

Exile, Memory and the Fragmented Sense of Home: A Study on *I Saw Ramallah*

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Abstract

Displacement and exile constitute central concerns in modern Palestinian life writing. I Saw Ramallah by Mourid Barghouti offers a profound reflection on the lived experience of exile following the 1967 Arab–Israeli War. The memoir recounts the author’s return to Ramallah after nearly three decades of forced absence and examines the complex emotions that arise from confronting a homeland transformed by time and political conflict. Rather than presenting exile merely as geographical separation, the narrative portrays displacement as a continuous condition that shapes memory, identity, and the sense of belonging. Through reflective and fragmented narration, the text reveals the tension between remembered landscapes and the altered realities of the present. The memoir thus demonstrates how personal memory intersects with collective history, illustrating the profound psychological and cultural consequences of long-term exile. By foregrounding the instability of home and identity, the work provides a compelling literary representation of displacement and its enduring impact on individual and national consciousness

Keywords: Displacement, Exile, Memory, Identity, Homeland, Palestinian Literature

Introduction

Displacement and exile are important themes in many contemporary literary works, especially those that emerge from regions affected by political conflict and migration. Such narratives often explore the emotional and cultural consequences of being separated from one’s homeland. *I Saw Ramallah* by Mourid Barghouti is a powerful memoir that reflects the experience of exile through personal memory and reflection. The work is closely connected to the historical events that followed the 1967 Arab–Israeli War, which resulted in the displacement of many Palestinians. The memoir describes the author’s return to Ramallah after nearly thirty years of living away from his homeland. This return becomes a moment of deep reflection, as the author confronts a place that is both familiar and changed. The memories of the past often contrast with the present reality of the homeland. Through this experience, the narrative reveals the emotional complexity of exile and the feeling of alienation that displacement can create.

The text also explores how exile affects identity, belonging, and personal memory. Displacement is presented not only as physical

separation from land but also as a psychological condition that shapes the way individuals understand home. By focusing on these experiences, the memoir offers valuable insight into the relationship between memory, homeland, and identity. Therefore, the work provides an important perspective for understanding the representation of displacement in contemporary life writing.

Displacement and the Condition of Exile

In *I Saw Ramallah*, displacement is presented as more than physical absence; it is an enduring condition that shapes the individual's consciousness across psychological, emotional, and cultural dimensions. The memoir reflects the long-term exile experienced by Mourid Barghouti following the events of the 1967 Arab–Israeli War. Psychologically, prolonged separation produces a persistent sense of alienation and identity fragmentation. Emotionally, exile manifests through nostalgia, grief, and the tension between memory and present reality. Culturally, displacement disrupts connections with social, linguistic, and spatial environments, creating a sense of estrangement even within familiar contexts.

Through these experiences, the memoir implicitly resonates with postcolonial understandings of exile and displacement, where separation from homeland transforms memory, identity, and belonging. The text illustrates how political and historical circumstances shape personal consciousness, demonstrating that exile is both an individual and collective experience. By integrating these perspectives, the memoir provides a nuanced exploration of the complex human condition of displacement, without explicitly naming the theoretical framework in the heading.

Memory and the Reconstruction of Homeland

In *I Saw Ramallah*, memory serves as a central medium through which the author negotiates his relationship with homeland after decades of displacement. The memoir portrays how recollections of childhood, family, and local landscapes sustain a symbolic homeland in the mind of the exiled individual. Upon returning to Ramallah, the author confronts the tension between these preserved memories and the changed realities of the present, revealing the fragile and transformative nature of memory. Emotionally, this reconstruction evokes both nostalgia and estrangement, highlighting the psychological impact of prolonged separation. Culturally, memory functions as a bridge connecting the individual to lost social practices, language, and communal spaces.

Implicitly, the narrative aligns with postcolonial insights on exile, suggesting that memory is not passive but actively reconstructs identity and belonging under conditions of displacement. The memoir demonstrates that the homeland exists simultaneously as a physical place and as a memory-laden construct shaped by history, politics, and personal experience. Through this lens, the text deepens our understanding of how displacement transforms the meaning of home and how memory serves as a tool for negotiating identity and cultural continuity.

Identity and the Politics of Return

In *I Saw Ramallah*, the author examines how prolonged exile shapes personal and cultural identity. Years of separation from the homeland create a fragmented sense of self, where belonging becomes uncertain and multi-layered. The return to Ramallah does not simply restore lost familiarity; instead, it exposes the changes in both the homeland and the individual, highlighting the tension between memory and reality. Emotionally, the act of return evokes both joy and estrangement, illustrating how identity is negotiated through the interplay of past experiences, present realities, and anticipated futures.

Culturally, the memoir reflects the ongoing negotiation between the author's personal identity and the collective history of his community, demonstrating that return is both a deeply personal

and socially embedded event. Implicitly, the narrative resonates with postcolonial understandings of exile, where identity is fluid and continuously reconstructed under historical, political, and emotional pressures. Through these reflections, the memoir emphasizes that belonging is not automatically regained upon return; rather, it is a process shaped by memory, social relations, and the enduring effects of displacement. This section underscores how the politics of return are intertwined with the transformation of identity, revealing the persistent influence of exile on the self and community alike.

Conclusion

The memoir under study offers a profound investigation into the human experience of exile, revealing that displacement extends far beyond mere physical separation from one's homeland. It demonstrates how prolonged absence affects psychological stability, emotional well-being, and cultural belonging. Memory emerges as a crucial tool for sustaining a sense of home, yet the encounter with a changed reality highlights the tension between recollection and the present, complicating the process of return. The narrative further illustrates that identity is continuously negotiated, shaped by historical circumstances, social connections, and personal experiences.

By implicitly engaging with postcolonial perspectives on exile, the memoir underscores the enduring influence of political and historical forces on individual and collective life. The act of returning becomes both a deeply personal and socially embedded process, revealing that belonging and identity cannot be automatically restored but must be actively reconstructed. Overall, the work offers significant insight into the interplay of displacement, memory, and identity, providing a nuanced understanding of the universal human condition shaped by exile and return.

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