BOOK REVIEWS

Nur Masalha. The Palestine Nakba: Decolonising History, Narrating the Subaltern, Reclaiming Memory

Reviewed by Dr. Laura Khoury

The Arab-Israeli struggle is less than a century old, but Arabs and Israelis have not been combating in the field only, or engaged in an acute case of “war of maneuver,” as the word “struggle” might, prima facie, indicate to those (un)informed by an inherently biased media about the Palestine question. They have also been struggling in almost every imaginable arena. Historiography is at the forefront of this confrontation and it entails more than mere legitimacy, but even existential value. There is much of the past events and episodes of history, some of which occurred thousands of years ago. For even debating, and by implication reconstructing the past, is very much informed by the events and the episodes of the current conflict itself. The clash of accounts, this time by scholars and historians, therefore, is a central factor of the conflict.

Masalha belongs to a group of scholars who represent a counter-hegemonic historiography for the purpose of decolonizing history and recognizing that the root cause of the conflict is in the Nakba. He objectively narrated the Nakba as it happened. He understood the depth of the catastrophic traumatic Nakba in terms of disintegration, fragmentation, destruction of society, depopulating major cities, dramatic rupture in history, ethnic cleansing, de-Arabisation, destruction of historic Palestine, redistribution of Palestinians, their shattering, displacement, and removal. He specifically discloses the orchestrating of the transfer (by Weitz in 1940), the Israeli narrative of denial (by Golda Meir in 1969), the myth of Jewish return after two thousand years of exile among Zionists, the erasure of ancient Palestinian place names, disappearance of Palestine from the map, and dismantling of Palestinian society.

Myth making is an integral part of nation building, argues Eric Hobsbawm (2012), but in the case of the Arab-Israeli struggle and due to the settler-colonial nature of Israel, myth making has been devastating to the “Other.” Dispelling myths is central to Masalha’s work, starting with the invention of a nation that is based

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on the employment of the Zionist project of collective memory by being highly selective in manipulating certain elements of the religious past to the myth of the nonexistence of Palestinian archives. Masalha exposes the colonial realities that the European Zionist narratives invented which made the Zionist settler-colonial project unique; the Zionist superimposing Hebrew toponymy to de-Arabize Palestine, the selective reconstruction of antiquity by establishing the science of archaeology as an epistemological strategy to construct an Israeli Jewish identity that privileges Israeli science par excellence, and to dispel the alienation of new citizens. Along with that came further cleansing of Palestinian sites, reconstruction of Muslim shrines as Jewish shrines and appropriating the many Palestinian place names.

Dr. Nur Masalha is a recognized specialist in the field of Palestinian refugee studies. His research in the past in the form of books and research articles equipped him with the necessary specialization and breadth of knowledge, deep research, and well-integrated conceptual thought of the concept and trauma of Nakba. This current book The Palestine Nakba is a higher and deeper reflection on all that he wrote and others added in the field due to his stress that the Palestine Nakba is a site of Palestinian collective memory. For example, he devotes in his past works special focus on the refugee problem, the concept of “transfer” in Zionist Mythology, “politics of denial,” new Israeli historiography, and the systematic nature of Zionism in destruction. This book advances and stresses the significant role oral history played in reviving the memories of the Nakba and the significance of the act of memoricide or the act of killing those memories.

The book is structured around three themes: to decolonize the history of ethnic cleansing, to narrate the subaltern, and to reclaim those memories of the Nakba in an effort to decolonize that history. All three themes are interconnected and interdependent. For the purpose of decolonizing history Masalha challenges hegemonic, top-down, elite, masculinist and nationalist discourses on Palestine-Israel using decolonizing methodologies and a critical language. For the purpose of narrating the subaltern he brings in oral history, indigenous and gendered memories. For the purpose of reclaiming the Nakba he argued for new methods of remembering: the Palestinian elite representation of the past oral history, the new media influence in shaping consciousness and the grassroots communities that helped keep Palestinian hopes of return.

Political Zionism was obsessed with creating “new” Zionist tradition and was obsessed with the rewriting of the history of the “Jewish people” or writing narratives with no narratives, thus creating a Zionist language and semitization of the new Hebrew man through the resurrection of a dead language, and the invention of a new masculine memory based on hegemonic state power like “new Hebrew Man,” “new Hebrew” and “new Yishuv.” Masalha exposes the European hegemonic narratives
and discourses that are repeated in the Western media promoting the idea that Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East and thereby substituting a fictional Jewish ethnicity for the mythical Jewish race (ethnicity being a convenient alternative force) when in fact the Jews in Israel belong to a wide range of “ethnicities.” Masalha goes on to elucidate the amnesia created by fashioning European landscapes of forestation and erasure of any to conceal the newly destroyed Palestinian villages by nick naming as “little Sweden.” Not only this but fashioning a particularly biblical landscape completely divorced from reality. In addition, the looting of Palestinian records, archives and library collections.

The continuity of trauma renders this book more like a socio-economic and political study not an account of an historic event, in fact, Masalha clearly shows how the trauma continues through the “politics of denial” of the refugee problem through ongoing ethnic cleansing, and much more ongoing distress. He writes: “We should not be enslaved—obsessed—by the past, but neither should we deny the potency of historical memory and its centrality to the continuing trauma” (253) and that “remembrance should be an act of hope, liberation and decolonization” (257). The reader gets the clear thought that the Nakba is co-extant with the Zionist scheme on the land. The reader also gets the idea that Cultural resistance is where Masalha situates memory and commemoration. In his conclusion he calls for new counter-hegemonic narratives and devises fresh liberationist and decolonization strategies. As if he is saying the past should free us but at the same time “neither should we deny the potency of historical memory and its centrality to the continuing trauma. Remembering the Nakba is also vital because its most salient by-product was the Palestinian refugee problem, the greatest and the most enduring in the world” (253-254).

Decolonizing a colonial history is not easy since it has to avoid the colonizer’s words found in history books and the like. One needs to be careful that scholarship does not serve colonial ambivalence too. Lowery (2010) who attempted to decolonize the history of the natives, especially the Lumbee and Tuscarora people, realized that the people whose oral histories she studied live and breathe colonialism every day so how can the Natives (as well as the Palestinians) resist views of history that privilege European epistemologies? Masalha takes on the strenuous task of decolonizing Palestinian history, narrating the Subaltern, and reclaiming the memories of the Palestine Nakba. He invigorates every representative scholarly work on the Palestine Nakba and documents the Palestinian oral history of cultural resistance which makes the collective memories and narrates the history from the bottom up. This book is very rich and thorough and can be considered a classic in its field. This is a historical scholarship with a decolonizing purpose.
Note
1. Hobbsawm says imagining a nation is mostly a matter of reaction and resentment, and a response to imperial domination.

References

Paul Tabar and Jennifer Skulte-Ouais. Editors. Politics, Culture and the Lebanese Diaspora
Hardcover $67.99

Reviewed by Melanie Trexler

Politics, Culture and the Lebanese Diaspora makes an important contribution to Diaspora studies, Middle Eastern studies, and Arab studies by highlighting the shift in political and cultural practices of Lebanese migrants and the identities they construct as a result of migration. A product of a 2007 conference sponsored by the Institute for Migration Studies at the Lebanese American University, the volume contains 24 essays from anthropological, historical, literary, and sociological perspectives. Essays examine the relationships between communal, national, and transnational components of the politics and culture of Lebanese living in Diaspora. Authors challenge the idea that “home” and “identity” are static, fixed concepts and instead indicate that notions of homeland and identity are fluid constructs impacted by transnational politics in Lebanon and in the country of immigration.

The book is divided into three sections: Identity and Multiculturalism, Politics and Activism, and Literature and Media. The first section examines various factors that shape Lebanese identity, emphasizing that immigrants and their descendants constantly negotiate their identities based on past and present situations in both the homeland and country of immigration. Their efforts to assimilate into a new culture are often complicated by racial prejudices and the potential for the erasure of ethnic and cultural particularities. As Hyndman-Rizik argues in her essay, first and second generation Hachthi immigrants adopted a white identity to assimilate in the US, but 9/11 interrupted the assimilation process. As a result, third and

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