



Present Tense: Past Perfect

Jerusalem Now and Then

By Dr. Ali Qleibo



Palestine is paradise. We have lost it, and we have fallen out of grace. The families, the village, the city, the land, the fauna, and the flora have sustained a traumatic blow. Depopulated forcefully at times, forsaken by its people who are driven by pragmatic needs to the diaspora (*al-shataat*) at other times, and abused by the greedy local enterprisers, Palestine and the Palestinians at the end of the day have fallen into a grievous state.

"There is no hope. There is nothing to look forward to." My friend Khalil quoted his son who had just graduated from Jordan University in Amman. "I cannot persuade him to return." He explained: "Apart from the discouraging low salaries he has no social life to draw him back. As dismal as living in Amman may seem to us, it has much more to offer our children than life here."

The fraction of the geographic Palestine that has remained in the West Bank has turned bleak. Culture has given way to ignorance and beauty has been overtaken by ugliness as villages, towns, and fields have developed into slums. Once an idyllic pastoral town, Jericho has devolved – through a mixture of ignorance, profiteering, and incompetent administration – into a shantytown. Its gurgling water canals have been diverted into underground water pipes, its citrus groves have been desiccated, and its green fields have become stone and cement tenements with minimal urban planning. Artas, famous for its gardens, and the plum and cherry orchards around the adjacent Solomon's Pools have lost their old appeal. Alternately a dumping ground, the rest of the green space has been taken over by an arbitrary mess of buildings, ruining the landscape in blatant

Whereas nostalgia is a file that removes the rough edges from the good old days, photographs are representations that preserve or re-present information from their physiological correlates. In contradistinction to nostalgic memories, pictures proffer a tactile impression that remains after the object represented is long gone. Whereas fidelity in photography consists in the preservation of images imprinted in film from previous experiences, nostalgia consists in constructing images that lack a duplicate in experience.

defiance of beauty, order, and harmony. The discrete aesthetic harmony of houses and the nature of Palestine of yore have been taken over by hideous dissonant architecture. Once a favored picnic haunt, Artas has now become a dump.

Beauty of nature, culture, class refinements, liberal Western values and the impeccable public image that reflects *bella figura* are the elements that constitute the nostalgic narratives of the good old days (أيام الزمن الجميل). These memories are preserved for posterity in family anecdotes and illustrated in the photographs that

survived *al-Nakba*. Photographs of bygone days conserve past events previously apprehended and confirm that the event happened in my country, in my city, and in my family. They have the power to reinforce in our minds these collective memories that have disappeared or have been, as it were, laid aside out of sight. Photographs in this sense are the storehouse of our ideas of ourselves, our identity, and our roots.

Pre-*Nakba* Palestinian photographs have a revelatory impact. Though these photographs are momentary and discontinuous with the present, they provide a glimpse of the fundamental traumatic rupture that underlies present

Jerusalem 1943. A luscious spring wreath frames a group of maidens from the Nuseibeh family.



Palestinian angst. In the following pictures, the dissolution of Jerusalem's cosmopolitan urbane culture, the break-up and disintegration of family unity, and the manic suburban sprawl throughout the West Bank become lamentably visible.

Paradise regained! A luscious spring wreath frames a group of maidens from the Nuseibeh family. It is Jerusalem 1943. A freshly pruned bitter orange tree to the right and the leaves of the loquat tree, center back, both favored fruit trees in a Jerusalem garden, are telltale signs of the location and season. It is spring.

Time is paramount. Summer, winter, under the rain and the sun, as the almonds blossom and as the grape leaves turn golden yellow and fall; the turn of the seasons coalesces into one endless instant of the spring garland composition. Time stops to preserve forever the pristine purity of youth. The artwork will not be tarnished by time; the fossilized minute will never slip into the present but remains an everlasting moment of now.... The fleeting image is preserved in print for posterity.

Alas time moves on. A surge of great tenderness and pity wells up within me as I behold my mother as an adolescent. The revelation upon seeing her young, vulnerable, and fragile triggers a sense of compassion that makes me shudder and almost turn away from her portrait, even as I yearn to look and try to accept and understand time: I know her as a mature woman and have seen her advance in age. It is awkward to see my mother a mere child. The photograph evokes deep pathos. Pity draws me toward her, and fear makes me recoil from what the future holds for her and the other damsels on the eve of *al-Nakba*. Like the audience of Greek tragedy, I know the drama as it unfolds.

The artist had set the stage by paying meticulous attention to placing the chorus of the lovely maidens on a

carpet stretched out in the garden for the occasion. He had placed each according to her age, height, and stature. Some were seated on chairs; others were squatting, kneeling, or simply standing in their appointed positions. I recognize my mother's beaming face, full of candor; my aunt Maleha's kindness, and my aunt Wijdan's exuberant smile. Memories of each of her sisters and cousins are replete with details and drama. They have played out their prescribed roles. They have lived their lives fully. Death had the final word.

The spring garland is a picture of bliss; the final days before the *Nakba* and before the diaspora in the 1940s. Mother almost alone, first in the fourth row to the right, is barely fifteen. I recognize my eight aunts and a few cousins who used to visit from Lebanon, from Kuwait, and from the States. And then the long silence. Most have died. In the picture they pose listless, unaware that the life they know is drawing to an end; the loss of Palestine would put an end to the state of grace.

Though mother recognizes her sisters and cousins, she has no memory of the place or the other girls who were their neighbors in the Musrara Quarter where her family home still stands. The rustic balcony and doorway suggest the possibility that the scene may have been in the family farm in Qalonia, northwest of Jerusalem in the foothill of al-Qastal. Many photos with different members of the family must have been shot on the special photographic occasion. This one has survived the fires, the bombs, the destroyed homes of al-Musrara, once the raging battlefield of Jewish snipers against the Palestinian residents of Sheikh Jarrah, southward to al-Musrara.

Cultural identity consists of shared memory; sameness of memory is metaphysically necessary and sufficient for sameness of discursive collective identity. Photographs as

objective records are interesting not only for their own sake but also because of their conceptual connection to the notion of identity. They provide first-personal evidence of identity. Moreover, photographs allow one to know one's own past, immediately and directly. By establishing a direct relation to past events the picture provides the elements that tie the present with the past, whose constituent elements articulate with the collective narrative.

Photographs, as part of collective memory, represent the world that once was, rather than our experiences of the world. The opulence of the Jerusalem of the thirties is metaphorically represented through the grandiose art-deco door, the rich Persian carpet, and the white tablecloth. Its elite cosmopolitan class is amply displayed in the manner, restrained elegance, and discrete demeanor of the ladies

When we want to refer back to something that happened before the Nakba, we often use the past perfect, which underlies the nostalgic Palestinian discourse. When we talk about the Israeli occupation, the PNA corruption, and our general grievances, we use the present tense to express the idea that our malaise is repeated or usual.



Jerusalem 1930s. Group portrait of assertive, independent, and active feminists from various women's associations.

portrayed. In this vintage photograph from the 1930s, the present-day viewer is first and foremost impressed by the image of refined "elegance" and "class."

It is a riveting group portrait of assertive, independent, active feminists

from various women's associations. Their forceful poise and their diffident composure command respect and admiration. Though I have shared the picture with numerous Jerusalemites none could identify any of the ladies portrayed. Yet judging from their

demeanor, all concur that these are Jerusalemites. My mother was barely three years old then. The other ladies I interviewed, who are in their seventies, were not yet born at the time of the photograph.

The ladies from the various Jerusalem women's associations had gathered at the King David Hotel, which was the symbol of luxury and elegance during the British Mandate. The reception was held in honor of leading Egyptian feminist, Huda Shaarawi, whose robust presence dominates the photo. Donned in a stylish European bonnet of the period, she sits next to an equally attractive lady whose foulard frames her gentle radiant face. In 1923, when Huda Shaarawi, the pioneer of feminist activism, removed her veil in Cairo's train station, she created what became a landmark (and much-copied) gesture for feminists throughout Egypt and the Middle East, and established her status as one of the most important feminists in twentieth-century Egypt. It is well known that she was a close friend of Ms. Zuleikha al-Shihabi, the leading Jerusalem feminist. Could it be the lady next to Huda? Milia al-Sakakini, Tarab Abdul Hadi, two pioneers of women's associations, must have had their place in this commemorative picture. The loss of Palestine and the massive depopulation of Jerusalem have created great gaps in our knowledge of Palestinian society and social history. The folk narratives that extol the cosmopolitan glamour of Jerusalem invoke elegance, social refinement, and liberal Western humanist values as epitomizing Jerusalem society. The historical details and overall socio-economic political context, which constitute the historians' craft, are lagging behind. Jerusalem, in the wake of the *Nakba*, languishes in nostalgic melancholy for the lost paradise, for the joie de vivre and for the old liberal values, Western lifestyle, and distinctive class structure. The classic photograph assumes an iconic status

as the embodiment of the perfect past.

"They are all there," Aida pouted upon her return following the New Year parties that she had attended in Amman, where she met my aunts, uncles, and cousins. "Jerusalem society lives in Amman. Your cousins Nada and Nazek Qleibo are like the ladies in the picture..." The Jordanian capital is in fact the contemporary Palestinian urban social center. "Crossing Allenby on my way back I entered the VIP room and held back my tears." She had picked me up from my midnight flight from Istanbul. "I am tired of the Israeli occupation, I don't want to see one more Israeli soldier, I am revolted by Abu Mazen and the corruption in Ramallah, the vulgarity of the people here...."

In Amman, family and friends always wonder how we put up with life "there."

"We stay indoors with our servants and busy ourselves with books, writing, painting, teaching, country rides, walks, and running the country farm; and we frequently travel abroad" is my terse answer. In fact, we lead a lonely existence in our beloved Jerusalem. We have reconciled with our choices. Our children refuse to settle for less when they can have more elsewhere. They do not want to live the reclusive life that we have learned to cherish.

"My generation inherited the loss of Palestine." I reasoned with Aida, "Like you, I was born to a devastated, depopulated city wallowing in nostalgia for the pre-*Nakba* life, for the Jerusalem they once knew; their families, their friends, the society, and the cosmopolitan culture and glamour of the lost Jerusalem. It was not easy to survive in a divided city behind a wire fence that extended from Damascus Gate northward to Jenin. The majority had left by the fifties and the few survivors died before you were born."

It was past midnight and we were in the car watching Jerusalem with its majestic golden dome of the Noble

Sanctuary dominating the city from our favorite perspective on Mount Scopus. We delight in the spectacular view of our mosque early in the morning, wrapped in mist, with drizzle on the windowpanes, and we enjoy the sunset over our city. Before returning home from Ben Gurion Airport or Allenby Bridge, we drive to this spot to restore calm to our hearts.

"And should this be burnt then nothing would bind me to the city any longer. I could then be free."

Aida has not yet read Yukio Mishima's novel *The Golden Pavilion*, in which he

a modern house instead. The centuries-old town, a veritable museum, was bulldozed overnight. Similarly donor money provided the financing to destroy Jericho's traditional irrigation system and substitute underground pipes as an alternative, thereby destroying the wild fauna and flora of the pastoral town.... The fiasco of the cultural community center at the Artas pools is another example, and the list is endless.

The entrance to Jericho, through Wadi Qelt, has always provided a beautiful panorama of the City of the Moon. On the right, perched on top of the valley,



Modern day entrance to Jerusalem.

juxtaposes the eternal beauty of the ancient Kyoto Temple, the serenity and refined sense of aesthetics and lofty spirituality it evokes, with the ugliness, co-opting of traditional Japanese values and traditions in the pragmatic post-war surrender and cooperation with the United States.

Money by donor countries speeds up the destruction of Palestinian cultural heritage and natural beauty. The municipality of Dura, with abundant cash, offered to subsidize the destruction and removal of the debris should anyone choose to build

stands the elegant historic Alami house surrounded by citrus groves topped by palm trees that spread throughout the panorama that encircles the once-elegant Belle View Hotel, the dignified Jericho mosque and Catholic church that bask in the shade of the ancient sycamore trees.

We are the last generation to remember this panoramic vista. A building project has already started on the edge of the bridge. It blocks the view and the green expansive fields that, in turn, are scheduled to be transformed into a housing project for pensioned



Old view of Jerusalem from the north city wall. Dome of the Rock prominent in center of photo.
Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

bureaucrats. The West Bank has grown into massive shapeless islands in a sea of settlements, in which the villages have become ethnic dorms and the countryside has been ravaged into dumping grounds. Nothing has been spared. Over the past decades, the ancient dignified Byzantine-style lead cupola of the Dome of the Rock has been replaced by the golden oval dome. Notwithstanding, the Noble Sanctuary, under occupation, survives as our solace and the jewel of Palestine.

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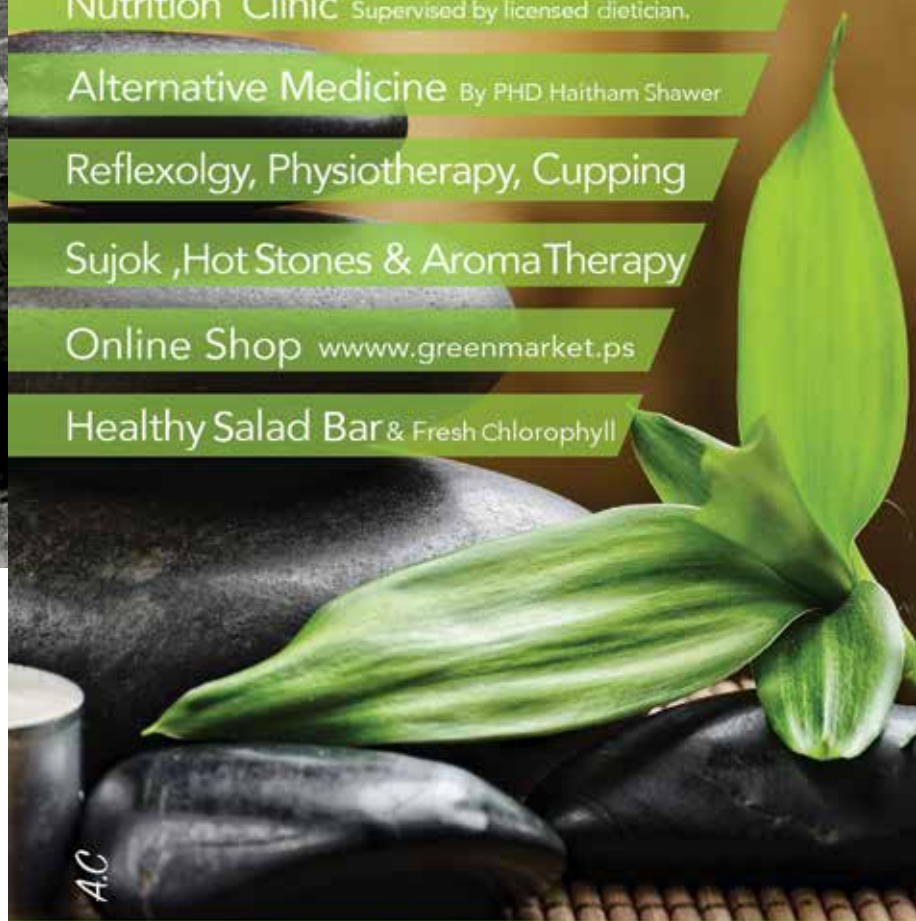
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