, shapes, and landscapes with the memory of individuals. She lucidly explains the interwoven link between the memory of individuals and physical structures. In her book, *The Objects of Memory*, she specifies how the hand-drawn maps in Palestinian memorial books become examples of emotional reconstruction of the lost villages and not just pictorial representations. The vanishing spaces in Palestine needed immediate representation. Lack of representation of the beauty of the authentic landscapes and the memories associated with them increased the risk of their extermination. To preserve these unthought-of memories, literature, specifically memoirs, played a very significant role. The article, *The Hatred of Memory*, mentions “Whilst memory is erased in times of violence, people resist by protecting what remains of their past and reconstructing their heritage. Questions of memory become essential in times of crisis as people search for their own past to make their wounds visible” (Lovrenović).

Raja Shehadeh, through his works, captured real-life examples of memoricide as his family experienced it. A reputed Palestinian Christian family were expelled from their hometown, Jaffa, to the provincial town of Ramallah in 1948 after the formation of the State of Israel. Although Shehadeh followed in his father's

footsteps, he later vowed to himself not to be a part of any Palestinian liberation activity or politics after his father was stabbed to death. The incident left a deep void in him for years. In "TMR Conversations: Raja Shehadeh & Amal Ghandour", he admits that it took time for him to realize that nothing was more powerful in this world than words, and that is why he started writing. He adds that he could contribute much more to the Palestinian liberation as a writer than as a lawyer. Through his writing, he powerfully articulated the hardships faced by Palestinians living under occupation, making a lasting mark on modern Palestinian literature. *A Rift in Time (ART)* is a poignant example of memoricide. Further examples of his literary output include *The Third Way*, *A Journal of Life in the West Bank*, *Strangers in the House*, *Palestinian Walks: Forays into a Vanishing Landscape*, *Occupation Diaries*, *Going Home: A Walk Through Fifty Years of Occupation*, and *Forgotten: Searching for Palestine's Hidden Places and Lost Memorials*. *ART*'s subtitle, *Travels with My Ottoman Uncle*, suggests it is a quest to find the narrator's uncle, who had fled from Palestine, then part of the Ottoman Empire. Even though the narrator traces the footsteps of his paternal great-great-uncle, Najib, the memoir dominantly discusses the geographical spaces of Palestine during Ottoman rule and its transformation over the years. From the beginning, the memoir is an exploration of the political upheavals during Ottoman rule. Shehadeh places the autobiography of his uncle against the backdrop of his own experiences in occupied Palestine and laments over the huge transformation the country has undergone over the years. The memoir holds a significant place in the Palestinian literary canon for varied reasons. By placing his memory against his uncle's memory, Shehadeh has brought in a novel style of narration. The memoir is also notable for its elaborative description of the culture, geography, and history of Palestine.

Shehadeh, at the beginning of the memoir, is on a quest to trace his family history. He discovers his great-uncle, Najib Nassar, who had faced capital punishment and spent three years evading capture. Shehadeh travels through the villages in which his uncle travelled once; an autobiography records the sublime beauty of those villages as he experienced it. Shehadeh now contrasts the bygone beauty of the villages with their disappearance which he notices in his trip around them. He mentions that whatever Najib could experience, he could not even trace. The long romanticizing descriptions of the land remain only on the pages forever. Shehadeh expresses his great disappointment at seeing something he never expected, In Najib's time the hills would have been alive with the voices of other villagers and the noises of the farm animals – the cock, the donkey and the shepherd dog. There would be sheep and goats treading the trails, grazing. The muezzin's call to prayer would punctuate the day. All this has now gone. The cycle of nature has been broken, leaving nothing but green. No variety in colour or sound. No birds singing or bees buzzing about. The land has been swept clear of the life of the small farmer and the homesteads that had flourished for centuries. Breaking the prevailing silence is just the occasional swish of the clover as the wind sweeps down and blows through it. (Shehadeh 74) Even though Najib had mentioned in detail in his autobiography the places he visited and the people he met, he did not elaborate on the geography of the places. This forced Shehadeh to look for other writings on the same topic, which brought him to T. E. Lawrence. Shehadeh mentions in an article that Lawrence's description of Palestinian spaces helped him reimagine the villages in Najib's story. Don Mitchell, in his article "The Lure of the Local: Landscape at the end of a troubled

century,” mentions that places with their defining elements turn out to be a part of the mythology of cultures and the building blocks of identity. Shehadeh also colored the villages with his imagination, and his imagination might have strengthened his identity as a Palestinian. The lines above clearly reveal to the readers the jolt he experienced upon witnessing the drastic changes in the scapes of his imagination; they also mark the indelible wound the changes created in the author’s identity.

Another strategy the occupiers adopted to metamorphose the land was through toponymy. Pappe mentions, “Here, dispossession was accompanied by the renaming of the places it had seized, destroyed, and now recreated. This mission was accomplished with the help of archaeologists and biblical experts who volunteered to serve on an official Naming Committee whose job it was to Hebraize Palestine’s geography” (226). The authentic Arab names of the villages were replaced with a Hebrew version. The explanation Ben Gurion gave for this heinous act needs special mention in this context: “We have to get rid of the Arab names for political reasons because we do not recognise the Arab possession of this country, neither their spiritual possession nor their names” (Ishfaq). He also wrote in his memoir that it is important to rename the Arab villages with old Hebrew names. If old Hebrew names are not available, new Hebrew names should be given. To be precise, in their determination to Hebraize Palestine, they successfully made sure of a Hebrew name for every village. The most important question is, if the intention was to help Palestine develop, why is there a need to change everything that appeared authentic to the place? The occupants, through these measures, also went to great lengths to ensure that even if the Palestinians came back to their native land, they would be left with the traumatic task of finding their village among the villages with new Hebrew names. Barbara McKean Parmenter mentions an episode in which Mahmood Darwish experiences the same. Parmenter narrates: “Darwish recounts a taxi trip during which the Moroccan Jewish driver, not realising that his passenger is an Arab, condemns the continued use of any Arab street names. Arriving at his destination, al-Mutanabbi Street (al-Mutanabbi was a famous tenth-century Arab poet), Darwish himself wonders why its Arab name has been spared. Looking more closely at the Hebrew Street sign, he discovers that it reads "Almont Navi," a Hebraicized transformation of the Arabic and an obliteration of its cultural meaning” (89). In the memoir, we see Shehadeh also experiencing the same emotion in a different way. He mentions, “Of the thirty-three Arab villages formerly in the sub-district of Tiberias, only four remain. All the others had been destroyed and new Israeli villages, designed to make the area look European, with red-tile roofed houses and green lawns, were put in their place” (Shehadeh 127). Shehadeh also narrates another episode in which he fails to trace the villages through which his uncle travelled once. He gets more traumatized by the word ‘destroyed’ that appears next to the names of the villages on the new map. “I have been able to find only one official Israeli map where all the Palestinian villages existing before 1948 are shown. Next to many of those, appears the sinister Hebrew word *harous* (destroyed)” (Shehadeh 5).

He also draws the readers' attention to the change that is brought in the vegetation in the land. Special attention and efforts were made by the settler colonizers to change everything that appeared authentic to Palestine:

Many more trees must have been felled, just as human beings have been cleared, to leave open fields where machines could work unhindered at sowing and harvesting the wheat. The few trees that were left to

provide coordinates for the men working the machines were the only reminders of the life that had once flourished here, peaceful presences above the grassy land, marking where the houses, schools, mosques, churches and cemeteries of the old villages had been, singular reminders of an Arab presence that had long since been uprooted out of existence. (Shehadeh 83) Irus Braverman, in his article “The Tree Is the Enemy Soldier: A Sociolegal Making of War Landscapes in the Occupied West Bank,” explains that uprooting of the trees is considered by the soldiers as a patriotic act aimed at developing national homelands. Ilan Pappé also explains the same idea by mentioning the initiatives taken by the Israeli government to uproot the olive trees, which are a part of the Arab culture, and replace them with pine trees which are more common in European geography.

He expresses pellucidly the strategic ways by which Israel reformed the confiscated land to make it look like the land of their dream. In the urge to create their last, they wiped off the memories of millions. These deliberate acts were also done to put a halt to the dream of Palestinians to return to their native land. He expresses his agony by mentioning, But I soon discovered that, in the course of creating a new country over the ruins of the old, Israel had renamed almost every hill, spring and wadi in Palestine, striking from the map names and often habitations that had been there for centuries. It was the most frustrating endeavour. If only I could visit this area with someone able to read the landscape and point out where the old towns and villages had stood. I knew just the person, but the Palestinian geographer Kamal Abdulfattah was not allowed to cross into Israel from the West Bank. How Israel manages to complicate and frustrate every project! (Shehadeh 3) Shehadeh, in this part, makes it clear to the readers that the massive transformations which Israel brought to the land are beyond the scope of any description or discussion.

Shehadeh’s melancholy over the lost spaces is never-ending. He cries over and over again at the unimaginable change the land has gone through:

The land is now the outcome of a planned vision that has been in the making since the start of the twentieth century, an ideological dream that has been forcibly realised, transforming the land, redividing it, changing farming methods and exploiting every plot available, redistributing it all on an entirely new basis. The transforming process began here, in an area of large plains and plenty of water where gargantuan dreams were possible. Najib was one of the first people to pay attention to what was going on, to try to describe it, warn about its consequences for the Arab community and to document it. This is where the Zionist ideas of the founders of the Jewish state began to take shape, the ideal of return to and ‘redemption’ of the land, of Jewish labour, of establishing bands of armed guards to protect the Jewish colonies that eventually developed into the Israeli army. The transformation is so immense that if Najib were to visit now he would not recognise the place. (Shehadeh 38) Shehadeh here asserts that the occupation has achieved its objective through the metamorphosis of the geographical spaces. Every bit that a Palestinian can relate with in the surroundings is carefully wiped out. The changes are so immense to the extent that, according to the writer, no generation can recognize the land they lived in, from the existing locales.

Memory is an intrinsic thread by which one connects with everything around in life. Memory, on the other hand, is connected with the physical spaces around. Hence, changes in physical spaces will affect

changes in what one remembers of the past and thus in one's identities. The deliberate willful acts of the occupants mar the memories of the Palestinians and erase their histories. The transformation of the landscape brings uncertainty to the individuals' nostalgic desire to return. The lost spaces remain merely in the memories of individuals forever. Narration through literary pieces remains the only way to preserve the beautiful landscapes of Palestine. Writers like Shehadeh bring to the world the hidden complexities of the conflict. The literary pieces talk to every generation about the Palestine that once existed, the Palestine in which their families grew up, and a Palestine that is now unrecognizable. Conflicts that happened a century ago have left shattered monuments and rubble of historical sites and landscapes of identity for the natives to come back and relate to. But the occupation that happened in Palestine erased everything that any Palestinian could claim as his or hers. That could be the most destructive harm of the occupation and even the greatest curse of the century.

Conflicts of Interest

The author certifies that she has no affiliations or involvement with any organization or entity with any financial or non-financial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

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