The Mercy Seminar 2025, Term III.1

Al Nakba/The Catastrophe

***Jaffa: Land of Oranges*, by Ghassan Kanafani, translated by Mona Anis and Hala Halim**

When we had to leave Jaffa for Acre there was no sense of tragedy. It felt like an annual trip to spend the feast in another city. Our days in Acre did not seem unusual: perhaps, being young, I was even enjoying myself since the move exempted me from school. Whatever, on the night of the big attack on Acre the picture was becoming clearer. That was, I think, a cruel night, passed between the stern silence of the men and the invocations of the women. My peers, you and I, were too young to understand what the whole story was about. On that night, though, certain threads of that story became clearer. In the morning, and as the Jews withdrew threatening and fulminating, a big truck was standing in front of our door. Light things, mainly sleeping items, were being chucked into the truck swiftly and hysterically.

As I stood leaning against the ancient wall of the house I saw your mother getting into the truck, then your aunt, then the young ones, then your father began to chuck you and your siblings into the car and on top of the luggage. Then he snatched me from the corner, where I was standing and, lifting me on top of his head, he put me into the cage-like metal luggage compartment above the driver's cabin, where I found my brother Riad sitting quietly. The vehicle drove off before I could settle into a comfortable position. Acre was disappearing bit by bit in the folds of the up-hill roads leading to Rass El-Naqoura [Lebanon].

It was somewhat cloudy and a sense of coldness was seeping into my body. Riad, with his back propped against the luggage and his legs on the edge of the metal compartment, was sitting very quietly, gazing into the distance. I was sitting silently with my chin between my knees and my arms folded over them. One after the other, orange orchards streamed past, and the vehicle was panting upward on a wet earth... In the distance the sound of gun-shots sounded like a farewell salute.

Rass El-Naqoura loomed on the horizon, wrapped in a blue haze, and the vehicle suddenly stopped. The women emerged from amid the luggage, stepped down and went over to an orange vendor sitting by the wayside. As the women walked back with the oranges, the sound of their sobs reached us. Only then did oranges seem to me something dear, that each of these big, clean fruits was something to be cherished. Your father alighted from beside the driver, took an orange, gazed at it silently, then began to weep like a helpless child.

In Rass El-Naqoura our vehicle stood beside many similar vehicles. The men began to hand in their weapons to the policemen who were there for that purpose. Then it was our turn. I saw pistols and machine guns thrown onto a big table, saw the long line of big vehicles coming into Lebanon, leaving the winding roads of the land of oranges far behind, and then I too cried bitterly. Your mother was still silently gazing at the oranges, and all the orange trees your father had left behind to the Jews glowed in his eyes. As if all those clean trees which he had bought one by one were mirrored in his face. And in his eyes tears, which he could not help hiding in front of the officer at the police station, were shining.

When in the afternoon we reached Sidon we had become refugees.

The 1948 Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine, by Ilan Pappe

ON A COLD WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON, 10 March 1948, a group of eleven men, veteran Zionist leaders together with young military Jewish officers, put the final touches on a plan for the ethnic cleansing of Palestine. That same evening, military orders were dispatched to units on the ground to prepare for the systematic expulsion of Palestinians from vast areas of the country. The orders came with a detailed description of the methods to be used to forcibly evict the people: large-scale intimidation; laying siege to and bombarding villages and population centers; setting fire to homes, properties, and goods; expelling residents; demolishing homes; and, finally, planting mines in the rubble to prevent the expelled inhabitants from returning. Each unit was issued its own list of villages and neighborhoods to target in keeping with the master plan. Code-named Plan D (Dalet in Hebrew), this was the fourth and final version of vaguer plans outlining the fate that was in store for the native population of Palestine. The previous three plans had articulated only obscurely how the Zionist leadership intended to deal with the presence of so many Palestinians on the land the Jewish national movement wanted for itself. This fourth and last blueprint spelled it out clearly and unambiguously: the Palestinians had to go.

The plan, which covered both the rural and urban areas of Palestine, was the inevitable result both of Zionism's ideological drive for an exclusively Jewish presence in Palestine and a response to developments on the ground following the British decision in February 1947 to end its Mandate over the country and turn the problem over to the United Nations. Clashes with local Palestinian militias, especially after the UN partition resolution of November 1947, provided the perfect context and pretext for implementing the ideological vision of an ethnically cleansed Palestine.

A few days after Plan D was typed out, it was distributed among the commanders of the dozen brigades that now comprised the Haganah. With the list each commander received came a detailed description of the villages in his field of operation and their imminent fate— occupation, destruction, and expulsion. The Israeli documents released from the IDF archives in the late 1990s show clearly that, contrary to claims made by historians such as Benny Morris, Plan Dalet was handed down to the brigade commanders not as vague guidelines, but as clear-cut operative orders for action.

Once the plan was finalized, it took six months to complete the mission. When it was over, more than half of Palestine's native population, over 750,000 people, had been uprooted, 531 villages had been destroyed, and 11 urban neighborhoods had been emptied of their inhabitants. The plan decided upon on 10 March 1948, and above all its systematic implementation in the following months, was a clear case of what is now known as an ethnic cleansing operation.

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"This war [of 1948] and its cataclysmic consequences for Palestinians—their decisive defeat in battle, the expulsion and flight from Palestine of roughly 700,000-750,000 Palestinians, the destruction of more
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than 400 Palestinian villages, and the total collapse of Palestinian society—is simply termed the *al-Nakba* (the Catastrophe) by Palestinians. It is by far the most seminal event in Palestinian history and collective memory" (Peleg and Waxman, *Israel's Palestinians*, Cambridge, 2011).

"The trauma of *Al-Nakba*, as Salman Abu Sitta concluded, is imprinted on the psyche of every Palestinian, on those who witnessed it as well as those that did not" (*Palestinian Collective Memory and National Identity*, ed. By Meir Litvak, 2009).

There is now unanimity among historians that the Palestinian refugee crisis inside and outside of Israel—so potently expressed in the language of trauma and catastrophe—was created by Israel's policy of banning the return of displaced Arabs. "This plan was enforced immediately, systematically, and coercively. On this point there is no controversy" (Lesch and Lustick, 2005).

"In my situation, there are no essential differences between the story of my childhood and the story of my homeland. The rupture that occurred in my personal life also befell my homeland. Childhood was taken from me at the same time as my home. In 1948, when this great rupture of ours took place, I jumped from the bed of childhood onto the path of exile. I was six. My entire world turned upside down and childhood froze in place, it didn't go with me. The question is whether it is possible to restore the childhood that was taken by restoring the land that was taken" (Mahmoud Darwish, Palestinian Poet).

"Memories of Palestine as it was before 1948 have become such a significant element in the collective narrative of loss and exile in the community in Lebanon that when I, in the course of a life-story interview, asked a twenty-year-old Palestinian woman what her worst memory (*zakira*) was, she said, 'the Nakba, of course'" (Lesch and Lustick, *Exile and Return: Predicaments of Palestinians and Jews*, 2005).

"The traumatic events of Palestinian history have, however, acted as a unifying national factor. It is the adhesive glue that has enabled the population to overcome differences, controversies, and segmentation, and create one history around one unifying shared memory" (Meir Litvak, 2009).

The memory and hopes of the Palestinian people, both inside and outside of Israel, are focused on the memory of the Nakba, both with regard to what was lost in defeat and/or exile, and with regard to what the future might hold for the people.

There are three main ways in which the memory of the Nakba influences the hopes of the Palestinians who remember it. For the refugees, the Nakba gives rise to the need to remember the concrete details of village life up to 1948, as these memories are their claim to have lived there, and to have the right to return there. The right of return to the house that was left is a primary passion of Palestinian refugees, even across the wall in Bethlehem, and is symbolized by the key to the house, and often the title to the land, that they took with them when they left, as well by the village names, which are often used in the camps and in naming their children. The hope of the refugees is to go home to the place their family left, and this desire is powerfully expressed in the poetry and literature produced by Palestinian writers of all kinds, even ones who stayed in Israel after 1948 or in Nablus during this whole period.

For Palestinians in the territories, the memory of the Nakba gives rise to the dream of an independent Palestinian state, which would allow the Palestinians to exercise sovereignty over themselves as the

Jews were able to attain sovereignty for themselves in Israel. This hope is quite different than the hope to return to the family's house in Jaffa, and gives rise to very different expectations and aspirations, even as it is founded on exactly the same memory of trauma and catastrophe.

For Palestinians in Israel proper, the Nakba has given rise to the effort to show the Jews in Israel that a Jewish and democratic state is an oxymoron. They first attempted to do this by demanding rights for individual Arab Israelis, and this movement has recently changed to seeking equality for the Palestinians (Christian, Muslim, Druze, or Bedoin) as a people, with their own right to self-expression and freedom, which they only see as happening if Israel relinquishes its Jewish identity. They thereby seek to use the Israeli aspiration to equality to undo the Jewish nature of Israel, seeing these two aspirations as essentially and necessarily contradictory.

United Nations Resolution 194: Creation of a Conciliation Commission
11 December 1948

The General Assembly,

11. Resolves that the refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property which, under principles of international law or in equity, should be made good by the Governments or authorities responsible;

Instructs the Conciliation Commission to facilitate the repatriation, resettlement and economic and social rehabilitation of the refugees and the payment of compensation, and to maintain close relations with the Director of the United Nations Relief for Palestine Refugees and, through him, with the appropriate organs and agencies of the United Nations.

The Lemon Tree, by Sandy Tolan

We were exiled by force of arms. We were exiled on foot. We were exiled to take the earth as our bed. And the sky as a cover. And to be fed from the crumbs of those among the governments and international organizations who imparted their charity. We were exiled but we left our souls, our hopes and our childhood in Palestine. We left our joys and sorrows. We left them in every corner, and on every grain of sand in Palestine. We left them with each lemon fruit, and with each olive. We left them in the roses and flowers. We left them in the flowering tree that stands with pride at the entrance of our house in al-Ramla. We left them in the remains of our fathers and ancestors. We left them as witnesses and history. We left them, hoping to return.

The Deluge and the Tree, Fadwa Toukan

When the hurricane swirled and spread its deluge
of dark evil
onto the good green land
'they' gloated. The western skies
reverberated with joyous accounts:

“The Tree has fallen!
The great trunk is smashed! The hurricane leaves no life in the Tree!”

Had the Tree really fallen?
Never! Not with our red streams flowing forever,
not while the wine of our thorn limbs
fed the thirsty roots,
Arab roots alive
tunneling deep, deep, into the land!

When the Tree rises up, the branches
shall flourish green and fresh in the sun
the laughter of the Tree shall leaf
beneath the sun
and birds shall return.
Undoubtedly, the birds shall return.
The birds shall return.

***We Will Return*, Abdelkarim Al-Karmi (Abu Salma) - 1951**

Beloved Palestine, how do I sleep
While the spectrum of torture is in my eyes?
I purify the world with your name
And if your love did not tire me out,
I would've kept my feelings a secret.
The caravans of days pass and talk about
The conspiracy of enemies and friends.

Beloved Palestine! How do I live
Away from your plains and mounds?
The feet of mountains that are dyed with blood
Are calling me
And on the horizon appears the dye.
The weeping shores are calling me
And my weeping echoes in the ears of time.
The escaping streams are calling me
They are becoming foreign in their land.
Your orphan cities are calling me
And your villages and domes.

My friends ask me, "Will we meet again?"
"Will we return?"
Yes! We will kiss the bedewed soil
And the red desires are on our lips.
Tomorrow, we will return,

And the generations will hear
The sound of our footsteps

We will return along with the storms
Along with the lightening and meteors
Along with the hope and songs
Along with the flying eagle
Along with the dawn that smiles to the deserts
Along with the morning on the waves of the sea
Along with the bleeding flags
And along with the shining swords and spears

***To my Mother*, Mahmoud Darwish**

I long for my mother's bread,
My mother's Coffee,
And my mother's touch...
Childhood grows in me,
Day after day,
And I love my life,
For if I die,
I fear my mother will shed a tear!

Oh take me, if I return some day,
As a veil for your eyelashes,
And cover my bones with herbs,
That turned sacred by your ankle,
And tie me,
With a strand of hair,
Or a thread, that dangles from your dress,
For I may turn to a god,
A god I will be,
If I ever reach the bottom of your heart!

Place me, if I return,
As a fuel for your fire....
And a clothesline on the roof of our house,
Because I have lost the ability to stand,
Without your evening prayers!
I have grown old, so give me the stars of childhood,
So that I could join the young birds,
In their journey home,
To your waiting nest.......

On Palestine as a State, or a State of Mind: In a Newsweek interview in 2000, Darwish was asked, "What should the role of the poet or artist be in a Palestinian state?"

Darwish's answer: “I don't think there is any role for poetry. Poems can't establish a state. But they can establish a metaphorical homeland in the minds of the people. I think my poems have built some houses in this landscape. I described my suitcase as my homeland. It is an unfinished voyage, and most Palestinians carry their land as they carry their luggage, because they remain in exile. We Arabs thought that Israel is stronger than it thinks. Why are they afraid of one poem about a mother? Some Israelis, especially the right, want to monopolize the story of this country and to ignore the relationship of other people with this country. When a poet speaks about nostalgia and love for his country, it destroys what the Israelis have taught, which is that this country was empty when Israel was founded. My poems are a love story with this country. This clashes with their story. But we have to realize that this country belongs to two peoples. Everybody has the right to love it and to write poetry about it.”

***Sanarjiu, We Shall Return*, by Fairuz**

We shall return to our village one day
and drown in the warmth of hope
we shall return
though time passes by
and distances grow between us.

O heart don't drop wearied
on the path of our return
how it wounds our pride
that birds tomorrow will return
while we are still here.

There are hills
sleeping and waking on our pledge
and people who love
their days comprised of waiting
and nostalgic songs
places where willows fill the eye
Bending over the water
while afternoons in their shade
drink in the perfume of peace.

We shall return
the nightingale told me
when we met on a hill
that nightingales still
live there on our dreams
and that among the yearning hills
and people there is a place for us
O heart then
how long has the wind scattered us.
Come, we shall return
let us return.