

Going Back To The Diaspora



By Hasheemah Afaneh

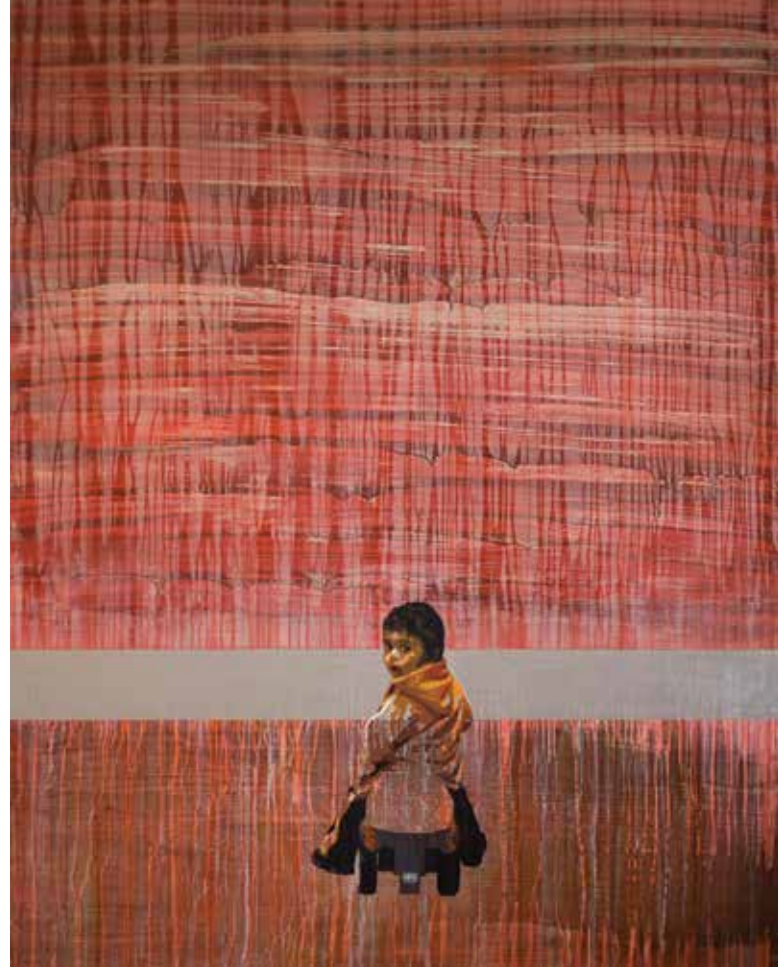
“You’re going to be part of the diaspora now,” my friend Mariam said, turning to me with her eyebrows raised. We were on our way home, riding one of the orange service taxis that commute between Birzeit University and Ramallah, and I had just told her that I was looking into public health graduate programs in the United States. Sitting in the middle seat of the Ford van, looking ahead and watching the windshield wipers fight against the rain, I weighed the word. Diaspora. Never before had I thought of my leaving Palestine that way.

“Yeah, I guess I am.”

After we’d gotten off at the final stop in Ramallah and parted ways, I decided to walk home, despite the cold, all the while considering the implication of the word. The definition of diaspora in various dictionaries may include the words “moving” and “populations,” but that is not the thought on which I grew up. My definition of diaspora weighs so much heavier. Perhaps as a byproduct of my Palestinian roots and upbringing, the word is weighty on my mind and even heavier on my tongue. I tried to search for a lighter word to describe what my moving-abroad-in-order-to-study means. I could not think of anything.

Why did I need to explain it?

When I think of diaspora, I think of Palestinian refugees, disseminated all over the world because politics never seem to work in their favor. The first people who come to my mind are not the members of my Palestinian family who have lived in the United States for decades, and it does not even occur to me to remember my Palestinian friends who are spending a few years abroad to study. I don’t connect them with the diaspora – even though they, too, fit the definition – because they can go back home. They still have that privilege. Unlike the people who hold on to their right of return, or the ones who are exiled and may have lost all hope of ever returning. When I hear diaspora, it most



Between Exits by Hani Zurob shows Palestine from an exile’s point of view.

closely translates into “one who is not home and cannot go back home” – until someone reminds me of the fact that I am part of the diaspora now.

I was part of the diaspora long before I knew it. I was born to my parents in the diaspora; I was raised for half of my life in the diaspora; the diaspora is where I learned English. This situation was the reason why my parents decided to fly my siblings and me back to Palestine. And this is how in fifth grade I ended up or, better, started searching desperately for something to read in English, until I finally came across my first copy of *This Week In Palestine*. That was in seventh grade, at Angelo’s, a well-known pizza restaurant in Ramallah.

I had been under the impression that it was hard to go home after I’d grown up mostly in the diaspora. But the truth is, it is harder to go back to the diaspora after having been home for a while.

Now, having lived in Palestine for fourteen years, I am back in the diaspora, feeling nostalgic and longing for Fayrouz to be played on the radio in the morning – and I am looking for



The beautiful architecture of a balcony in Jerusalem on a late afternoon.



An extravagant French-style balcony in the French Quarter, in New Orleans, Louisiana, USA.



View from my bedroom window on a winter evening as it is about to rain on Jabal Al-taweel, Al-Bireh.



View from my bedroom window on a rainy summer day in the French Quarter, the heart of the city of New Orleans.

something to read in Arabic. I talk to my friends back home and tell them that I do not wish to get too comfortable here. I am too aware of my surroundings and of who I am as a Palestinian and global citizen to get too comfortable anywhere else, anyways.

Two weeks in the diaspora, I was sitting in my first epidemiology class where we study the determinants and frequency of disease. My professor had mentioned two types of populations, one of them being a dynamic population. This kind of population keeps changing and can make room for new people. When she asked for an example, I wanted to raise my hand and say, “those in the diaspora.” The diaspora is a dynamic population, with some people entering continually, willingly or by force, while others are leaving or hoping to leave.

I have been in the diaspora for only two weeks as I am writing this, but I already know I want to leave here and go back to make my home a better place, despite the hardships and struggles I know I will be facing. That is the reason why I, like

many of us, am in the diaspora in the first place. I am here to go back there, as odd and complicated as it sounds. I hope that one day, years from now, I will look back at this piece with a smile knowing that I pulled through.

Even though I was born in the diaspora, coming back is not easy. Introducing myself in classes is not easy, and I can only imagine what it is like for the people of what I consider the actual diaspora. “I’m from here, but I’m not exactly from here.” Or do people skip the second part entirely?

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