

A MOVEMENT BACK TO HOME: HOW IS THE HOME PRESENTED IN TAMIM AL-BARGHOUTI'S IN JERUSALEM?

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ABSTRACT

Postcolonial and literary scholars have discussed colonialism as the invasion of the home. This notion is something that resonates within the Israel and Palestine context, especially with a large Palestinian population being exiled outside the country. This essay will use the notion of the home to explore how the poem “In Jerusalem” is a reaction of the poet Tamim al-Barghouti in seeing his father’s hometown for the first time. It will investigate how the poet navigates within the Arab literary traditions as a way to claim back the home from where his father was previously exiled. The discussion is led by the poem’s close reading which considers the poem itself as a reconstruction of the home (Jerusalem) in absence of the poet’s contact with it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Gerhard Stilz (1999: 9) describes the home in the postcolonial framework as "[t]he “central” mode on which “our” personal identity has been nurtured, the place to which one “belongs” and returns". In his essay “The Home and the World,” Bhabha (1992) suggests that colonialism unsettles the borders of the home through the invasion of land as well as the quest of “civilisation.” The invasion of the home resonates in the recent Israeli settlements in the Palestinian side of East Jerusalem [1] driven by the Zionist ideology of rightful claim of the land in order to "expand the Jewish sovereignty" (Levac, Levy 2019). The Israeli invasion and unsettling of the Palestinian home territory results in homelessness or more forceful exile. Many Palestinians, in fact, have been forced to leave the city of Jerusalem or give up their houses to Israeli settlers. Edward Said (2001:173), being himself a forcefully displaced Palestinian, describes exile as the "unhealable rift [...] between the self and its true home." Rendered homeless by the colonial regime, the exiled person is always longing for the true home.

The work of Egyptian Palestinian poet Tamim al-Barghouti (1977) is an outcome of the Palestinian exile; his father, who was studying in Egypt, was prevented from returning to Palestine during the 1967 war which displaced many Palestinians. Al-Barghouti’s poem *In Jerusalem* (2015)[2] is a reaction to his first visit to his father’s home city. Performed in front of a wider Arab audience, al-Barghouti’s poem functions as a way for Palestinians living in Jerusalem and those exiled to recognise a city familiar and close to their identities. Despite the history and current occupation by the Israeli forces, this poem marks a claim to the poet’s ancestral home, prompting a sense of familiarity and understanding by other Palestinians. Thus, it is critical to visit the poem in its depiction of loss and longing for the home as similar themes emerged in many Palestinian bodies of literature, especially in resistance poetry.

Focusing on the cultural production in the reclaiming of the home from the colonial power, it is key to recognise that al-Barghouti’s poem is written as an ode, in the traditional Arabic form of the *qasidah*. Hussein Khadim (1997:179) suggests that “Arab poets utilized the traditional Arabic qasidah form to interrogate what critics have called “the textuality of Empire,” and to mobilize a collective response to colonialism.” Khadim writes in the context of the poet Ahmad Shawqi, who became an important literary figure in the establishing of Egyptian identity between colonial rule and independence. In a similar fashion, al-Barghouti, using the form of the qasidah, is recognising his positionality in the broader Arabic literary tradition. As a large part of the Palestinian population lives in the diaspora, using classical genres and writing about the ancestral home becomes a way of maintaining ties with the Palestinian identity.

There is a similar tendency of using traditional poetic forms in broader resistance literature as a way of recognising an assimilation with the homeland (Harlow 1987). However, in al-Barghouti’s case, the poem is not a way of mobilising a response, as argued by Khadim, but rather a way for him to reclaim his, or rather, his father’s homeland. In fact, written as a response to the poet’s first visit to the city, *In Jerusalem* becomes a way of recognising how al-Barghouti’s “own sense of national identity has been nourished in the exile milieu” (Said 1993: 178). Al-Barghouti follows the theme of the qasidah, to “recall what is lost” (Abadah 1989: 3). The poem opens with “[w]e passed by the home of the beloved” (1), which positions the city of Jerusalem as home and sets a nostalgic tone. This nostalgia and attachment for home is nourished outside of the physical homeland, as Said suggests, the exile milieu, a result and strike against the colonial settlements of Israel in East Jerusalem. Nonetheless, al-Barghouti reveals that “the city has two timelines” (45), a recognition of the divided nature of the city, broken between Israeli and Palestinians. However, the references to other nationalities throughout the poem, the green grocer from Georgia, the Polish boys, the Ethiopian policeman, among others, portrays the city to be home to many other groups. Jerusalem is thus constructed by different identities; his use of the qasidah reconciles the traditions ingrained in him in his Palestinian identity and suggesting a sense of nostalgia, while depicting an image of a city that is changing.

[1] Jerusalem is divided into East, West, and the no-man’s land. Both Israel and Palestine are claiming Jerusalem as their capital.

[2] Originally performed in 2005 in Abu Dhabi for the competition “The Prince of Poets”. Originally written and performed in Arabic, the version discussed in this paper is translated by Ahdaf Soueif and Radwa Ashour

The narrative of the poem, furthermore, follows a journey into the city which resembles the classical narrative of the Bedouin hero with his camel, mourning the loss of his beloved (Kurpershoek et al. 1996). The camel and the beloved, usually a woman, symbolise ‘the two modes of Bedouin life, settling down [in terms of family] and travelling’ (Jacobi 1958: 31). The Bedouin’s nomadic tradition complicates the notion of the home as it positions it as a mobile space rather than a fixed place. From this point of view, the poem can be read through this travelling narrative; the speaker’s journey through Jerusalem, like the Bedouin hero who travels through the desert, constructs the narrative of his travels by associating with the historicity of the city. He comes across evidence of the Mameluke, Moghul and Indian pasts all within the walls of Jerusalem. Furthermore, the architecture and mention of the Torah, Bible and the Quran, reminds the reader that the city is home to three major monotheist religions. Religious ideologies are used as a discourse of ownership of the city – in the regime of Israeli settlers – and become a way of estranging the Palestinians, who are in majority Muslim or Christian. Zionist ideologies make use of the narrative of having claims to the “promised land”, which complicates the idea of the home or homeland in the poem. It further makes the reader or listener question the Israeli settlers reasons to undermine and/or exile the other group who also made the Jerusalem their home.

Ashrawi (1978: 78) compares contemporary Palestinian poetry to Ulysses’s exile and journey to return home, but the journey in *In Jerusalem* ends with the leaving of the city, portraying the reality of Palestinian displacement caused by the Israeli colonial regime. Furthermore, it questions what it means to give the city of Jerusalem one single identity. In his work on *The Poetics Of Space*, Bachelard argues that “[a]n entire past comes to dwell in a new house” (Bachelard 1958: 5). In a similar way, al-Barghouti’s depiction of history indicates that the city has been home to previous civilisation and has a past to be recognised. By exiling Palestinians, the Israeli neocolonial settlements deny the Palestinian presence in their home [3], in a similar way previous empires erased indigenous and native people in their colonies. The exiled, diasporic and transnational Palestinians are keeping their home alive: through producing literature outside of the Israeli governance, they are transporting their culture with them.

The Zionist ideology of being entitled to Jerusalem as the promised land for the Jews is reflected in the architecture of the city. Even before entering the city, the speaker in the poem is encountered with the “enemy’s wall” (2), referring to the Western Wall in the city, a physical and metaphorical manifestation of the Israeli neocolonial regime. The Palestinians, even when on their side of the city, are slowly erased away from their home. Eyal Weizman (2012), in his research and art projects, explores the architectural ways Jerusalem has been reconstructed after the recognition of Israel in 1948 through colonial regionalism. He further discusses a continual move of the Israeli settlers to gain land in the East Jerusalem side, slowly chasing Palestinians out of their physical homes, to the West Bank or abroad. Martha Wegner also reports of the Israeli state controlling water pipelines as well as electric and gas resources supplying the houses in East Jerusalem (Wegner 1993). This controlling and remapping of the city is depicted in the metaphor of text and marginality in the poem:

‘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’ (33/34/35)

The text, seen as an allegory of the city of Jerusalem, pushes the speaker to the footnote and a margin, mirroring the Israeli settlement regime and invasion of East Jerusalem. The Zionist ideology is what is pushed as the main text, and the Palestinians, who do not conform to it, are driven out of the boundaries of their home city. Many, like al-Barghouti and his parents, are either forced to leave the country or give up their homes to Israeli settlers.

[3] I recognise that not all Palestinians are exiled but for the purpose of this essay I will limit my discussion to the experience of the exiled Palestinian. As per the ones who still live in the city, they are subjected to follow Israeli laws and do not have full rights or control over their own homes.

In his work, Said argues that the Orient is a construction of the West in the colonial discourse, created as a “style for dominating, reconstructing, and having authority over the Orient” (Said 1978: 3). The thick veil that covers the city can be seen as an allegory of Orientalism; the veil invades and covers what is underneath it, like the Israeli settlements and architecture that redefines the dynamics of the city. Nonetheless, the face underneath the veil is still present, like the past dwelling in the house, Bachelard argues. The poet, like other exiled Palestinians not living in Jerusalem, is the face and a footnote and a margin of the city. On the other hand, the allegory of the text also places the Palestinians at the centre of the city. In a literal sense, the main purpose of the footnote is to further explain or digress from the text. There is a sense of retrieving the space of the home within the city, reflecting that Palestinians are not completely rewritten by the Zionist main text.

Going back to Said’s notion of Orientalism, where colonialism is a result of cultural hegemony and the Orient is always defined by the coloniser, this notion is contrasted by the city of Jerusalem having its own voice. The city speaks for itself through the silence of its surroundings as “[e]verything in the city/has a tongue” (49/50) and “you’ll find etched on your palm a poem” (99). This personification of the city juxtaposes with the architectural reconstruction of it by the Israeli colonial regime, an attempt of cultural hegemony. Al-Barghouti seems to suggest that Jerusalem’s rich history and culture is what gives everything in the city a voice (tongue). The mention of poetry, furthermore, can be seen as a way of reclaiming the home through literature, a nod to the numerous resistance poetry maintaining a collective Palestinian identity. The “rows of graves” are metaphors for the “lines of the city’s history” (105/6); the systematic alignment of the graves suggests the linearity through which the city has been aligned to follow one history and ideology - in this case, Zionism.

Many Palestinians living in the diaspora are longing for their home after having been exiled through the building of colonial settlements” (Schulz & Hammer 2003). This can be seen in the vivid description of the city in the poem. Even though it is the first time al-Barghouti visits Jerusalem, the experience is portrayed in a familiar tone, almost as if the city was inscribed in his memory, as if he had seen it before. Seeing the Israeli colonial regime as “an absolute intrusion of a nation into another’s collective life and imagery” (Lambert 2013: 29), each painted image in the poem is a careful recollection of Jerusalem’s “life and imagery,” almost like a blueprint. The enemy’s wall (2) of the Israeli settlers is juxtaposed with “the beauty of the octagonal and blue” (55), the golden dome (56), and the dark marble columns (68). For instance, there is an expectation from the start of the poem that “[f]or once your eyes have seen Jerusalem/you’ll see nothing else” (11/12). The bright colours of the architecture and the richness of the material leaves the speaker and the reader in awe, creating an imagery that is contrasted to the violent architecture of the settlers (ibid. 2013: 9). The poem ultimately ends with a sorrowful moment, with the mention of crying and the uncertainty of whether the speaker will be able to ever go back to the home of Jerusalem.

Al-Barghouti questions how Palestinians will assimilate to the notion of the home when their physical space is being taken over by the Israeli settlers. The only solution and hopeful note he leaves the reader with is “I see no-one in Jerusalem-except you” (133). This hints at how the home found in Jerusalem is not a physical concept, it is a tangible memory retained through you, the reader. The depiction of the city in the poem counteracts the settlement regime of the Israeli state by reconstructing a Jerusalem through the lines, imageries, and form of the poem. The sense of longing discussed throughout this essay is a result of displacement and erasure of Palestinian homes in Jerusalem.[4] Al-Barghouti’s travel through Jerusalem resonates in the poem as a travel through a homeland that is rich with history and different groups of people, as seen through the graves, the city’s current inhabitants, and the ancient monuments. The form of the qasidah ties everything together, becoming a familiar Arabic genre that is recognised by all Palestinians. While al-Barghouti cannot stay in Jerusalem, his poem has captured a sense of home that is ingrained within his Palestinian identity even when in exile.

[4] This is more recently seen through forced evictions of Palestinians homes in Jerusalem: <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/palestinians-battle-home-evictions-east-jerusalem-silwan-181206052617178.html> Accessed 10 January 2019.

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