

BURIED

The Defiant Unspoken in Emile Habiby's *The Pessoptimist*

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2013–2014 Penn Humanities Forum Andrew W. Mellon Undergraduate Research Fellowship

University of Pennsylvania

Honors Thesis: Comparative Literature

Introduction: From Imagination to Invasion

“Now don’t be a skeptic. Don’t say the Age of Miracles is past. What makes you always get things upside down?” –*The Pessoptimist*¹

“In our view it I the duty of every Jew to come and live in Palestine, and any regulation restricting the fulfillment of this commandment is not only devoid of legal authority, but positively sinful. The land was once ours, and by the grace of Heaven it will be ours once again...No power in the world can stop us from returning to this our land.” – *Rabbi J.L. Fishman, 1948, to UN Special Committee on Palestine*²

Consecrated by blood and myth, the “Holy Land” of Palestine has, for millennia, captivated the imaginations of pilgrims and conquerors alike. When Zionist leaders began in the late 19th century to conjure a mythic future for the Jewish people, it was upon this storied land that they cast their nationalist projections. Skeptical of the notion of Jewish assimilation in Europe, Theodore Herzl imagined an autonomous political society for his people, founded as a bulwark against the anti-Jewish hatred of his time. “Let sovereignty be granted us over a portion of the globe adequate to meet our rightful national requirements; we will attend to the rest,” Herzl proposed in 1896. Within this framework, the Zionist imagination promoted affiliation based on a commitment to an idealized, Jewish nation-state.

After originally aiming to settle in Argentina, Zionist leaders soon saw the efficacy of appealing to collective religious memory, and began urging global Jewry to fulfill their destiny and “return” to their eternal homeland in the land of Zion (Palestine).

¹ Emile Habiby, *The Secret Life of Saeed the Pessoptimist*, trans. Salma K. Jayyusi and Trevor LeGassick. (Northampton: Interlink, 2003), 4.

² Jewish Agency for Palestine. “The Jewish Plan for Palestine, Memoranda and Statements,” presented to the United Nations Special Committee on Palestine. (Jerusalem: The Jewish Agency for Palestine, 1947), 390.

³ By employing nationalist, socialist, and spiritual rhetoric in turn, Zionist leaders were able to orchestrate gradual Jewish immigration to Palestine in a project that mimicked many settler-colonial models of the day. Arriving in a region already laden with the political ambitions of Ottoman, European, and Arab imaginations, Jewish settlers quietly established a demographic foothold as a prelude to larger Zionist designs. The Jewish population rose steadily, from about 25,000 in 1881 to an estimated 608,000 in 1946 (compared to 1.269 million Arabs).⁴ This astonishing shift in population, however, was only the first step in a larger Zionist commitment to the creation of a Jewish state. As Leo Motzkin envisioned in 1917,

The colonization of Palestine has to go in two directions: Jewish settlement in Eretz Israel and the resettlement of the Arabs of Eretz Israel in areas outside the country. The transfer of so many Arabs might seem at first unacceptable economically, but is nonetheless practical.⁵

After years of deliberate but gradual acquisition of Arab land under the British Mandate, Zionist forces adopted “Plan Dalet” on March 10, 1948 as a “blueprint for [Arab] expulsion.”⁶ Israeli historian Ilan Pappé reports,

“The bottom line...can be found in a letter Ben Gurion sent to the commanders of the Hagana brigades telling them [the Jordanian’s] offensive intentions should not distract them from their principal task: ‘the cleansing of Palestine remained the prime objective of Plan Dalet.’” (He used the noun *bi’ur*, which means

³ Jewish Agency, “Jewish Plan for Palestine,” 390.

⁴ Charles D. Smith *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*. 5th Edition. (New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2004), 185.

⁵ Yasmeen Abu-Laban and Abigail B. Bakan, “The Israelization of social starting and the Palestinianization of the racial contract,” in *Surveillance and Control in Israel-Palestine*, eds. Elia Zureik, David Lyon, Yasmeen Abu-Laban, (New York: Routledge, 2011). 281

⁶ Nur Musalla, *Politics of Denial* (London: Pluto Press, 2003), 27

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either “cleansing the heaven” in Passover or “root out,”
“eliminate.”)⁷

The Plan served as guide for the Zionist military conquest of Palestine, executed according to a deliberate program of expulsion, property seizure, demolitions, and mass executions.⁸ In a brief historical moment, indigenous Arabs saw their livelihoods swept away as Jewish troops openly invaded Palestinian villages during the “Israeli War of Independence.” Through means of force and intimidation, the Zionist infiltration resulted in thousands of Palestinians dead and hundreds of thousands more displaced as refugees (most conservative estimates place the number at least 650,000, with many historians estimating 800,000 or more).⁹

When the war ended in 1949, armistice negotiations proceeded without Palestinian representation as Egypt, Transjordan, Lebanon, and Syria signed separate treaties with Israel. After the formal cessation of the war, a radically new political reality emerged in its aftermath. Only about 15% of the former Palestinian population remained within the boundaries of the new State of Israel, sudden refugees within a foreign domain. Some of these residual Arabs were absorbed as citizens of the new state, while others were encouraged or forced to “transfer” to neighboring Arab states.¹⁰ Some of the earliest debates within the newly-formed Israeli parliament (Knesset) centered on the widespread anxiety surrounding the imperfect expulsion of the Arab population.

⁷ Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Oxford: OneWorld, 2006), 128.

⁸ Masala, *Politics of Denial*, 27.

⁹ Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 200.

¹⁰ Masala, *Politics of Denial*, 60.

Politicians, statisticians, and military leaders conferred on how to best minimize and control these remaining Arabs, seeing their very presence as an existential threat.¹¹

One among this tenacious remnant was Emile Habiby. Born in 1921 to a Palestinian Christian family in Haifa, Habiby remained rooted within Israel proper throughout the upheavals of the British Mandate and both the 1948 and 1967 wars. A committed writer and political activist, Habiby's choice to remain in Israel was deliberate and rare among the Palestinian intelligentsia that had largely emigrated by 1948. Habiby's concern for the unique experience of Arabs within Israel informed his personal and creative endeavors and propelled him to become an active member of the Communist Party while still a teenager.¹²

Habiby worked his way quickly through the ranks of the party, becoming an editor for the communist Arabic newspaper, *al-Itihad*—a position he would hold almost continuously for 49 years. Habiby also served in the Knesset as a representative for the Israeli Communist Party (Maki) from 1952 to 1972.¹³ Throughout the years of 1972-1974, Habiby published *Al-Waqā' i' al-gharībah fī 'khtifā' Sa'īd Abī 'l-Naḥsh al-Mutashā'il* serially in *al-Itihad*. Literally translated as “The Strange Occurrences Surrounding the Disappearance of Saeed the Ill-fated Pessoptimist,” this novel remains Habiby's most widely-acclaimed work.

Drawing deeply from classical Arabic tradition, yet deftly employing colloquialisms and contemporary references, Habiby's *Pessoptimist* is nuanced yet

¹¹ Ahmad H. Sa'di, “Ominous Designs,” in *Surveillance and Control*, eds Zureik et al (New York: Routledge, 2011), 85.

¹² Adnan Ibrahim Sa'idi, *The Arabic Novel in Israel: A Critical Study of the Works of Emile Habibi*. (Haifa: The Arabic Language Academy, 2013), 15

¹³ Sa'idi, *The Arabic Novel in Israel*, 31.

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profoundly accessible. Replete with wit, candor, and double-entendre, Habiby's work, while delivering deep political commentary, stands apart from the more polemic work of some of his contemporaries as an artistic landmark in Arabic prose.¹⁴ Reprinted and translated widely, *Pessoptimist* won Habiby acclaim even from Israeli intelligentsia, receiving the Israel Prize for Arabic Literature in addition to the (Palestinian-sponsored) al-Quds Prize.

While its merit on the level of sentence and syntax is apparent, *Pessoptimist* endures most of all for its resonant commentary on the larger Israeli-Arab experience, a topic Habiby found woefully neglected by contemporaries. Speaking specifically to the particular struggles of Palestinians within the Israeli state, *Pessoptimist* also presents Habiby's deep frustration with those abroad who viewed Israeli Arabs as tainted or even traitorous. This alienation, compounded by the pressure of the Israeli surveillance apparatus, created an atmosphere of paradox, fear, and segregation that formed the crucible for Habiby's work. Examined in the light of the bewildering facts of Arab life in Israel, the absurdities of *Pessoptimist* seem appropriate, even inevitable. "I am just an Arab who, by some magic, remained in Israel," quips Saeed, the protagonist of the novel. Of his "fantastic mystery," he insists, "just because it defies the rules of logic is no proof that it is not true."¹⁵

By straddling the line between fantasy and fact, writes Edward Said, Habiby's novel comes closer than most to representing the outrageous reality.

¹⁴ Roger Allen, *The Arabic Literary Heritage*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998). 189.

¹⁵ Habiby, *The Pessoptimist*, 118, 4

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“Emile Habiby’s invention the Pessoptimist, the protagonist of a disorderly and ingenious work of Kafkaesque fiction, has become a kind of national epic. The Pessoptimist is being half here, half not here, part historical creature, part mythological invention, hopeful and hopeless, everyone’s favorite obsession and scapegoat. Is Habiby’s character fiction, or does his extravagant fantasy only begin to approximate the real?”¹⁶

Said’s question is not facetious. Palestinians throughout the 20th century struggled both to grasp and articulate their catastrophic and bizarre fate. In the wake of Zionist conquest and the establishment of Israel, Palestinians found their lives irrevocably altered by the material enactment of Zionist national ideology on their land, bodies, and consciousness. In particular, the Arabs who remained in Israel survived the war only to experience daily annihilation as subjects of a hostile Zionist hegemony.

These Palestinians developed elaborate inner logic to cope with their reality on the political and psychic peripheries of their ethnocratic society. Existing on the fault line of competing imaginations and beneath weight of surveillance, Israeli Arabs strained to maintain a sense of personal and communal coherence amidst this state of siege. Any sense of self-consciousness, however, was forged against the relentless Zionist desire to efface non-Jewish presence from the land. In relation to the labyrinthine architecture of Israeli oppression, the Palestinian Israeli sought to escape total obliteration by resorting to covert and paradoxical attempts to narrate, at least internally, her own experience. Edward Said, himself distanced from the internal Israeli Arab experience, was often perplexed by these forms of coded hope,

To be on the inside...is to speak from, be in a situation which, paradoxically, you do not control and cannot really be sure of... You try to get used to living with outsiders and endlessly

¹⁶ Edward Said, *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986). 23

attempting to define what is yours on the inside...because our interior is always to some extent occupied and interrupted...we express things obliquely and, to my mind, so mysteriously as to puzzle even ourselves.”¹⁷

Habiby’s novel not only depicts but performs this particular impenetrability. Webbing fantasy with outlandish fact, Habiby’s erratic narration draws readers into the inertia of the Palestinian experience with disturbing power.

By simultaneously denying and seizing Arab representation, the Israeli state rendered the Palestinian subject to constant metaphysical onslaught. Habiby relates the layered reality of this contested psychic space, where the Israel’s oppression permeates even the mental territory of its subjects:

We can see the flags of the state even when folded up inside people. And didn’t the late Prime Minister Eshkol try to transform the so-called military government into something that observes without itself being seen? But we could still discern it, in the orders for house arrest and the furrows deep in our cheeks. Now that’s what I call imagination!¹⁸

Benedict Anderson’s analysis of nationalism, wherein “communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined,” provides another lens with which to view Habiby’s deeply imaginative, yet horrifically historical, narrative. Habiby likewise seeks to legitimize the Israeli Arab experience, characterized by tenacity in face of diffuse but relentless state oppression, as a valid form of resistance within the broader Palestinian struggle. For Habiby, it is not only the martyr or the *feday* who sacrifice for the cause, but also those “unremarkable”

¹⁷ Said, *After the Last Sky*, 53.

¹⁸ Habiby, *The Pessoptimist*, 101.

Arabs who endure the daily humiliation of their subject status within Israel.¹⁹ Habiby's protagonist, trapped within this contradictory structure, finds it impossible to maintain his dignity while surviving within Israel, likening himself to an ass or an impotent "old sack."²⁰ In this way, Habiby gives a wrenching portrait of the humiliation of his Palestinian compatriots in Israel while appealing to external Arab critics to appreciate the dilemmas of this position.

While Habiby's novel, constructed of Saeed's epistolic confessions, on the surface appears to offer rather intimate disclosure, its ultimate performance is one of withholding. The work revolves around an indiscernible core, at the center of which lies the enigmatic fate of Saeed and the question of his often-mentioned "secret." Though partial contours emerge through the narrator's cryptic references, to reveal the secret would destroy the mysterious power drawn from the hidden knowledge. To survive, Saeed must, above anything, refrain from revealing his secret, "the preservation of which [becomes] his lifelong occupation."²¹ This obsessive secrecy reflects the Palestinian's need to maintain, if only on the psychic plane, a space beyond the surveillance and seizure of the Zionist state. As Saeed eventually takes flight into fantasy, Habiby himself gestures towards obscurity as the only means of escape within Israel.

This paper will examine the mechanisms by which the Israeli state, following its pre-1948 logic of ethnic exclusivity, first erased the Palestinian presence through "absenting" the unwanted Arab bodies, then reimagined these same bodies as captive-subjects and enemies. By usurping the Palestinian right to self-representation, the Israeli

¹⁹ Habiby, *The Pessoptimist*, 2.

²⁰ Habiby, *The Pessoptimist*, 57.

²¹ Habiby, *The Pessoptimist*, 70.

state leveraged its power to narrate these Arabs as threatening, inferior, and vulnerable. Through increasingly broad and banal forms of biopower, the Zionist gaze penetrated even the most intimate levels of Palestinian existence, leaving Arab subjects irrevocably caught in a web of documentation and surveillance.

Through the framework of this history, Habiby's work gains importance as both a reclamation of self-representation and a declaration of the Palestinian's right to withhold. Ultimately, I argue that Habiby's novel accomplishes what his inherently limited roles as Knesset Member and Israeli citizen could not by both exposing the obscenity of oppression and concealing the kernel of Palestinian resilience.

Part One: The Architecture of Absence

“...the right of the Jewish people to establish their state is irrevocable. This right is the natural right of the Jewish people to be masters of their own fate, like all other nations, in their own sovereign state...by virtue of our natural and historic right...we here by declare the establishment of a Jewish state in Eretz-Israel, to be known as the State of Israel.”²²

-Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel, May 14, 1948

“The fact is, I’ve disappeared. But I’m not dead.” – The Pessoptimist

The creation of the State of Israel in 1948 brought the Zionist imagination into a sudden, material incarnation. Along with acquiring 78% of the territory of former Mandatory Palestine, the new state now encompassed over 100,000 Palestinians.²³ For these survivors, the advent of “peacetime” did not provide relief from the threat of Zionist encroachment. Despite Israel’s ostensible affiliation to democratic ideals, the inauguration of Zionist political power compounded, rather than reduced, its emphasis on Jewish privilege.²⁴ While Anderson describes modern nations as distinguished by “finite, if elastic, boundaries,” which emerge in contrast to other nations “lying beyond,” the Israeli imagination employed a dual demarcation, defining its borders most potently at the level of individual subjects.

Even as many Israeli leaders openly sought further territorial expansion, the internal architecture of the new state was parsed through the explicit discrimination of non-Jews. The Palestinian within Israel found herself exiled from the imagined community of the Jewish Israeli even while residing in the same “nation.” In the

²² Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel, May 14, 1948

²³ Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 200.

²⁴ Masala, *Politics of Denial*, 39.

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Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel, it was not a territorial body but the “Jewish people” who were to be “conferred the status of a fully privileged member of the comity of nations.”²⁵ By delineating the state as an ethnic body in addition to a territorial location, the Zionist polity both encompassed and excluded the non-Jews in its midst. These non-Jewish subjects were left grappling with the contradictions of this most intimate exile, creating a cultural and national inertia aptly reflected in Habiby’s uncanny novel.

The State of Israel was forged both according and in contrast to the European model of nation-building in its day. The events beyond 1948 revealed a progressively materializing nationalism “based on a settler-colonialist logic of ‘*terra nullis*’...that required the erasure of the Palestinians.”²⁶ Conscious of the many European precedents to such a model, Zionists had from the beginning posited the emerging Jewish state alongside Western, imperial nations. Addressing German critics, Herzl appealed to the logic of the day, arguing,

“Don’t you know what a colonial age we are living in?
...[colonialism] is a policy which England has been pursuing for
decades and which has been regarded as exemplary by many
nations...Look upon this movement as one which is committed to
the general welfare, which wishes to serve the poor, is inimical to
no one, and can bring a measure of relief to mankind.”²⁷

According to Herzl, the Zionist project would not only spread enlightenment to the local population, but would be instrumental in carrying European cultural and political

²⁵ Declaration of the Establishment of the State of Israel, 1948.

²⁶ Sunaina Maira and Magid Shihade “Hip Hop From ’48 Palestine: Youth, Music, and the Present/Absent.” *Social Text* 112. Vol 30, No. 3. (Durham: Duke University Press: 2012), 114

²⁷ Theodore Herzl, “Who Fears a State?” 1898, in Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 52.

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interests into the Orient. “We should [in Palestine] form a part of a wall of defense for Europe in Asia, an outpost of civilization against barbarism.”²⁸

According to Magid Shihade, this idea acted as a sort of reverse-Orientalism, reimagining Palestine as a Western enclave and violently disrupting the region’s history as a Western Asian culture integrally linked to Africa.²⁹ This legacy, argues Shihade, “puts the Palestinian question into conversation with similar sites of colonization in Asia and the Third World and with the legacy and lessons of Western colonialism.”³⁰ In addition to the immediate justification of their colonial aims, the position of the Jewish nation as a “democratic” and “western” state also exempt the Zionists from the Western imaginings of the surrounding “Oriental” populations. According to the 1947 Jewish Agency report *The Position of the Jewish Communities in Oriental Countries*,

With the spread of European influence in the Orient a change for the better set in. The domination of religion in the life of the Moslem peoples gradually weakened... The most serious obstacle to Jewish emancipation has been Moslem hostility. The spirit of Western liberalism... has never penetrated beyond a small class of educated Moslems.³¹

This important maneuver within the European imagination allowed Zionists to align themselves with the “positional superiority” of Orientalist thought.³²

Many Zionists also sought to naturalize the Jews’ relation to Palestine, and in doing so present them as a trustworthy intermediary between the Occident and the incomprehensible, barbaric Arab masses. Abu-Laban and Bakan argue that a theory of

²⁸ Theodore Herzl, “Der Judentstaat” (1896), in Charles D. Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 51.

²⁹ Shihade, “Israel in Asia: Settler Colonialism as Rupture,” paper given at University of Pennsylvania November 19, 2013 (paper shared by author) 19.

³⁰ Shihade, 20.

³¹ UNSCOP, *The Jewish Plan for Palestine*, 140

³² Edward Said, *Orientalism*. (New York: Vintage, 1979), 8.

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the racialization of non-Jews, or “racial Palestinianization,” arising in relation to the concept of “whiteness as an unnamed system of dominance,” aptly describes the mission of the Zionist state.³³ They quote Gargi Battacharyya on the subject,

“Israel offers a model for transforming the justified demands of the racialized other into evidence that this otherness is innate, impassable, and can only be contained and disciplined in the interests of the enlightened western state and its (full) citizens.”³⁴

In addition to appealing to this patronizing liberalism, however, Israel also posited itself as a state of exception by claiming divine justification for its nationalist designs. Ben-Gurion boldly asserted the Jewish right to Palestine was not derivative of European approval, declaring to the UNSCOP,

The Jewish right to Palestine was prior to the Balfour Declaration. Our right has existed for 3,500 years. The Balfour Declaration was merely a recognition by a Great Power of that right. The right existed before.³⁵

This ancient right was granted by God, explained Rabbi Fishman in a later session of the same Committee. “We have only one homeland in the world...this is our country, and ours it shall be with the help of Him who chose Zion.”³⁶ The theology of Zionist designs was parsed further during a question and answer session with representatives of the Committee:

Sir Abdur Rahman (India): Rabbi Fishman, what was “The Promised Land?”

Rabbi Fishman: The Promised Land was...from the river

³³ Abu-Laban and Bakan, “Israelization,” 279.

³⁴ Abu-Laban and Bakan, “Israelization,” 280

³⁵ Ben Gurion, in “The Jewish Plan for Palestine,” 367.

³⁶ Rabbi J.L. Fishman in “The Jewish Plan for Palestine,” 392.

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of Egypt up to the Euphrates. [...]

Rahman: When was the promise made by God?

Fishman: “The promise was given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, about 4,000 years ago...it was reaffirmed to Moses.

Rahman: Did God also promise that twelve tribes would arise out of Ishmael, son of Hagar and Abraham?

Fishman: It was definitely stated that the sons of Isaac would inherit the land.

Rahman: That was not the question. Did God promise that twelve tribes would arise out of Ishmael or not?

Fishman: He said not.³⁷

Mahmoud Darwish reflects the bewilderment and grief of the “tribes of Ishmael,”

poignantly employing the language of Exodus of a sudden departure “before the dough rose”:

We live, if we are able to live, in an infant past, planted in fields that were ours for hundreds of years until a moment ago, before the dough rose and the coffeepots cooled. In one ill-fated hour, history entered like a bold thief... With a massacre or two, the country’s name, our country, became another. Reality became and idea and history became memory. The myth invades and the invasion attributes everything to the will of the Lord who promised and did not renege on his promise.³⁸

By attempting to maintain its position among the supposedly enlightened Western bloc while advancing ethno-religious ideals, the Zionist project occupied a position of ideological contradiction that endures to this day. Abu-Laban and Bakan, drawing from Pappe, point out “if Israel is conceptually include in the community [of Western liberalism], it would be the only so-called democracy where citizenship is overtly defined through ethnicity and religion.”³⁹

Habiby, dispossessed by the “divine right” of the Israeli state, satirizes this imagined historical inevitability,

³⁷ Rabbi J.L. Fishman, “The Jewish Plan for Palestine,” 392.

³⁸ Mahmoud Darwish, *In the Presence of Absence* (Brooklyn: Archipelago, 2011), 47.

³⁹ Abu-Laban and Bakan, “Israelization,” 278.

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“These aren’t Mamluks or Crusaders. These are people returning to their country after an absence of two thousand years.”
“My, what prodigious memories they have!”⁴⁰

For Habiby, the resurrection of the ancient past as justification for Jewish privilege was both ridiculous and sinister. Even so, Habiby resists those Palestinians who sought to counter the narrative of the “promised land” with their own mythologizing of the past. Habiby found these contesting collective memories unproductive, demonstrating this critique in the *Pessoptimist* through characters who suffer terrible fates by constantly searching beneath their feet for ancient treasures. This motif signifies the futility of those who sought to win the war of memory through the literal and symbolic act of archeology. Habiby expresses his disdain for such regressive logic in biting prose,

Your ancestors built above their predecessors, but then the age of the archaeologists arrived They began digging beneath while demolishing above. If you continue like this, you’ll reach the dinosaurs.⁴¹

For Habiby, the dredging up of an extinct past threatened to keep both Jews and Arabs trapped in a fruitless dialectic.

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Even the most idyllic imaginings of the Abrahamic past could not exempt Zionists from dealing with the fact of Palestinian presence in the “Promised Land.” For those Palestinians who remained after 1948, a new reality of relentless structural violence emerged. The triumphant Zionist state turned its attention to the “Judaization” of the

⁴⁰ Habiby, *The Pessoptimist*, 24.

⁴¹ Habiby, *The Pessoptimist*, 38.

newly cleansed land, re-directing (rather than reducing) its colonizing energies to less visible avenues of invasion.⁴²

While Israel absorbed some Arabs as “citizens,” this inclusion was partial and mediated by a myriad of legal and social caveats that revealed their subjugated status within the new state. By tailoring its civil policies to isolate Palestinians, Zionist sought to weaken communal affiliation and to encourage “soft transfer” beyond Israel’s borders. Even so, engineers of the Israeli state sought more dramatic “answers” to the problem of this undesirable demographic. Within a few weeks of the founding of the state, Ben-Gurion commissioned a committee to craft a “comprehensive and effective solution” to the approximately 125,000 Arabs recognized by the government as remaining within the new state. The committee determined the proper approach would “require a regime with military character not subject to the rules of normal procedures.”⁴³ Such a brutal directive was plausible as Israel lacked a constitution or bill of rights, allowing the state to “interpret its own activities subject to subsequent Knesset or court challenge, a more desirable option in a time of crisis and transition.”⁴⁴

Within this environment of urgency and impunity, the Israeli leadership swiftly imposed emergency martial laws that targeted Arabs and allowed for continued land acquisition and population transfer. Policies such as the “Defense Emergency Regulations,” provided the legal coverage for state acquisition of Palestinian property within its new frontiers, giving Israeli officers license to impose cordons and curfews, confiscate land, shut down assemblies and businesses, and detain people without trial—

⁴² Maira and Shihade “Hip Hop From ’48 Palestine,” 119.

⁴³ Masalla, *Politics of Denial*, 149.

⁴⁴ Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 219.

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all allegedly in the interest of security. Israeli leaders declared “war on infiltrators”—their term for Palestinian refugees attempting to return to their abandoned homes—and spoke openly of the need to expel Arabs across the border.⁴⁵

Further legal inventions enabled Zionists to project their ideals of Arab non-presence explicitly onto Palestinian bodies, most notably in the category of “present absentee.” This martial directive provided an exhaustive framework for rendering Palestinian subjects “absentees,” even when physically present in the state, defining an absentee as:

Anyone who, on or after 29 November 1947 (the date of the United Nations General Assembly resolution to partition Palestine), had been: (a) a citizen or subject of one of the Arab countries at war with Israel; (b) in any of these countries, or in any part of Palestine outside the jurisdiction of the regulations; or (c) a citizen of Palestine who abandoned his or her normal place of residence.⁴⁶

Thus, while Benedict Anderson defined the nation as “imagined, limited, and sovereign,” defined by “finite boundaries beyond which lie other nations,” Israel’s rendering of local Palestinians as “absent” created a more complex reality.⁴⁷ In the case of the Zionist project, expansionist ideology undermined any absolute sense of material borders, while the exclusivity of the Jewish national identity subjected Palestinians to political exile even while residing within the state of Israel.⁴⁸ This paradox of acknowledgment and effacement by the state demonstrated the tension between Zionist’s ideal “imagined

⁴⁵ Nur Masala, *Imperial Israel and the Palestinians: The Politics of Expansion*, (Sterling: Pluto Books, 2000), 63.

⁴⁶ Masala, *Politics of Denial*, 155.

⁴⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (New York: Verso, 2006), 7.

⁴⁸ Masala, *Imperial Israel*, 63.

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community” of an actively affiliated Jewish population free of non-Jewish disruptions and the dissonant demographic reality.⁴⁹ Maira and Shihade expound,

The concept of the “present absent” offers a profound analytic lens for understanding the fundamental contradictions of the social political and cultural conditions created by specific histories of settler colonialism for ’48 Palestinians, who are simultaneously visible/invisible, internal/external, indigenous/inauthentic, and always ‘present/absent.’⁵⁰

Thus, despite Israel’s promise to the international community to “uphold the full social and political equality of all its citizens,” Palestinians within Israel found themselves utterly vulnerable and without recourse, bound up in a network of documentation and denial.⁵¹ Azoullay describes these Palestinian lives existing always “on the verge of catastrophe,” with their bodies serving as the site of the catastrophic event, “present in the territory but missing from political representation.”⁵² While the Palestinians residing outside the borders of Israel were summarily ignored by the Israeli government, their counterparts within the Jewish state were the subject of existential anxiety and the object of ideological denial—inscribed and ignored. “To be a non-Jew in Palestine/Israel,” observed Edward Said, “is first of all to be marked negatively.”⁵³

Emile Habiby reflects the intimate, exasperating sensation of living beneath this network of negation through the antics of his cowed and bewildered protagonist. “Don’t say the Age of Miracles is past, writes the alienated Saeed, “The moon is closer to us now

⁴⁹ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

⁵⁰ Maira and Shihade, “Hip Hop from ’48 Palestine,” 5.

⁵¹ Masala, *Politics of Denial*, 146.

⁵² Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2012), 67.

⁵³ Edward Said, “Ideology of Difference” in *Politics of Dispossession* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 90.

than are the fig trees of our departed villages.”⁵⁴ After escaping the war, Saeed is quickly disillusioned by the humiliation and violence of his lot in the new Israeli state. The Pessoptimist reveals his cynical estimation of his life as a survivor:

I escaped because a stray donkey came into the line of fire...so it died in place of me. My subsequent life in Israel, then, was really a gift from that unfortunate beast. What value then, honored sir, should we assign to this life of mine?⁵⁵

Saeed’s survival is constantly portrayed as either arbitrary chance or the result of morally questionable or undignified behavior, reflecting the deeply compromised position of the Palestinian in Israel—“when I realized true caution demands walking on four feet, I began to do so.”⁵⁶ Despite a shared experience of dispossession, Saeed’s relationship to his fellow Palestinians remains ambivalent, reflecting the intra-communal alienation of the post-war upheaval.⁵⁷ “My experience taught me to have confidence in no one,” the Pessoptimist explains, “and to keep my secrets tucked away.”⁵⁸

As he travels deeper into the newly established Zionist state, Saeed bears witness to the plight of displaced Palestinians attempting to return to their now-shattered villages. The defiant, if futile, efforts of the refugees contrast with Saeed’s rapidly vanishing subjectivity as an Israeli Arab. “Will they never disappear?” wonders one Israeli soldier who haunted by the persistent shadows of an exiled mother and child. “The question, however, was not directed towards me,” notes Saeed, who, though physically present, has been rendered docile by his subservient relation to Zionist power.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Habiby, *The Pessoptimist*, 4.

⁵⁵ Habiby, *The Pessoptimist*, 6.

⁵⁶ Habiby, *The Pessoptimist*, 97.

⁵⁷ Shihade, “Israel and Asia,” 5.

⁵⁸ Habiby, *The Pessoptimist*, 95.

⁵⁹ Habiby, *The Pessoptimist*, 16.

Resisting the impulse to cast his lot alongside the miserable refugees or daring freedom fighters, Saeed aligns with the Israeli state and contents himself with musing about his romantic interest, Yuaad—Arabic for “will return” or “once again.” Their relationship, violently ruptured by Yuaad’s expulsion by the Israeli state, portrays the estrangement between Arab Israelis and those Palestinians who reside outside the Jewish state. The fact that this love is illusory and left unconsummated can be read as a stark commentary on the feelings of impotence and frustration experienced by the Arabs imbedded in the Zionist state.⁶⁰

For Habiby, those outside the state of Israel were afforded a luxury of idealism not possible for those who, like Saeed, remained within the erosive atmosphere of the Zionist project.

For twenty long years I had lived alone, away from Yuaad. I had lived that time to its very last drop, to its very dregs. I had drunk its bitter cup and had not left a drop for her. I had saved her from those twenty bitter years so that she could remain young and twenty and not suffer the pain of those I had lived.⁶¹

Forbidden to speak of his vanished hometown or assert himself as an equal among his Jewish counterparts, Saeed feels his subjectivity “disappear.” Experiencing the “political living death,”⁶² described by Edward Said, the Pessoptimist is slowly stifled, “unable to breathe no matter how hard I tried, like a man drowning. But I did not die...a prisoner unable to escape.”⁶³

⁶⁰ Habiby, *The Pessoptimist*, 57.

⁶¹ Habiby, *The Pessoptimist*, 137

⁶² Said “The Palestinian Experience,” 1968, in *The Politics of Dispossession*, 19.

⁶³ Habiby, *The Pessoptimist*, 76.

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Part Two: Resurrection and Inscription

While the terror of forcible transfer and the paralysis of political annihilation were definitive of the Arab experience in Israel's earliest years, the Zionist apparatus soon began to implement more comprehensive and banal forms of domination.⁶⁴ With the development of state infrastructure, the written word was adopted as an essential weapon of control wielded to inscribe, demarcate, and manage Arab constituents. The same Palestinian who found herself obliterated from the national imagination became the subject of an increasingly sophisticated network of surveillance. In other words, the Israeli state was both unwilling to fully acknowledge the Palestinian presence and yet desperate to document these tenacious "absentees," leaving these subjects at the mercy of the erratic but absolute authorial choices of the state.

They wrote their narrative: We have returned. They wrote our narrative: They have returned to the desert. They put us on trial: Why were you born here? ⁶⁵

The Zionist project thus confiscated the Palestinian's right to representation, preempting any nationalist or cultural assertions by inscribing Arab constituents with an Israeli-issued identity. These "identities"—more appropriate to call them certificates of non-Jewishness—were "granted" to those Arabs who, willingly or unwillingly, were included in the 1948 Israeli census. This government census was facilitated by the newly-established Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), in partnership with a specialized "Committee Alongside the Military Government" established to "combat Palestinian

⁶⁴ Elia Zureik, "Colonialism, Surveillance and Control," in *Surveillance and Control in Israel Palestine*, 14.

⁶⁵ Darwish, *In the Presence of Absence*, 46.

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infiltration” of returning refugees.⁶⁶ Interior documents of the CBS and the Committee expose the deeply political objectives that lay behind this massive project of documentation:

“We will prepare an additional questionnaire: a regular questionnaire for all residents, and a special form for [the needs of] the Interior Minister, the Ministry of Minority Affairs and the Military government...without [the Arabs] noticing that we are asking them additional questions.”⁶⁷

The census was imposed over the course of two territorial sweeps, first to question each Palestinian household and announce an impending curfew. Next,

during the curfew the enumerators returned to the homes and checked the accuracy of the records from the first stage, added or subtracted the people that had been added or subtracted since the first visit, received a photograph from each resident, and presented them with a note that included their identification number, with the help of which they later received their official identification certificate.⁶⁸

This invasive “snapshot,” imposed by the state unilaterally established a corpus of knowledge, capturing the Palestinians as a demographic entity and reducing individuals to a quantified value. In addition to the psychological effect of involuntary documentation, this seizure of information allowed the Israeli administration to manufacture a population governable by virtue of its statistical legibility.

In Habiby’s novel, villagers recognize the debilitating effect of their position as inscribed subjects. As Saeed returns to visit an elderly family friend in what had become the State of Israel, she mistakes him for a census officer and recoils. “They’ve already

⁶⁶ Anat E. Leibler, “You Must Know Your Stock: Census as Surveillance Practice in 1948 and 1967” in *Surveillance and Control in Israel/Palestine*, 239.

⁶⁷ Leibler, 248.

⁶⁸ Israeli Central Bureau of Statistics, “Population Census: A Historical Perspective,” <http://www.cbs.gov.il/census/> Accessed 11 March 2014.

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had me, in the census,” she cries out, revealing her deep anxiety as a helpless, surveyed subject.⁶⁹ Habiby’s prose, written in Arabic, employs a play-on-words to dramatize this anxiety further. The Arabic, "I'm counted!" is purposely mispronounced, imitating the Hebrew accent of the census officer. “The word for "counted" (mahsiyya) is written "makhsiyya" meaning "castrated" just as the [Israeli] soldier had pronounced it,” notes Roger Allen.⁷⁰

From the first census in 1948 onward, Palestinians inside of Israel (and later under occupation in the West Bank and Gaza) were forced into “an economy of surveillance” wherein their (diminutive) rights were directly derived from their ability to be “seen” within the Israeli system of inscription.⁷¹ Thus, Arabs under Israeli control were “narrated” by the Zionist gaze, inscribed as absent from the realm of self-determination but indelibly, necessarily “present” by virtue of their documents. Under this extensive network of control, Palestinians were forced to carry identity cards as the token of their degraded rank and proof of their compliance with the Israeli apparatus of control. Seen in this light, the rage of Mahmoud Darwish’s poem, “Record! I am an Arab!” (1964) carries all the more poignant weight.

Record! I am an Arab
I have a name without a title,
Patient in a country
where the people are enraged.
... You have stolen my orchards
and the land which I cultivated
along with my children.⁷²

⁶⁹ Habiby, *The Pessoptimist*, 47.

⁷⁰ Roger Allen. Interview by author. Email. Philadelphia, PA, 15 March 2014.

⁷¹ Zureik, “Colonialism, Surveillance, and Population Control,” 9.

⁷² Mahmoud Darwish, “Biqat Hawiyya,” published in *Leaves of Olives* (Haifa: 1964).

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Edward Said likewise notes that “no Palestinian census exists,” describing a sense of internal chaos both reflected within and propagated by this inability to self-inscribe. “There is no line that can be drawn from one Palestinian to another that does not seem to interfere with the political designs of one or another state.”⁷³ The Palestinian was a trespasser on the landscape of Israel’s imagined community, constantly threatened and punished for his intrusion.

Thus unable to narrate their own experience or rely on their now-obliterated past, Arabs found themselves both captured by and dependent on the essentializing gaze of the Zionist state. They were “Arab” only in the sense of their non-Jewishness, a negative identity that rendered them vulnerable and humiliated, but without which they could not hope to survive. By acquiescing to this economy of visibility, Palestinians could attempt to negotiate their hostile society, but their tenuous status as Arabs meant their identity card could also be read as a license for abuse. “We don’t punish you for what crosses your minds,” an Israeli soldier explains to the Pessoptimist, “but for what crosses the Big Man’s mind.”⁷⁴

Both captured by documentation and obliterated by political deprivation, Palestinians became the site of Zionism’s contradictory projections: they were enemies and absentees at once. This system of inscription reflects the power of writing to constitute and control individuals, as described by Michel Foucault:

The examination that places individuals in a field of surveillance also situates them in a network of writing; it engages them in a whole mass of documents that capture and fix them...[in] a system of intense registration and of documentary

⁷³ Said, *After the Last Sky*, 23.

⁷⁴ Habiby, *The Pessoptimist*, 122.

accumulation...as an essential part in the mechanisms of discipline...opened up two correlative possibilities: first, the constitution of the individual as a describable, analyzable object, not in order to reduce him to “specific” features...but in order to maintain him in his individual features...second, the constitution of a comparative system that made possible the measurement of overall phenomena, the description of groups”⁷⁵

In addition to cementing the inequality between Jews and non-Jews, however, such ritual documentation served the paradoxical function of obscuring the disparity between ethnic groups. Even as the state leveraged its power to survey, demarcate, and restrict Palestinian life, the supposed objectivity of numerical data gave the Israeli regime a veneer of liberalism. “The census was crucial to the establishment of legitimate exclusion based on citizenship,” write Liebler and Breslau, but, by mimicking the symbols and language of Western administrations, simultaneously presented the image of an impartial system rendering equivalent subjects.⁷⁶

Israel’s gestures of equality did not extend to all Palestinians of the state. For the populations left out of the Israeli census—all Bedouin Arabs, among others—this system of authorization became evident through its power to exclude undocumented individuals from the (increasingly monitored) activities of living. By binding up the act of documentation with the access to life-sustaining privileges, making mobility, housing, employment, and civil protections derivatives of recognition by the state apparatus, Israel’s method of control grew into a dense network of “biopower.”⁷⁷ Under this arbitrary and encompassing system, Palestinians were highly narrated but individually

⁷⁵ Foucault, “Means of Correct Training,” in *The Foucault Reader*. Ed. Paul Rainbow. (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 203.

⁷⁶ Anat Liebler Daniel Breslau, “The Uncounted: Citizenship and Exclusion in the Israeli Census of 1948,” in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 28:5, (2006), 900.

⁷⁷ Foucault, Preface to “The History of Sexuality” in *The Foucault Reader*, 335.

mute objects, existent (but absent) in a universe awash with the inconsistencies of the Zionist imagination.

“For all the writing about them,” reflects Said, “Palestinians remain virtually unknown...we have experienced a great deal that has not been recorded.”⁷⁸

As the Pessoptimist notes, there is evidence of him in every newspaper, and in the Zionist’s anxiety towards his existence, yet everyone denies knowing anything about him.⁷⁹ As the Israeli authorship of the Palestinian experience grew increasingly intimate and essentializing, Palestinians became harder to “see.”

Habiby’s novel, as an act of writing and representation, is thus on one level an answer to the largely unilateral Zionist narration of his people. The act of writing is conspicuous in the very form of the novel, which is constructed as a series of fictitious letters written by the now-disappeared Saeed. This author, seeming to defy the Israeli monopoly on writing and narration, claims the act of writing for himself. Saeed is, on one level, almost desperate to be heard, explicitly “pleading” his friend to “tell his story.”⁸⁰

Readers are privy to Saeed’s intimate narration through the letters’ exposure in the novel, while the absence of the addressee in the text assigns these unilateral messages a haunting weight. There is no guarantee, as Derrida notes in *The Postcard*, of the letters’ arrival or reception, and this fissure between the letter-writer and the letter’s destination is irreducible.⁸¹ Despite the constant salutations to his unnamed addressee, then, Saeed’s narration must also be considered apart from its potential to communicate to the one to

⁷⁸ Edward Said, *After the Last Sky*, 4.

⁷⁹ Habiby, *The Pessoptimist*, 7.

⁸⁰ Habiby, *The Pessoptimist*, 3.

⁸¹ Jacques Derrida, *The Postcard: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 59.

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whom it was sent. For the Palestinian, attempts at self-representation faced this question in both the general sense and vis-à-vis the censorship of the Israeli state. The value of the letter, then, must also be weighed for its service to the writer himself, and Habiby's novel may be considered in relation to the books' epigraph, "Now, off with your sleep-clothes/And to yourselves compose/Those letters you so anticipate!"⁸²

The yearning expressed in these verses is resonant with another problem of Palestinian representation. In addition to enduring widespread suppression within Israel, Palestinians within Israel had long felt overlooked by their Arab neighbors. The *Pessoptimist* reflects this exasperation,

You said you never noticed me before. That's because you lack sensitivity, my good friend. How very often you have seen my name in the leading newspapers...[they publish] the names of everyone notable...but merely [give] general reference to the rest. The rest—yes that's me!"⁸³

The ambivalence of Saeed's addressee is implied, leveling a deeper critique against the selective attention of the international community. By denying his audience the veneered archetypes of martyr or freedom fighter ("I wasn't killed at the border...Nor did I join a guerrilla, as those who knew my virtue feared"⁸⁴) Habiby gestures towards Saeed's story as an experience that is equally valid and tragic as these more popular imaginings of the Palestinian. By bearing witness to the mundane oppression of his morally questionable protagonist, Habiby illuminates the isolating and relentless dilemmas of the Arab Israeli existence.

⁸² Samih Al-Qasim, quoted by Emile Habiby in *The Pessoptimist*, 1.

⁸³ Habiby, *The Pessoptimist*, 7.

⁸⁴ Habiby 3

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In this commitment to the often ignored, largely undignified experience of the “ordinary” Arab Israeli, Habiby set himself apart from his peers. While some of Habiby’s fellow Palestinian writers like Ghassan Kanafani had gained acclaim within the Arab world and beyond, these exiled artists spoke largely from the vantage point of the diaspora. This skew in representation reflected the exodus that took place in the 1940s, when the majority of the wealthy, educated, and artistic elite emigrated or fled, leaving Palestine culturally as well as materially bereft. As ‘Atallah Mansur noted in 1964,

The frontiers of sand and hatred that separate the State of Israel from its Arab neighbors also separate those Arabs who have remained [in Israel] from the centers of Arab culture...the cultural and spiritual nourishment of the Israeli Arabs has shrunk to nothing.⁸⁵

Habiby’s protagonist Saeed is a far cry from a nationalist hero but equivocates and debases himself to no end. Riddled with paradox and absurdity, Saeed’s letters leave readers unsettled even as the narrator bemoans the futility of his attempted correspondence.

How often I yelled at those about me, “Please, everyone! I groan at the burden of the great secret I bear on my shoulders! Please help me! But all that came from beneath my moustache was a meowing sound, like that of a cat...That’s how I’ve been for twenty years, meowing and whimpering.”⁸⁶

The act of writing alone, then, does not itself provide relief for Saeed. Even when he breaks from the suffocating practice of self-censorship, his words remain illegible, unrecognized. Although Saeed insists he is writing for the purpose of disclosure (“tell my story!”) his narration provokes by concealing as much as it reveals, performing

⁸⁵ Sa’idi, *The Arabic Novel in Israel*, 15.

⁸⁶ Habiby, *The Pessoptimist*, 76.

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something more complex and troubling than a simple exercise in cultural self-assertion. Rather, through the story of Saeed, Habiby simultaneously asserts Palestinian presence while leveraging his authorial power to obscure the method and intent of his peoples' survival. "Death is no way out...If we are secretive, it's only in hope of deliverance."⁸⁷

⁸⁷ Habiby, *The Pessoptimist*, 110.

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Part Three: Buried Treasure and the Indestructible Unspoken

“[I was given] a very strange secret, the preservation of which became my lifelong occupation.” – *The Pessoptimist*

“No one will manage to hide the pain. It is visible, tangible, and audible, like the resounding break of the place...Who will tell our story?” – Mahmoud Darwish

Besieged by a hostile national consciousness and abandoned by supposed compatriots in the larger Arab world, Palestinians within Israel have been subject to suppression on nearly every imaginable plane. With the seemingly endless inscription of Palestinian subjects, the Zionist state does much to both preempt and prevent Palestinian self-authorship. As the construction of a modern surveillance state progressed, Palestinians were forced into ever more remote corners to find room for expression. As Saeed writes,

When the government began renovating the catacombs, rebuilding their walls, putting electric lighting, clearing the halls and the decorative work and restoring them, we began retreating into other invisible tunnels. Now we never remain in one place, never can feel at ease with ourselves, not for a single moment.⁸⁸

This ever-deepening Zionist interference in Palestinian lives created compounding cultural inertia, smothering self- and communal consciousness with fear and driving Palestinians into the literal and figurative “underground.” This retreat is dramatically portrayed in Habiby’s novel, wherein the narrator informs his reader in that he is writing from a hiding place “beneath the city,” where the state’s “evil cannot reach me.”⁸⁹ Likewise, Saeed’s son Walaa retreats underground, explaining “It was to breathe free that

⁸⁸ Habiby, *The Pessoptimist*, 69.

⁸⁹ Habiby, *The Pessoptimist*, 70.

I came to this cellar, to breathe in freedom just once.”⁹⁰ The freedom of these subterranean spaces comes from their inscrutability in lying beyond the gaze of the surveillance state. Even so, Habiby interrogates this escape:

“Why did they so fill the earth with these tunnels, reverend?”
“To free themselves from worry about those above.”
“But the tunnels did not save them!”
“They didn’t realize that.”⁹¹

For Habiby, the relief of these tunnels is offset by their ultimate futility, as the fleeting freedom they bring comes only after abandoning the land and air above. The act of burrowing beneath the earth likewise reflects the visceral attachment to the land central to Palestinian nationalist organizations such as *Al-Ard*—literally translated as “The Earth.” Poets like Mahmoud Darwish expressed this metaphysical attachment, “We have on this earth what makes life worth living/on this earth, the Lady of Earth/mother of all beginnings and ends/She was called Palestine...My Lady, because you are my Lady, I deserve life.”⁹²

The act of digging is also a reflexive picture of the Zionist’s claim to their historic connection to the land. While their colonizers appeal to archeology and ancient texts to justify their invasion, many Palestinians countered with their own tales of buried family treasure. Throughout the novel, Palestinians are constantly trying to return to their hometowns to unearth precious deposits they claim to have left behind, each believing their personal salvation will come with this retrieval.

⁹⁰ Habiby, *The Pessoptimist*, 109.

⁹¹ Habiby, *The Pessoptimist*, 38.

⁹² Mahmoud Darwish, “On This Earth,” 1986.

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In the case of Saeed's wife, Baqiyya—whose name means “Girl Who Remained”—her hidden inheritance lies in the sea just beyond her ruined village of Tantura:

Now, what I want is to return to the ruins of my village,
Tantura, and go to the beach...In a cave in the rocks below,
beneath the sea, there is an iron chest, full of gold, the jewelry of
my grandmother...My father hid it there and told us about it so that
an of us who ever needed it could make use of it.⁹³

Saeed, though reluctant, makes an effort to fulfill his wife's wish. Saeed makes many attempts to recover the alleged treasure from beneath the sea, employing his son as a lookout and thus instilling the legend of the secret in the next generation. The ultimately fruitless search for the treasure can be read as a critique of the Palestinian preoccupation with an inaccessible, imaginary past of idyllic communion with the land. The belief in the retrievability of the past, despite the compounding futility of their condition, is an almost universal feature of Habiby's characters and reflects the notion of “*awdah*” (“return”) central to Palestinian resistance.

This ritual myth-making preserves not only the past but those who, through the act of recalling, conjure their own sense of affiliation and history.

[My wife] illuminated for me a truth about your friends...how
they maintain their courage in the face of officialdom and are
never awed by a big man...no matter how poor they may
be...every one of you must have an iron chest in your own
Tantura, where your father hid is treasure of gold.⁹⁴

Saeed eventually finds himself defending the myth of the treasure to his own son—who quizzes him,

⁹³ Habiby, *The Pessoptimist*, 88.

⁹⁴ Habiby, *The Pessoptimist*, 89.

“But will you find it, father?”
“If I keep on diving and you keep the secret, we’ll certainly find it.
Has anyone ever found it, father?
Others definitely must have found their golden fishes.
If we should find it, what will you do with it, father?
As the others have done.”
“but what did they do with theirs?”
“Well, they didn’t tell me their secret.”⁹⁵

In this interaction, Habiby poignantly expresses the tension created by this tautological aspiration for the past: Palestinians persevere the present and aspire to the future by clinging to myth of their fathers’ treasure. While contemporary facts oppress, the parable of the treasure endures as an ephemeral, indestructible hope.

The “iron chest” provides an imaginary repository for the frustrated dreams of the Palestinians, even as the treasure itself remains forever elusive. The Palestinian hope is constantly thwarted, but the duplicability of family and national myth provides at least minimal relief. Its power rests in its obscurity, and the act of searching and re-telling provides Palestinians their own template for imagined community—albeit a buried, deferred one. The myths of these family treasures endure by virtue of their ambiguity, as they remain undefined and thus impossible to deny. Though never found, these secrets hover alluringly at the periphery of personal and communal memory, permitting Palestinians to curtail their current suffering through an imagined, impending return.

These treasures, although constantly alluded to, must never be openly discussed among Palestinians for fear of exposing the paradoxes of their retrospective aspirations. Importantly, Palestinians are also careful to guard their personal myths in order to preserve their sense of exceptionality amidst incoherent communal disaster. To recognize

⁹⁵ Habiby, *The Pessoptimist*. 98.

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the universality of these myths would obliterate their value as a personal mechanism of survival, forcing Palestinian subjects back into the chaos of collective catastrophe. Thus, the power of the “treasure” lies in its perceived singularity, in presenting itself as inevitable and unique to the individual. For each Palestinian, it is *his* family history, the name of *her* destroyed village, that sustains hope.

In the face of enormous collective oppression, the individual gropes for some way to imagine her own fate exceptional. Personal and family history provide a discrete identity through the connection to an imagined, past certainty. This practice is nearly universal among the displaced Arabs of Habiby’s novel, most strikingly in the scene at the Jazzar mosque.

Soon voices erupted again, persisting in drawing out their relationships to their villages, all of which I understood to have been razed by the army:
“We are from Ruwais.” We are from al Hadatha.” “We are from el-Damun” ...⁹⁶

Each Palestinian draws a sense of coherency and attachment from this seemingly indestructible bond to their memory of the past. When these myriad, specific memories are presented as a chorus, however, this results in an echo of the larger structure of collective loss. In the courtyard of the Jazzar mosque, the magnitude of the Palestinians’ dispossession invades as the individual voices converge into meaninglessness. Thus, the function of the “secret” is to guard the individual’s tenuous sense of singularity, preserving the unspoken hope of being an exception to the ruin of one’s people. Saeed

⁹⁶ Habiby, *The Pessoptimist*, 22.

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marvels at these Palestinians' ability to "conceal this secret, despite the fact that it must be known to thousands...even to tens of thousands."⁹⁷

Despite this observation, Saeed likewise imagines himself unique among his unfortunate compatriots:

I was dazzled by my own good fortune. For here I was, having managed safely to return...the rest of my nation was out there wandering aimlessly, lost and destitute....All except me!...Some supernatural power had to be at work here.

Saeed likens his survival to a magical event, reflecting the irrationality of this myth of exceptionality. For Habiby, those who wish to believe themselves spared from the Palestinian tragedy must be willing to resort to fantasy.

By choosing the medium of the novel, Habiby further thrusts fiction and fact together, mimicking the actual experience of Palestinian Israelis who find themselves mediated, narrated, and interpreted into near-oblivion. Habiby himself, limited as Saeed by the antagonizing Zionist state, finds fantasy the most apt means of describing, and resisting, his fate. This resistance is subtle, and, like the "treasure chests," made potent by its impenetrability. The core of *Pessoptimist* remains inscrutable, framed by Saeed's frequent references to his personal secret, which, despite his claims of "telling his secret to the world," remain maddeningly vague.

This assertion of the secret's existence and the stubborn refusal to reveal its substance defers the finality of the Palestinian loss. Just as the power of the "buried treasure" is derived from the perpetual searching which preserves the possibility of

⁹⁷ Habiby, *The Pessoptimist*, 89.

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eventual fulfillment, Saeed's secret need not exist or be disclosed to offer a sense of subjective relief.

Ambiguity is preferred to abject loss. While Saeed's family is ostensibly killed by Israeli forces, Saeed describes them as "disappeared." In his grief and bewilderment, direct language is exchanged for inconclusive myth.

They had managed to escape completely, without a trace... Their fate remains a closely guarded state secret... How often I felt an urge to go down to find out for myself, but I didn't have the heart for it. To preserve a spark of hope that they were still alive was better than to drown it.⁹⁸

Just as Saeed denies his reader the knowledge of his secret, Habiby's novel is also a dramatic performance of withholding. In the face of a state that seeks to monitor, inscribe, and control his subjectivity, the Palestinian seeks relief in the codes of secret and silence. The indefinable Palestinian *samud* ("endurance under great strain") is drawn from this elusive repository of imagined pasts and futures, of the nearly palpable recollections of vanished hometowns.

Standing so starkly on such an ephemeral foundation, the improbable endurance of Palestinians inspires both admiration and dismay. Poignant, ironic, and grotesque in turn, the story of the Pessoptimist reflects the larger tragedy of Palestinians within Israel who, post-1948, became the site and subject of a hostile nationalist imagination. As this nation-state leveraged its powers of surveillance and co-opted the "authorial" abilities of the Arabs, these subjects could seek relief only on the level of imagination. They drew life from their individual myths of a familiar, certain past while closely guarding access to their psychic oases. Secrecy not only protected these Palestinians from the punitive

⁹⁸ Habiby, *The Pessoptimist*, 113.

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surveillance state, but also guarded them from the exposing, to themselves or others, the inconsistencies in their ideological maneuvers.

Habiby's novel, forged in this crucible of control and denial, gestures towards obscurity as the only "rational" option for those circumscribed by absurdity. There is no reprieve from relentless Zionist denial, but the Palestinian nevertheless persists beneath and between the infrastructures of oppression. Faced with the incomprehensible, Saeed can only negotiate his reality by employing fantasy, asserting his discordant pessoptimism in lieu of actual relief. In the end, the Pessoptimist does not triumph, only disappears.

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