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Between Barkat and the Little Ibtisam: Feminine Memory and Thereby Narrative in Ibtisam Barakat's *Tasting the Sky: A Palestinian Childhood*

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ABSTRACT: *This paper examines the idea of the feminine memory and its role in re/establishing a new dimension of Palestinian history in Ibtisam Barakat's Tasting the Sky: A Palestinian Childhood (2007). The article draws on several core concepts in postcolonial studies, including diaspora narrative, trauma, and memory as well as Fatma Kassem's study of the oral narratives of Palestinian women who witnessed the events of the 1948 War. Instead of being a mere memetic text that reflects historical incidents in literature, Tasting the Sky sheds light on the impact of traumatic experiences on both memory and the writing/narrative process. This feminine memory, focusing on traumatic experiences, seeks to construct a healing narrative that comes to terms with the traumatic past of the individual and the collective, and as a result, creates new realities. The novel demonstrates how memory and narrative can be encapsulated in a literary-political project, not merely to represent reality but to recreate it, recreating history from a countless number of scattered, traumatic, not-yet-graspable moments about a lost Home. We argue that this feminine memory is manifested through three perspectives: The domestic sphere, the female body and the female language.*

KEYWORDS: Ibtisam Barakat, *Tasting the Sky*, feminine memory, healing narrative

INTRODUCATION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

On our first trip back from Chicago to Amman in 2012, we quickly realized that many passengers on that trip were discussing their itinerary, expressing their intention to continue the trip to the West Bank through Sheikh Hussein Bridge. The twelve-hour trip was more than enough to make new Palestinian friends. Most of them were American citizens as well, but the strong ties with their home urged them to spend the summer vacation with their extended families in Palestine and to maintain the connections between the new generations and a vanishing homeland. It was amazing to see how, after long years of absence from home and of

cultural and economic assimilation of immigrants into their host country, RJ Airlines was still a favourite choice in any vacation plan for Palestinian Americans. This is because every journey to Palestine and back to America represents a new season of immigration for them, carrying the present with them to revisit the past and recreate it. For the Palestinian Americans, it is an opportunity to teach the new generations about their history of struggle.

The history of the Palestinian diaspora and displacement is not new. The major waves of immigration from Palestine date back to the 19th century before the current Palestinian-Israeli conflict started. Driven by the search for better economic opportunities, or to avoid Ottoman forced military service, thousands of Palestinian families made their way to Europe, the United States and Latin America (Civantos, 2006, p.6). Immigration to the United States was boosted by larger waves of Palestinian immigrants in the wake of the Second World War and in the aftermath of the Arab-Israeli War of 1948. Farah and Orfalea (2010) point out that these waves of immigrants received high education, were remarkably aware of their Palestinian identity and they constantly emphasized their affiliation to their Palestinian Arab culture.

The political unrest in the Middle East resulted in new waves of Palestinian immigrants to the United States, especially after major Arab-Israeli military conflicts like in 1967 and 1982 which was concluded by the Israeli occupation of the West Bank. Ludescher (2006) explains that these recent waves of Palestinian immigrants maintained a strong involvement with Middle Eastern politics and established a Palestinian nationalistic and anti-colonial character that strove to support the Palestinian cause from inside America. Alghaberi (2018) asserts that Palestinian nationalists today avoid using "Palestinian diaspora" due to the impact of such terms on the very existence and survival of Palestine as a place to identify with. As "diaspora" delineates the existence and acceptance of a new "Home", they struggle to keep their historical claim of an independent, united and viable home country alive (p. 1). In general, those writers always stress the fact that most of the Palestinian population outside historical Palestine underwent forced displacement and dispossession. Despite the attempts to deny the diaspora, there has been a distinguished trend among Palestinian immigrant writings to see the diaspora as a reality that can no longer be ignored. Living thousands of miles away from the once-home Palestine, establishing new economic and cultural identities and holding new citizenship does not necessarily indicate a betrayal of the original home. This can be a rare opportunity to construct bridges with the past and serve the remaining Palestinian population back at Home. In a similar vein, Naguib's study (2011) traces this common attitude by Palestinian novelists and explains that their writings were used to preserve and narrate the Palestinian collective experience of exile and displacement as a means to save Palestinian history from oblivion (p. 56).

A case in point for the tendency to acknowledge the past, admit the diasporic reality and build positive bridges with the past is the Palestinian American fiction writer and poet Ibtisam Barakat. Her novel *Tasting the Sky: A Palestinian Childhood* (2007) documents episodes from the author's life during and in the aftermath of the 1967 War between Israel and Arab countries. She starts her novel with the feelings of fear and confusion of the young Ibtisam during wartime. The subsequent chapters of the novel describe Ibtisam's life as a refugee in Jordan, her return to the occupied West Bank and her early school memories.

The conflicts in the Middle East are at the heart of Barakat's narrative. The narrative terminology takes the reader to the nature of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict that engulfs the whole work. In *Tasting the Sky*, Barakat skillfully summons her early childhood memories and engages them, as an adult author, in an innovative perspective of the struggle in the Middle East. She is both an eyewitness and a historian. Her work recollects, reconnects and reconstructs the fragments of a personal and collective war experience encapsulated in what

we call the feminine memory.

This study engages in a critical dialogue with pre-existing research of feminine memory in the diaspora context. Salwa Cherif's study (2003) highlights the question of memory in two prominent Arab American female writers; namely Elmaz Abinader and Diana Abu-Jaber. The study explains that the works of Abinader and Abu-Jaber not only assert the Arab identity in a hostile environment but also stress the "femaleness" of Arab American women. Cherif argues that both female authors explore the intertwining of the past and present in the construction of the Arab American female identity. By doing so, Cherif adds, Abinader and Abu-Jaber establish a space for Arab American women to negotiate a new sense of the feminine self among "the layers of a buried ethnic and female past" (p. 208).

El-Hajj and Harb (2011) build on Cherif's examination of memory which provides a fresh understanding of female self-identification and construction. In a way, El-Hajj and Harb develop Cherif's reading, expanding her "definition of gendered memory to include not only manifestations of Arab patriarchy (internal oppression) but also political layers of colonial oppression and injustice that Arab women face" (p. 139). El-Hajj and Harb highlight the role of memory in constructing Arab American women's *self* in novels like Abu-Jaber's *Arabian Jazz* (1993). The authors show how feminine and ethnic memory is employed to support Arab American women in their fight against silencing and oppression while maintaining a strong connection to their land and people.

In her seminal *Palestinian Women: Narrative Histories and Gendered Memory* (2011), Fatma Kassem documents and analyzes the oral testimonies of Palestinian women who witnessed the events of the 1948 War which paved the way for the creation of the State of Israel and the gradual decline of the Arab presence in that particular reign in the Middle East. According to Kassem, the importance of her book lies in denying the historical exclusion of such testimonies from historical studies and collective memory (p. 5). In the book, Kassem strives to highlight the role of the female memory "not as complementary to men's stories, but as worthwhile and deserving of visibility in their own right" (p. 39). The gendered memory, as Kassem concludes, serves as a valuable tool for understanding the complex relationship between gender, nationalism and citizenship, one of the modern world's longest political and military conflicts.

Theory

The question of gendered autobiographical memory has been under study for decades and yielded numerous studies that used a range of approaches to document gender differences. Many studies indicated that females are often reported to incorporate more details in their memory narratives and report more vivid recalls and emotional memories than men. The studies showed that when compared to males, females' autobiographical recollections have been described as more episodic, emotionally rich, coherent and personally meaningful. In general, female writers have been considered to have relatively superior autobiographical memory (Ely & Ryan, 2008; Pillemer et al., 2003; Stapley & Haviland, 1989).

In "Gender Differences in Autobiographical Memory: Developmental and Methodological Considerations", Grysman and Hudson (2013) reiterate that "Evidence suggests that parents speak differently to girls and boys and that girls develop a more interpersonal sense of self in their early years; these factors may influence what type of information children, and subsequently, adults focus on when recalling personal events" (p. 264). In their seminal review of the literature on gender differences in verbal memory, Loftus et al. (1987) relate gender differences to the differences in the traditional social roles of males and females which contributed to the formation of disparate interests and expectations surrounding the types of activities in which each gender should excel. Thus, differences in memory performance

between men and women may be related to physiological capacities, interests, expectations or a complex combination of these factors.

That said, we argue that *Tasting the Sky* exemplifies the previous hypotheses of the special nature of the feminine memory in autobiographical narratives. This feminine autobiographical narrative manifests itself mainly through three perspectives: the domestic sphere, the female body and the female language.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Domestic Sphere and the Self as a Social Entity

The novel is narrated from the point of view of Ibtisam Barakat who nostalgically recalls her childhood memories in Palestine during the Six-Day War in 1967. The text is replete with various memories of innocence revealed as this little girl tries to face the complexity of life, especially when the domestic sphere is challenged and penetrated. These female memories give the narrator an opportunity to recover the lost part of the *self*, a lost part of identity left in Palestine due to immigration to America, which she reconstructs through memories: "I am midway from forgetting to remembering. I do not know how long it will take before I return to all of myself" (p. 169). Long (2014) writes, "understanding home as the interrelationships between many places, people and priorities recognises the ongoing importance of conventional ideas of home as coordinates of identity through or around which the dynamic possibilities of diasporic life circulate" (p. 342).

As a female narrator, Barakat reconstructs this lost part of her identity through the memories of her relationship with her family members, especially with her mother when she was a little girl in Ramallah. This narrative not only helps Barakat to reconcile with her lost part of the self, but it also enables her to emotionally reconcile with her family members who could be lost, as is the case with many Palestinian families due to immigration and the Israeli occupation of the West Bank. Long (2013) argues that "the house, both as a thing in itself and as collection of heterogeneous interior spaces, reaches out and draws together larger aspects of diasporic lives" (p. 341). Therefore, in the first part of the novel, Barakat focuses on narrating the inside; things that happened in the domestic sphere, which is the traditional domain of Middle Eastern females. Barakat makes this clear right from the beginning of the novel:

> The war came to us at sundown. Mother had just announced that our lentil-and-rice dinner would be ready as soon as Father arrived. She picked up Maha, my infant sister, held out a plump breast, and began to rock and feed her. I was three and a half years old but still wanted to be the one rocking in my mother's arms. (p. 19)

This scene reveals the feminine memory which the novel is glutted with. This little girl, as a female narrator, is so attentive to the female experience. As soon as she announces the beginning of the war, she surprisingly shifts the scene to the domestic sphere. She is so heedful of her mother's behaviour toward her infant sister; she describes how her mother breastfeeds her sister and describes her jealousy of her sister, wishing to be in her place.

Barakat's memories about the domestic sphere go on as she captures everyday chores, extending from detailing how her mother prepared the dough for baking to riding in the back of the truck to the stream to wash clothes:

> Early mornings, Mother prepared the dough for our bread. She sifted flour, mixed it with water, salt, and yeast, and pounded it together. When she let it rest, we would poke our fingers into the dough to draw faces. Father then took the flat loaves to be baked in the community oven. (p. 58)

In these memories, Barakat finds moments of happiness which serve as a healing narrative: "Mother washed our clothes mainly on Fridays, when Father had no work and could drive us to a stream where many people gathered. My brothers and I rode in the back of the truck screaming into the wind and laughing wildly" (p. 59). On their journey to the stream to wash their clothes, the kids found an opportunity to pour themselves out: "At the top of our lungs we would yell all the expressions Mother had told us we should never say because they were impolite. Then we made up songs in which the forbidden words were repeated over and over until we arrived at the stream" (p. 45). Freeman and Brockmeier (2001) reiterates,

> It is precisely at this juncture that we begin to see autobiographical memory serving as a vehicle for tracing the trajectory of a life and, via narrative, giving it meaning. Historicity, autobiographical memory, and narrative identity therefore emerge as an interlocking discursive configuration. (p. 79)

This autobiographical narrative about the domestic sphere is a moment of reconfiguring the female self as a social entity. This configuration helps Barakat to reconfigure her identity by revisiting the past while narrating her childhood memories. Consequently, we see her aware of the role of Arab women, particularly Muslims, in extending kinship through breastfeeding other women's children:

> The women who could do so nursed the infants of women whose milk had dried up. It was said, and repeated, that children nursed by the same woman would instantly become siblings and must never marry. Mother nursed only my sister, so we acquired no new siblings. (p. 42)

Women in distress comforted each other and expressed solidarity, especially while their husbands were away. For the same purpose, Barakat's mother befriended Hamameh, the driver's mother, on their journey to Jordan, and they promised to help each other: "But Mother gained a sister of her own—Hamameh, the driver's wife. The two women agreed that if the war lasted a long time and their husbands did not return, they would help each other through whatever followed" (p. 42). The possibility of loss or losing one's husband or relatives was always present in these women's minds. This also required constructing the female self in a particular way to face such a possibility. Interestingly, in the feminine narrative, what is domestic and individual is also public and collective. Barakat's narrative captures these moments of solidarity as the hardship, which has been experienced by Barakat and her family, has been experienced by other Palestinian children and families as well. The female narrator does not posit herself and her family as the only heroes of the narrative, but other people are involved in the story narrated more realistically.

It is important to note that these memories come from the inside: "When a war ends, it does not go away [. . .] it hides inside us" (p. 16) as the mother assures Ibtisam. As the mother does not want her daughter to remember war due to its drastic consequences that reside inside the person; a great part of Barakat's novel focuses on remembering domestic issues, i.e. the inside. These effects and hidden consequences must have their way out, especially through language which forms the second dimension of our discussion of the feminine memory.

Female Language: Remembering Through Language

On the dedication page of *Tasting the Sky*, Barakat dedicates her novel to "Aleph," the first letter of the Arabic and Hebrew alphabets, to her parents and two brothers and to children everywhere. It seems she is pretty aware of the importance of language in depicting her memories and in conveying them to other children in the world, on the one hand, and the importance of memories ingrained in children and their childhood—children who grew up and are now adults but are, at the same time, still children commemorated in Barakat's memories.

Aleph is not only a letter in the Arabic alphabet but also one of the little friends Ibtisam lost during her childhood. To regain the lost Aleph requires reliving the past and creating a new present. Barakat's memories are shaped by their gendered language, which, in turn, forms a gendered history. It is not to be understood that the text is feminized, rather this feminine language participates in liberation politics and the nation's consciousness. The image of Palestine as a lost home where there was, and still is, warmth to embrace all of its inhabitants, males and females. Such warmth is demonstrated by the female language employed by Barakat in the novel which is more episodic, more emotional and more coherent than the male language.

Furthermore, Aleph in *Tasting the* Sky embodies language; the Arabic language, which is one major constituent of Barakat's identity. Language is a tool that Barakat uses to convey her suffering and her memories to the world. Language is a healing tool for Barakat; it is her window to the world. As Majaj (2001) explains, "For Palestinian authors in general, writing offers a means of 'going home,' of asserting a claim to the Palestinian past and the Palestinian future" (p. 124).

Therefore, we see Ibtisam sending letters to penfriends around the world. Barakat eloquently describes the situation:

> I sometimes find a stick of chewing gum in my box. Someone has opened it first, written a line of cheerful poetry, then wrapped it again. Smiling, I skip out of the post office. I chew the line, taste its meaning. Paper and ink, poems and my postbox are medicines that heal the wounds of a life without freedom. (p. 9)

As a Palestinian woman, writing gives her freedom to express what she cannot say. Ibtisam understands the language of freedom and the language of rebellion: "My father has no language for the pain and loneliness he feels. Is that because he has lived all his life not knowing freedom? Or does he hide his freedom somewhere, the way I hide mine in Post Office Box 34?" (p. 14). Ibtisam's question implicitly refers to the difference in the mode of representation between males and females. At the time when her father does not have words to express his pain and loneliness, Ibtisam sheds tears as her ink: "My tears drip onto my shoes. Tears are my secret ink, in the absence of real ink. Liquid stories" (p. 14). Writing becomes a matter of defence mechanism for this little girl when her existence is threatened by the colonizer. Moreover, the autobiographical narrative becomes "a way of using language or another symbolic system to imbue life events with a temporal and logic order" (Ochs & Capps, 2001, p. 2).

These memories start as Ibtisam searches for an authentic account of her absence to tell her mother when she is detained by the Israeli checkpoint at Surda, between Birzeit to Ramallah:

> I want to ask him if I can take out a pen and paper. If he lets me, I will empty myself of what I feel. I will distract myself from my hunger, for I have not eaten all day. And I will record details to give to my mother in order to avoid her wrath—if Ramallah is not really gone. (p. 7)

The traumatic scene at the Israeli checkpoint forced this little girl to remember through language. She was afraid to forget any single detail to account for her absence. The traumatic scene did not even make her forget her mother and her instructions which prevented her from asking the Israeli soldier for permission to take out a paper and pen: "But something in my mind wags a warning finger not to ask, not to do the wrong thing. It's a finger like Mother's, telling me to get home in a hurry, not ever to be late. But I am already many hours late" (p. 7). She chose to remember even the traumatic scene and her mother demanded her to forget, "*'Khalas, insay, insay,'* she demands impatiently. 'Forget, just forget'" (p. 7). As her mother considers forgetting a blessing, Barakat believes that remembering is an existential choice. It

is a matter of choosing oneself, "I do not know how long it will take before I return to all of myself. Yes, an echo still warns: 'Learn to forget.' But I am past this checkpoint—I will never regret that I chose to remember (p. 169). Barakat contrasts the past with the present. Although she was demanded to forget by her mother, she has documented her traumatic experiences with language even after a long time of immigrating to America.

Interestingly, Barakat follows in the footsteps of other women by choosing to remember. Narrating stories from the 1948 War became a passing time activity for women who immigrated to Jordan during the Six-Day War in 1967:

> The women did not sleep. Instead, they passed the time by telling stories of the war in 1948, embroidering their memories with worry and tears. They only stopped when the call from the minaret of a nearby mosque announced the arrival of a new morning. (p. 39)

The process of remembering, which Barakat constructs in the novel, is an agency against the colonizing attempts to erase her Palestinian identity. Barakat emphasizes that "mothers and soldiers are enemies of freedom" and that she is "doubly occupied" (p. 12). In her study of some Arab diaspora writers, Cherif pinpoints, "The reclamation of the Arab past by Abinader and Abu-Jaber and its reconstruction from a female perspective is instrumental for the writers' own agency and the empowerment of their Arab American women characters" (p. 208). This creates a healing narrative for Ibtisam, the Arab American writer, against her "double occupation" as she calls it. Consequently, she writes in retrospect to revolt against this past.

Female Body: Remembering Through the Body

Ibtisam Barakat skillfully links the domestic sphere with the female body. This accounts for the nature of the female narrative and memory reconstruction. For women, Kassem points out, "the body is a site of memory in which their experiences are encoded and preserved" (p. 187). The body emerges as a vehicle for recreating and remembering past events. In this regard, Kassem adds, a combination of the "past bodily experiences" and the present status of the body intervenes in the way the memory is recalled and constructed (p. 187).

In the novel, Barakat sheds light on the fragile nature of the female body in the traditional Palestinian community. In this aspect, Barakat's mother reminds her that the female body and "reputation" are always in danger of violation and desecration. The mother keeps reminding her daughter to ""Imshy elhayt el-hayt wu qool yallah el steereh," she says. Walk by the wall. Do not draw attention to yourself. Be invisible if you can, is her guiding proverb" (p. 8). Under occupation, Barakat faces the possibility of physical/ sexual assaults by troops at the checkpoints. In such situations, the female body becomes a burden, a target, and a magnet of traumatic memories.

Barakat recounts a sexual assault as a kid. She narrates how Zuhair, a teenager, used to make "frightening gestures with his tongue, lips, hands and body" to people (p. 152). One day on the way back from school, Zuhair stopped the narrator and ordered her to pick some cherries for him. Zuhair raised her to a branch:

> When I started to pick the cherries, Zuhair began to roll up my dress […] I fought to free myself. But Zuhair shook me and grunted that I must pick new cherries for him. I said no. When I felt him touch my skin, I dug my fingers toward his eyes and scratched. His hands pulled away as though from fire. He swayed left and right, then raised me as high as he could and threw me down. (p. 152)

This traumatic experience and the violation of the female body left deep scars on the narrator's soul. The memories of that day are deeply connected to the fact that her body became a target of the male's gaze and desire. Barakat's narration recounts other accounts

about her mother being sexually threatened by Israeli soldiers in a way that reminds her of her experience with Zuhair. One day, the narrator recounts, a soldier:

> pulled out his gun and stood away from the window to guard the door. The other threw kisses at Mother, hugged and touched his body up and down as he pointed to hers. His gestures were similar to Zuhair's. Zuhair was Palestinian like us, and the soldiers were Israeli, but it seemed they wanted the same thing. I looked at Mother's face. She was pale and trembling. Before the soldier left, he made a circle with his hands, meaning that he would return on another day. (p. 164)

Even though she was a little kid, the narrator realized that both the Israeli soldier and Zuhair operated on the same rule and posed the same threat to the female body. In a hostile patriarchal environment, the narrator realizes that her body becomes a threat to her very existence. Gradually, the narrator becomes more aware of her mother's instructions to remain invisible and not to attract attention. As an adult, the narrator reconstructs her past bodily experiences which help her recreate a better understanding of her childhood memories and her present status as a diaspora writer.

The narrator's body-related memories also have a strong connection with the social gaze and expectations. At school, the narrator recounts how girls' hair was regularly checked for lice or fleas. She vividly describes the embarrassment and shame of the little girls:

> A man with a DDT pesticide pump sprayed their heads as though the girls were plants. Already pale with embarrassment, the girls sprayed with the white powder looked like sad, old women. "We're doing this to teach you cleanliness," the teacher would say. "And in the higher classes you will be made to drop your pants and someone will sniff near you to make sure you have bathed," the student who was busy parting our hair would warn (p. 148).

Here, the female body is violated and desecrated. As they have longer hair that is subject to lice infestation, the female body gains more weight in the memory's construction. This additional "burden" preserves more distinctive memories for females compared to their male counterparts.

Sexual encounters and targeting the female body forms but one aspect of the "Remembering through the body" we propose. Other aspects of the female body help the remembering of past events. Interestingly, Barakat's narration reflects how the body reflects and endures the consequences of the emotional reactions of the female. Upon the start of the Six-Day War, Barakat's father returns home and tells the family that the war has started. What the little narrator clearly remembers is her mother's extreme reaction to the news:

> Mother seemed to know exactly what my father's words meant. Her response astounded me. She struck her face with both her hands, dug her nails into her terror-stricken cheeks, and then she scratched. She said nothing, and her eyes gazed into the distance. It seemed like her soul had momentarily departed from our kitchen, where we all stood paralyzed. (p. 21)

Such responses/practices are common among women in the narrator's contemporary community. Self-torturing and violent reactions that target the body—in addition to being a reflection of the inferior social status of the female—maintain the body as a trigger of unforgettable memories that combine the violence of the scene, on the one hand, and the significance of the historical moment, on the other hand.

Remembering through the body is not limited to the narrator's body. In the novel, other female bodies serve as a trajectory of remembrance and re-creation of the past. Kassem argues that "Women memorize historical events by linking them to 'body time': maidenhood, pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding" (p. 187). These patterns of memory, Kassem adds,

"are directly related to the female body and its various functions" (p. 187). One example of this connection between feminine body time and memory is the narrator's frequent references to her mother's pregnancy and breastfeeding. The narrator recalls, "I liked the Jalazone school even more after Mother became pregnant. She walked slowly now and grew big like our goat. She spoke with agitation, demanding that I help with too many house chores" (p. 151). Before the war, the narrator narrates how her mother "picked up Maha, my infant sister, held out a plump breast, and began to rock and feed her. I was three and a half years old but still wanted to be the one rocking in my mother's arms." (p. 17). That said, the collective feminine body is transformed as one unified entity that serves/helps with the recalling/remembering process. Whether it is her body or another female body, the narrator shows a keen awareness of the various feminine body times or stages and links them with the historical moment.

For the narrator, the male body is also present, although it is more obscure for her. The narrator forms an understanding of her body in contrast to the ambiguity of the male body. She connects existential/historical moments with the questions she raises about the male body. When her brothers were old enough for circumcision and the family decides to celebrate that event, she asked her parents, "'What is circumcision?'". I had heard the word before but had never really understood it. My question floated into my parents' sudden silence and hung like a bubble in the air. Mother dismissed it by saying that only boys are circumcised." (p. 119). Interestingly, the circumcision incident is engulfed in the female narrative and rendered through the feminine memory. It is very indicative of Barakat's skill of remembering through bodily experience.

The circumcision incident concludes all of the three dimensions of the feminine narrative: the domestic sphere and the social entity, remembering through language and the body as a site of memory. Through the circumcision incident, the little Ibtisam experienced the loss of a friend, Zuraiq, the male goat, which was slaughtered for a big feast for those who came to celebrate this "happy" occasion. The little Ibtisam loved Zuraiq as she would love a member of the family. This was a result of compensating for something lost or absent, the absence of the male bodies; her brothers'. She wanted to accompany her brothers to school, but because she was still young, her father assured her, "'You can play with Maha, and you'll have Zuraiq all to yourself when they're gone'" (p. 108). In the absence of her two brothers, Ibtisam used Zuraiq as her pupil, and she played the role of the teacher. As for the domestic sphere, Ibtisam noticed the habit of having something to love in the place of something lost when she and her family visited her Grandma in Beit Iksa to have her brothers Basel and Muhammad circumcised. When Ibtisam met her Grandma, she noticed how her Grandma loved her trees and animals as compensation for her lost land and orchards in Kharrouba that were lost in the 1948 War. Barakat recounts, "Grandma loved trees with her heart, perhaps the way I loved Zuraiqee. 'They are part of my family,' she assured me" (p. 127). That is, the domestic occasion of circumcision is an occasion of remembrance and reminiscence; it is collective rather than private. Barakat lost Zuraiqu as she lost her donkey friend, Souma, and her home later:

> Dear everyone: Written on my heart, all that I lost—my shoes, a donkey friend, a city, the skin of my feet, a goat, my home, my childhood—shattered at the hands of history. But my eternal friend Alef helps me find the splinters of my life … and piece them back together. (p. 169)

What remains is the language that Barakat used to document these memories symbolized by Alef and engulfed with the bodily memory and experience.

CONCLUSION

Based on the above discussion, it is safe to conclude that the female narrative participates in recreating reality by bringing the past into the present through the feminine memory. It builds a positive bridge with the past and, at the same time, rebels against this past by choosing to remember. Like other Arab diaspora writers, the past and the present are major constituents of Barakat's identity that she endeavours to reconfigure throughout her narrative. This reconfiguration helps her regain the lost part of her identity and serves as a healing narrative.

Barakat's feminine memory is represented by three dimensions: the domestic sphere, the female language and the female body. Through the domestic sphere, Barakat is very eager to narrate the inside. This inside that turns out to be public and collective. It is ingrained in the nation's memory and articulated by Barakat's female language. Language provides Barakat with the freedom to convey her suffering to the world; it is a self-defence mechanism in the absence of other weapons. The body becomes a site of the feminine memory and a domain that could be violated by the masculine/colonizer and, therefore, should be protected by the only means available at that time, i.e. invisibility.

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