

Fragmented Voices and the Topology of Loss: Memory, Trauma, and Narrative Structure in Ghassan Zaqtan's *Describing the Past*

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Abstract

This article examines Ghassan Zaqtan's novella *Describing the Past* (1994; trans. Samuel Wilder, 2016) as a formally and politically complex intervention in contemporary Arabic literature and Palestinian narrative. Arguing that the text's multi-voiced, non-chronological structure constitutes an enactment of traumatic memory rather than a mere representation of it, the article analyses four interlocking dimensions of the work: the polyphonic dispersal of narrative authority as a register of refugee subjectivity; the figure of the dead or dying narrator as a vehicle for political haunting; the tension between the male scopophilic gaze and the woman's irreducible interiority; and the novella's phenomenology of description as a generative, rather than mimetic, act of memory. Drawing on trauma theory (Caruth), postcolonial criticism (Bhabha, Said), theories of haunting (Gordon), and Arabic literary scholarship (Joudah, Harlow, Khalidi), the article situates Zaqtan's text within the tradition of Palestinian writing against forgetting while demonstrating its distinctive aesthetic and epistemological ambition. The article concludes that *Describing the Past* performs what it thematises: the impossibility and the necessity of describing a past that colonial dispossession has rendered both absent and inescapably present.

Keywords: Palestinian literature, trauma theory, polyphonic narrative, memory and displacement, Ghassan Zaqtan, refugee experience, Nakba, postcolonial fiction, Arabic novel, haunting

In the landscape of contemporary Arabic literature, Ghassan Zaqtan's novella *Describing the Past* (1994; English translation by Samuel Wilder, 2016) occupies a singular and arresting position. Published originally in Arabic as a poet's first and only prose work, the text refuses the conventions of linear narrative, instead dispersing itself across multiple unnamed voices — designated simply as “I said,” “He said,” and “She said” — that circle a shared space of memory, desire, and irrecoverable loss. Set in the Karameh refugee camp in the Jordan Valley in the years preceding the 1967 Israeli occupation and the 1968 Battle of Karameh, the novella situates its intimate human drama within the seismic ruptures of Palestinian collective experience. This article argues that *Describing the Past* performs a double critical work: it excavates the psychic structures of trauma through a deliberately fractured polyphonic narration, and it maps the phenomenology of memory as an unstable, desire-laden act of reconstruction that is inseparable from the politics of displacement. Drawing on trauma theory, postcolonial narrative criticism, and Arabic literary scholarship, this essay examines how Zaqtan's formal innovations — the plurality of voices, the dissolution of chronological sequence, the figure of the dead narrator — enact rather than merely represent the condition of Palestinian refugee experience.

The critical reception of *Describing the Past* in Arabic literary scholarship has been, until recently, surprisingly sparse given the work's aesthetic ambition. Fady Joudah's foreword to the English translation begins to redress this neglect, situating the novella within a lineage that includes Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo* (1955) and Ghassan Kanafani's *All That's Left to You* (1966). Yet even Joudah's generous framing leaves much analytical work undone. By reading Zaqtan's text through the lenses of Cathy Caruth's theorization of trauma as narrative

impossibility, Homi Bhabha's theorization of the "unhomely," and the specificities of Palestinian literary tradition as articulated by Rashid Khalidi and Barbara Harlow, this article advances a more comprehensive account of how the novella's form and content are mutually constitutive.

I. The Politics of Form: Polyphony and the Refugee Voice

The most immediately striking formal feature of *Describing the Past* is its refusal of a single authoritative narrator. The text's three principal voices — the "I" (Christian), the "He" (the Iraqi's son), and the "She" (the nameless young woman) — take turns narrating the same cluster of events and encounters from their particular positions, without any overarching narrative consciousness to adjudicate between them or provide temporal coherence. This structural choice is not merely an aesthetic flourish borrowed from the modernist tradition; it is, as I will argue, an act of political and phenomenological precision.

In the opening section, "Noon Tea," the voice designated "I said" establishes the novella's central dynamic: a confession addressed to an unspecified interlocutor, shuttling between past and present with the logic of a dream rather than that of chronological recall. The narrator announces: "I told him that before he drowned. Have I told you he drowned? Well yes, he drowned" (Zaqtan 4). The death of the friend is disclosed not with ceremony but with a matter-of-fact, almost stumbling quality that mimics the disorganized temporality of traumatic memory as theorized by Caruth, who argues that trauma "is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature — the way it was precisely not known in the first instance — returns to haunt the survivor later" (4). The narrator's inability to narrate the drowning in sequence, his constant circling back and forward, his address to a "you" who may be the reader, the drowned friend, or some internalized

witness — all of these enact what Caruth calls the belated and recursive structure of traumatic knowledge.

The polyphony of Zaqtan's text also functions as what Bakhtin terms "heteroglossic" — a deployment of multiple socially and ideologically distinct voices that resist monologic resolution (291). In the refugee camp, social difference is inscribed in the very nicknames the characters bear: "the Christian," "the Iraqi's son." These names carry within them compressed histories of migration, religious difference, and the layered displacements that constitute Palestinian refugee identity. The lengthy digression on the uncle who fought with the Iraqi army in 1948 — or mythologized his participation in it — is not mere local color. It is an anatomy of how communities produce counter-narratives of dignity and agency to resist the overwhelming experience of defeat and dispossession:

Those days were retold by the bread of many houses, in the stories and treasures of many men. But hesitation followed when it came to discussing my uncle's role in all that. Those few weeks that he spent with the artillery regiment were the only thing that gave him any peace in a life that had been mostly without satisfaction.
(Zaqtan 25–26)

The episode foregrounds the novella's persistent concern with the relationship between storytelling and survival. Memory here is not a passive archive but an active, transformative practice — what Paul Connerton calls "commemorative narrative" through which communities "recollect their past" and, in doing so, constitute their collective identity (70). The uncle's embellishments, his Iraqi vocabulary, his adoption of officers' first names: all are strategies of psychic repair in the aftermath of catastrophe.

II. Memory as Haunting: The Dead Who Narrate

One of the most distinctive and disturbing aspects of *Describing the Past* is the gradual revelation that at least one of its narrators speaks from a position of death or imminent death. In “Bare Creatures, Silent Bodies,” the “I” narrator walks alongside the woman and two dead men — the drowned friend and the Hadj — describing the scene with the precise, detached quality of a ghost: “I was going off to die. That’s what I was told. She didn’t know this, but the two men did. We three dead men surrounded her as we climbed the narrow, straight road of dust” (Zaqtan 22). The narrator’s equanimity in the face of his own announced death produces what Roland Barthes, in a different context, called the “effect of the real” — except that here it is the effect of unreality, of a consciousness that has already partially evacuated the living world and looks back upon it with a kind of luminous detachment.

This narrative posture recalls Rulfo’s *Pedro Páramo*, in which the protagonist gradually realizes that all the voices he has been hearing are those of the dead. Joudah explicitly invokes this comparison in his foreword, noting that in both texts “voices appear and speak from a truncated time, resected and preserved in a jar” (viii). But there is a crucial political dimension to Zaqtan’s deployment of the dead narrator that exceeds Rulfo’s metaphysical register. In the Palestinian context, as Mahmoud Darwish has repeatedly insisted, the dead are never simply absent; they remain constitutive of the community’s self-understanding, their absence a form of hypervisible presence. The novella’s dead narrators do not speak from a timeless realm; they speak from 1948, from 1967, from the specific historical violence that produced the refugee camp as a form of life.

Zaqtan’s figuration of haunting also engages with what Avery Gordon calls “sociological ghosting” — the way in which the unresolved historical injustices of the past materialize in the present as disturbances, as forms of “complex personhood” that refuse to be contained within the

categories of the living or the dead (8). In the “Amen” section, the narrator (in the woman’s voice) recounts her mother’s story of the Haganah’s massacre of her father and six other men, each forced to dig the grave of the one before him. The seventh man, left alive to tell the story, figures the traumatic logic of the witness, the one whose survival is constituted by the deaths he carries within him. “In those days,” the mother says, “there were many sevenths wandering through villages, sitting on wells and roadstones, telling stories like this or different” (Zaqtan 47). The proliferation of “sevenths” suggests the systematic, administrative character of this violence — it was not random but ritualized, designed to produce witnesses who would carry terror into the surviving community.

III. Desire, Captivity, and the Female Body

The third thematic complex that organizes *Describing the Past* is the figure of the young woman, whose body becomes a site of complex and competing projections. She is perpetually observed, described, and desired by the male narrators, yet her own narrative sections reveal a subjectivity that persistently exceeds and undermines the male gaze directed at her. The novella is acutely aware of this tension and exploits it with considerable critical intelligence.

In “The Voice’s Desire,” the second narrator describes how hearing his friend’s account of seeing the woman transforms his own perception of her: “He told and I saw. He described, stopping only to catch his breath before going on into descriptions, travelling to all regions of her and sending back messages to me, granting to her some new miracle at every instance” (Zaqtan 12). This extraordinary passage stages the mechanics of scopophilic desire as a mediated, linguistic phenomenon: the friend’s voice becomes the medium through which the woman’s body is constituted as an object of desire. The phrasing — “travelling to all regions of her” — maps desire onto a cartographic logic that echoes Said’s analysis of orientalist discourse, in

which the Eastern subject is constituted as a territory to be explored, described, and possessed by the Western gaze. Here, however, the dynamic is internal to the Palestinian community itself, suggesting that the structures of patriarchal looking are not simply imported from colonial modernity but reproduce themselves within the space of the camp.

Yet the woman's own sections complicate this picture considerably. In "Something Woke Me," following the Hadj's death, she stands in the open doorway of her house, tears her dress to the waist, and submits her body to the night air with an autonomy and physicality that exceeds the male narrators' scopophilic framing: "I was alone and free and silent, with the Hadj inside, covered up to his forehead" (Zaqtan 17). The conjunction of freedom, solitude, and the husband's death is charged with an ambivalence that the text refuses to resolve. Similarly, the extraordinary scene in "Noon Tea" in which the narrator, as a boy, watches her through a worn curtain as she stands naked before a broken mirror, trying to kiss her own reflection — "trying to come out of the mirror to meet her own lips in a kiss" (Zaqtan 9) — positions her as a figure of intense, thwarted interiority. She does not see the watching boy; she is entirely absorbed in her own self-encounter. The scene figures a subjectivity that is not constituted by the male gaze but persists in despite of it, even as the narrative frame inevitably makes her visible to the reader through the boy's eyes.

IV. The Phenomenology of Return: Home, Ruin, and Description

The novella's title announces its governing epistemological concern: the act of describing the past is not a neutral retrieval of stored data but a constitutive, performative act that shapes what is remembered in the very moment of its articulation. "Things evaporate and die if they don't find someone to remember them," the "I" narrator insists (Zaqtan 7). Memory, in Zaqtan's

phenomenology, requires witnesses, requires language, requires the act of description to sustain the existence of what has been lost.

This is dramatized most poignantly in “The Christian’s Story,” in which the narrator’s father, having crawled back across the border to his destroyed village, returns with a single pomegranate. The fruit functions as a metonymic relic of the lost home, but also as an index of the limits of physical evidence: the village itself is gone, visible only in the persistence of cactus groves — the infamous “sabra,” originally planted as hedgerows around Palestinian homes and now, in a cruel irony, used as a symbol of Israeli-born identity. The father’s inability to wound the pomegranate, to eat it, marks the fruit’s transformation from food to monument: “It was in front of us — breathing and remembering — on that squat table, next to the knife that my youngest sister had brought and about which we quickly forgot” (Zaqtan 72–73). The pomegranate breathes; it remembers. Memory has been displaced from consciousness into object, into the thing that survives when the human witness is unable to bear the weight of recollection alone.

This figuration engages directly with what Svetlana Boym calls “restorative nostalgia” — the longing to reconstruct the lost home, to close the gap between past and present — and what she distinguishes from “reflective nostalgia,” which dwells in the ruins without seeking restoration. Zaqtan’s text oscillates between these two modes without resolving into either. The father’s storytelling becomes increasingly elaborate and confident after the pomegranate’s arrival, his memory more detailed and assertive: “He became more convinced of the things that happened to him and to us. He was more in possession of the force of description, more able to bring out the furnishings forgotten beneath the forest of cacti” (Zaqtan 75). Description here is

not mimetic but generative: the act of narrating produces, rather than reproduces, the world it claims to recover.

Conclusion: Form as Political Epistemology

Describing the Past is a work that demands to be read as a formal as well as a historical argument. Its refusal of linear chronology, its multiplication of voices, its narrators who are already dead or dying, its insistence on the performative and constitutive character of memory — these are not aesthetic choices that can be separated from the political reality they register. The Palestinian refugee, as Zaqtan figures him or her, is a subject whose relation to the past is structurally different from that of the non-displaced subject: the past is not safely archived behind a present that has moved on, but remains an open wound, a site of ongoing contestation, a claim that has not been answered.

In this sense, *Describing the Past* participates in what Elias Khoury has called the project of “writing against forgetting” that characterizes the most vital strand of contemporary Arabic literature. But Zaqtan’s formal innovation goes beyond commemoration. By making the act of description itself the subject of the novella — by staging the conditions under which memory becomes possible and the ways in which it inevitably transforms what it seeks to preserve — he produces a text that is simultaneously an elegy and an epistemology. The past cannot be described without being changed by description; the witness cannot testify without being implicated in what he or she witnesses. These are not merely literary insights; in the context of the Palestinian Nakba and its ongoing consequences, they carry the weight of a political and ethical demand.

Zaqtan’s novella belongs, ultimately, to that rare category of literary works that perform rather than merely represent their subject. To read *Describing the Past* is to experience, in

however attenuated a form, the disorientation, the grief, and the strange persistence of love that constitute the texture of refugee memory. That this experience is made available through the medium of a formally innovative, aesthetically demanding text is not incidental but essential: the difficulty of the form is the difficulty of the knowledge it seeks to convey.

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