

A psychoanalytic reading of *In Search of Fatima: a Palestinian story*, autobiography of Ghada Karmi, By Flavia Donati, Rome, May 5, 2014

Ghada Karmi's life has walked all the dramatic phases of the history of her people and has been deeply affected by them together with her family and her community.

I am talking about a woman and about an historian.

*Historia* in its original meaning used by Herodotus means "knowledge".

Ghada Karmi has walked through the trauma of the catastrophe of her people, overcoming, as I will illustrate, the trans-generational denial and arriving through her writing to be a witness of the horror which took place "there and then".

Man-made disasters, wars, political and ethnic persecutions aim at annihilating the social and individual existence of the human being. This is the de-humanization opposed by the historian. The historian integrates the traumatic experiences through their narration. This is what this woman historian has done and I want to honor her work.

The historian Walid Khalidi had to write "All That Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948" published in 1992 in order to salvage the memories that Zionism first and subsequently the Israeli State had stolen (houses, land, water, trees, millenary olive trees), destroyed (human lives, populated and harmless villages), expelled (hundreds of thousands of inhabitants made refugees or exiles like Ghada) over which they built thus deleting Arabic names and hence purposefully all memory of it.

In her early childhood Ghada was a thoughtful little girl with many close ties and relationships which made her deep-rooted to her community; she had a nanny called Fatima who was a true anchor providing warmth and security, and a dog named Rex who was her play-mate and companion.

I will discuss about her family and the way in which the almost impossible mourning of the complex losses were inter-twined with them.

This little girl one day was to lose everything. She was hurriedly placed into a taxi and forced to leave Jerusalem with no time to understand or allow for a true farewell.

That morning at dawn, as she moved away she was to see Fatima and Rex as ever smaller figures in the distance until these disappeared from sight. She was never to see them again nor would she ever find out what happened to them (page 113). It was April 1948: the "nakba", the catastrophe. Confused, overwhelmed and overcrowded, drowned in their pain and fear – their first stop was Damascus in Syria, followed by London.

Her book inter-twines the General History with the personal history. Ghada Karmi is a medical doctor and an accurate historian with a broad vision, driven by a sincere yet

painful search into her previous paths, naiveties, mistakes, illusions, failures and the subsequent reconnection from where she lost her way.

## **The Frame of the General History**

*The Balfour Declaration*, November 1917, concerning the partition of the Ottoman Empire, was sent by Mr Balfour, English Minister of Foreign Affairs to Lord Rothschild as representative of the English Jewish community and acting as delegate of the Zionist movement. In this official document the English government looked favorably to the creation of a Jewish nucleus in Palestine. Ghada Kharmi writes: "by that declaration the English government had promised someone else a land belonging already to its people and it did that having no right of ownership over it." (page 71). The Balfour Declaration was included in the Sevres Treaty of 1920 which signed the end of the belligerence with Turkey and which assigned Palestine to the United Kingdom. Thus the Mandate over Palestine.

In the first chapters of the book we can read: the events before *the transformation of Jerusalem of XIX* "when the first Christian missions were established...in less than 50 years hundreds of churches, schools, hospitals (page 31)...*the harsh occupation of the English Mandate* actively opposed by the Palestinian resistance "between 1936-1939 the Palestinian protest against the political line of the Mandate was relentless...but the leaders of the protest did not manage to find a common strategy to defeat either the advance of the Jewish occupation or the English one"...(page 10-11) the two pro-Husseini and pro-Nashashibi parties, in contrast with each other, were leading the Palestinian resistance to its defeat giving way to the ongoing Jewish migration every day more determined to conquer power" (page 44)...*The growing Jewish migration to Palestine* "before the beginning of the Jewish migration to Palestine of 1880 the (Jewish) community consisted of 3.000 people out of 350.000 land's inhabitants" (page 37). That small community which Ghada calls "our Jews" was indistinguishable from the Arabs as it spoke their language and it was physically indistinguishable. But the river of the Jewish migration grew under the eyes of the English Mandate. "Poor Jews in the '20s and 30's...but also wealthy Jews...."were receiving substantial financial subsidies from the English government (page 13) and became more and more land owners. Ghada writes: "left to themselves, people mingle. Mixed marriages, friendships in neighborhoods." (page 45)

***But the Zionists had other plans.*** The Jewish National Fund established in 1901 at the Basel Zionist congress, mapped the land and planned its expropriation. The military and political structures, initially armed and trained by the English army, became the armed tool (Haganah, clandestine army, Irgun, Stern Band) against the Palestinian population and against the English army which became the target of bloody attacks (for example King David Hotel head quarter of the English government was blown up by a bomb in July 1946 (page 54) or, for example, Goldsmith House location for the English officers (page 61). Ghada Karmi writes: "the English authorities seems overwhelmed by the ferocity of the Jewish attacks".

The Palestinian population, the community surrounding Ghada and her family became increasingly more terrified by the Zionist militia's attacks. These included those on the public transport in Haifa, the crowd at Damascus Gate in Jerusalem, on cinemas, on cafés, the massacre of Deir Yassin on 9 April 1948, and on those hotels thought to be home to the Palestinian resistance organizations – which were in themselves weak, divided, badly organized and directed. This eventually led to that day in April 1948 when Ghada and many others fled their land in order to save their lives.

You can read further in Ghada's book about the history of the end of the British Mandate and the United Nations' Partition Plan, as well as the suffering of the Palestinians, both those who stayed and those who were exiled – 800,000 women, men and children – and the 531 villages which were destroyed.

What I must address however is **the personal history** which is inter-twined in this general wider history. I would propose four areas of key reading within this story that allows one to enter its psychological aspects, which I identified during my own attempt to understand it. I trust that Ghada will sense my respect for her and the honesty of her story, despite the fact that I must compress the great complexities and intense emotional experiences into a few paragraphs, which may not give justice to the enormity of it all:

- 1) *Pre-nakba areas of fragility*
- 2) *The pre-existing factors contributing to the near-impossible elaboration of the trauma*
- 3) *The defensive attempts (for example the post-migration pseudo-integration)*
- 4) *The reconnection with her own history.*

## **1. Pre-nakba areas of fragility**

Ghada was born in 1939 and as a child lived with her parents and two elder siblings: a sister born in 1932 and a brother born in 1936. She was immersed and deep-rooted in a community which was rich in human interactions and commercial activities.

Ghada writes this book as an adult, and by virtue of the compassion that she feels for her parents' life, she can remember with tenderness certain aspects of her family dynamics which could otherwise have been recalled with a critical outlook, which rather is present only in some pages thus demonstrating her profound awareness and sincerity.

Furthermore, this compassionate outlook is one of her first steps in the elaboration, in the mourning of her losses allowing her to draw from both her own personal memory as well as the General History.

Ghada asks Fatima: “what is happening?” (page 107) as the anguish within the community is growing. She is not asking her mother or her father. For her, her anchor is Fatima. Her mother is a resourceful and intelligent woman but seems nonetheless distracted by her strong urge to entertain social interactions, which did allow their family to be included in the close-knit community but at the cost of leaving Ghada feeling rather lonely.

Ghada writes: “I was never noticed by anybody, I saw myself as skin and bones, I felt ugly and I was extremely jealous...” [referring to her young cousins who were spoiled by her mother and the boys who always received special treatment. (page 22)] “...it was expected from both adults and children to cope on their own...” “... life without Rex and Fatima was unimaginable.” (page 76)

These passages provide an image of a child who was not feeling sufficiently acknowledged or seen by the eyes of her mother, which therefore could result in a difficulty of forming a self-image. The experience of self-devaluation, insufficient mirroring and the lack of reassurance can cause a child to be more exposed to anxieties, insecurities, self-criticism as well as a fear of rejection in the relationship with the outside world.

Her anchoring to Fatima was of an affective and protective kind - a deep, warm tenderness. Fatima was a wise lady, however in the Palestinian society of that time Fatima’s social position was devalued: “Even as a child I was able to detect the social tri-partitioning of the Palestinian society: at the bottom of the hierarchy were the peasants, above these the land owners and on top the city-residents...” (page 17) “from the very beginning I saw Fatima as my mother... I knew that she was not my real mother, but I felt so close to her that my siblings would mock me: you are not our sister...we found you in the garden...your parents are peasants like Fatima is...sooner or later we will send you back to them...I would cry in desperation...my mother would scold them...but my distress in reality was only in part due to not wanting to be considered a reject within my own family, rather I was more disturbed by the idea of being associated with the peasants...” (page 16)

From my understanding, already as a young child Ghada’s internalization of the female image and model was complex. Complex the self-image formation. On the one hand Ghada found security, peace, tenderness and unconditional acceptance within Fatima, however on the other Ghada was in conflict with this internalization as this image was devalued and would ostracize her from her family.

The relationship with her father was tender. She would sit on his lap when her mother was out – he would read to himself and she would talk to him, not really knowing how much he was actually listening. He was a responsible man with intellectual aspirations, he worked as civil servant within the British entourage; this was a source of embarrassment for him as he was at the same time loyally placed within his own Palestinian community. This awkward position would subsequently re-occur following his migration to England as he would later find employment in the Arab division of the BBC.

Ghada says: "fathers have a crucial role in our culture. They are the main figure of authority, the creators of a family's reputation, the sole means of income and financial support and the base of a family's identity." (page 76)

Her father however, a victim himself of the greater events which befell his own land, said: "we shall not move from here and nobody will dare touch my books" (page 83).

One may wonder what are the far-reaching consequences on Ghada and her society of the loss of authoritativeness of fathers within their families, when they could be seen as unable to read reality and they failed to function as protective figures given the dramatic events beyond their control. The aura of omnipotence our parents should lose gradually in adolescence when we are better able to function in life...was then shattered violently. These considerations help us to understand the sense of fragility in the world and doubt of one's identity which will be associated with the post-migratory phase.

Both Ghada's mother and father find it difficult to talk about their own experiences as well as those of their children, both before the Nakba and in the years following migration. Ghada discusses this with astonishment, sadness and at times with resentment: "neither of them appeared interested in our lives..." (page 205) "...I cannot forgive my parents for throwing us with such mindlessness in such cultural and political quick-sands..." (page 191) "...father's tears for what? It was impossible to say as my father never spoke about his feelings." (page 144)

I tried to imagine the ongoing anguish in which her parents lived and perhaps sensing unconsciously that their world was threatened and was going to be destroyed. Perhaps they were not able to listen because they were unable to provide answers. They were not able to get close to the loss which they were about to experience, were experiencing, had experienced and which they would continue to experience in the future.

If we get closer to Ghada's perspective we are able to empathize with her experience. Children need to be helped to put their experiences into words so that they can be accepted without repression of their emotions, moreover they should be helped to understand their emotions and connect them to their experiences. They need to feel that their inner resources to confront challenges have been recognized, that they should not feel ashamed of their fear, they should not need to pretend, and to consolidate their own sense of identity.

The panic attacks that Ghada describes suffering from in London for many years (page 186) which began in Madame Tussaud's Wax Museum (perhaps not by chance: the waxes associated to dead people in a cemetery) might indicate a split between strong emotions and an insufficient containment in her formative years. This containment can be achieved by listening, reassurance and an empathic understanding of the adult to the child, and the trust of the word of the "Other".

It is when events in life strike us heavily that our weak areas come to light, and, as Ghada eventually managed to do in her journey, if we are able to reconnect with our inner resources and own authentic dynamics within our identity, then we are able to undertake repair work on those weak areas.

## **2. The pre-existing factors contributing to the near-impossible elaboration of the trauma (Palestine, Damascus, London)**

Loss of her world, relationships, identity bonds, community, smells, sounds, landscapes, familiar human features – with the arrival of April 1948.

Initially there was a growing fear overcoming the community. Her parents were terrorized (page 104) and the children are no longer able to rely on their comforting and reassurance, or explanation of what was occurring around them and on what their destinies would be. “There was not even time to say farewell to our house, country or anything that we had once loved..” (page 113). They escaped to Damascus to where their grand-parents lived.

Her family was experiencing an overwhelming pain but they employed a common defense mechanism, denial. People use denial with the illusion of protecting themselves from pain but this however results in an enormous difficulty in being able to elaborate it without resorting to excessive splitting. This splitting freezes part of our inner world resulting in complex emotional cognitive relational consequences.

“Following our arrival to Damascus nobody mentioned our previous life anymore. Our parents no longer spoke about Fatima...our house...or Jerusalem. I seemed to be the only person who held these in memory...and therefore, confused and stunned I decided to follow their example and I kept my confusions to myself. My devotion to Fatima, our house and my childhood became a private matter; a secret to be kept securely away.” (page 126) “.. memories frozen in time.” (page 161)

“To escape is playing along with the Jews, whilst remaining means exposing ones children to death...” (page 82)

Fleeing and leaving behind the elderly in order to save the children: how can one survive with such guilt or elaborate on this? How will this guilt resurface in life, or how might one attempt to prevent it from surfacing?

After various events and “...a transient folly in her parents...” (page 145) her family finally arrives in London. When in London the Karmi family maintains a tight Arab routine; her extremely unhappy mother enters a true depressive phase (page 167). She isolated herself and refused to install central heating in their house, which was cold and damp, and refused to accept their new London home as their final, permanent destination. She subsequently never learned English, nor did she form any friendships with English people. This was a strong contrast with her former life in Palestine, where the front door of her house was always open to guests and her neighbors were her friends, regardless of

their ethnic or religious background. She never set foot in her children's school (page 179) and the classical music she would avidly listen to in Palestine was now quickly turned off (page 183).

How can one elaborate such a dramatic and global loss? The failure in successfully migrating in the adult generation can be accounted for by an overwhelming pain which exceeds the ability to bear it, a prevailing mechanism of denial, the forced nature of exile and the thought that what you lost still exists but that somebody else occupies it. The invaders now live in their homes. The present becomes frozen as it is not the past and must not become your future.

The process of freezing the 'lost object' will inevitably involve also freezing what was experienced in ourselves with that object. The oscillation between idealization of the lost world and the denigration and alienation from the new present world, makes life difficult for the children who cannot remain closed indoors but rather have to go to school, learn the new language and negotiate their insertion into a new community, values, traditions and social approval.

As Faimberg (2006) wrote: a denial which has been transmitted from one generation to the next, often prevents from elaborating on the traumas in various catastrophes in 1900. This un-mourned loss eventually becomes sequestered into a 'cyst' which is almost irrevocably closed off. The cyst becomes a mutilation within the individual as well between the individual and others.

So which mental processes did Ghada have to do in order to continue living?

### **3. The defensive attempts ( the post-migration pseudo-integration)**

Ghada realizes that she cannot denigrate the present if she wants to live in it, and so she freezes memories and losses and along with this the foundations of her cultural identity. "I began to erase the past as if it had never existed...my parents favored this obliteration, and now I ask myself whether they did this so as to not re-experience the pain and the trauma or perhaps also for a more concealed and obscure reason. Perhaps what pushed them to obliterate was the shame for having deserted their homeland and having left it defenseless in the hands of the invaders "(page 193).

This shame was also possibly toward those people who had been abandoned and left there. Ghada thus began a long adaptation process, which we could call 'chameleon-like.' This was facilitated by her attendance in a Catholic school where the nuns would treat her with kindness; a taste of female caring which was akin to Fatima. Her best friend was a Jewish girl called Leslie, whose family was very welcoming to Ghada.

"I developed a notion that everything that was Arab was mediocre and did not merit any interest on my behalf..." (page 208)

The devaluation of one's heritage is pathognomonic of pathological mourning. "I adopted a resentment toward migrants, as if my family and I were part of the indigenous population... and in accordance with this principle I wanted to merge with the English, by imitating their behaviour and ways of life...and it never occurred to me that I may too become victim of that same contempt that my other migrant companions were experiencing. Nor did it occur to me that as a Palestinian I owed them the loss of my country..." (page 208-9)

The double level of splitting and denial becomes apparent here. The first level is the parents' denial of their loss, and the second level is the denial of the history of the Palestinian people that the British employed in the media and education in schools. The British wanted to forget their role leading to the nakba and were at the same time, by virtue of their common colonial linkage, promoting Israel as an ally country, thus forgetting the history of the British mandate in Palestine which had resulted in the spillage of their own blood as well as that of the Palestinians.

The two key moments which cracked Ghada's journey of adaptation between 1949 and 1967 were associated with the international Suez Canal crisis (November 1956) and the so-called 'Six-Day War' in 1967. These international crises favored an emergence in the social and school environment around Ghada of alliances between the English Jews and Israel, which were openly hostile to Arabs and Nasser's Egypt, as well as placing the English in an anti-Arab alliance with the other post- and neo-colonial states.

"The English Jews began in 1967 with their 'coming out' due to their religious background and their ties with Israel." (page 351)

Ghada suffered ugly experiences of bullying in school (page 262) and subtle-overt complications in her social interactions. She would be challenged: "do you think what your Nasser did is right?" (page 252)

She writes: "It took another decade and a further deep crisis for my construct to finally collapse, however, without my awareness, following the Suez Canal crisis the first cracks within me were formed." (page 268)

For a while Ghada had no choice: she attempted to integrate by assimilation. She obtained citizenship in 1952. She lived as if she had a double-life. An emotional detachment becomes evident between herself and her parents, who live worlds apart, and in particular her mother. Subsequently she is welcomed warmly by John's family, who wishes to marry her. Ghada hesitates because she knows that for her, John represents the English home that gives her a sense of belonging, but I think she felt the abyss which lay under their relationship. That sense of belonging was based upon the denial of her own history – of which there was never any mention – of her original Arab identity and of the historical reasons of her forced migration of which there was no mention either. (page 332)

Ghada unconsciously chooses the 15<sup>th</sup> May as her wedding date – which is also the date of the nakba. The date of the loss of her homeland now also becomes the date of the breach from her family, who were unable to accept her choice. Perhaps this overlap in the dates



occurs in the path of denial, or perhaps conversely it serves to direct the spotlights on this very date.

The wider history will once again enter her life, this time providing her a new chance of elaboration and personal integration. This occurs in the three-hour war...the so-called "Six-Day War", with the Arab debacle and the triumph of Israel in 1967.

The fusion between colonial states who shared anti-Arab sentiments and targeted them as enemies, both handed over the responsibility of threat to the Jews to the Arab world and thus allowed them to shift aside the cloud of the European role in the Holocaust.

A crucial moment came when John said: "I can't but admire Israel."

The marriage was overwhelmed by these events, but Ghada fully allows her inner crisis to develop: "I now felt twice as lonely. It was as if that week of the War had unmasked me. I asked myself who I really was." (page 344).

These are troubled pages but that reveal a process of inner reconnection to her own history and her own buried cultural bonds.

Those areas of ambiguity which one develops in order to permit adaptation, which is perceived as the only chance of survival, are obtained through splitting and suppression of important areas of our identity. These areas are correlated with various factors e.g. the fragility of one's sense of identity, the amount of shame and self-denigration threatening it, the collusive dynamics with the surrounding environment (denial, denigration, amnesia), the degree of violence of social exclusion and punishment in the event of revealing one's difference or critical stand.

Internal integration (heritage, belonging, identification models, trans-generational issues, our individuation-creation of our original identity in early developmental phase, its dilemmas) is the only pre-requisite for an external/social integration which does rely upon the loss of important parts of oneself or the adoption of a superficial chameleon-like behaviour.

Israel, via skilled political and media strategies, succeeded in transforming the Palestinian population's image from expelled victims from their homeland into an intrusive and aggressive presence, without rights and which had to be annihilated. The divided and disorganised Arab states, following the death of Nasser, never held any role in the geo-political scheme in the Middle-East and Mediterranean.

With the laws of March 2011, in Israel the State now withdraws funds to those institutions which commemorate the day of the foundation of the State of Israel as a day of mourning. Mentioning the nakba is forbidden in schools. The implications of this are that those thousands of Palestinians who stayed behind in what later became the state of Israel, are not allowed to commemorate the day in which they lost their former community and in which thousands of their friends and relatives turned into permanent refugees. Some of these refugees are exiles scattered around the world (such as Ghada's family) and many millions of others now live in refugee camps without rights and national identity.

True 'denial' prevents its victims from being recognised.

Ghada writes: "I understood with bitterness that I had not only lost my homeland but also my right to hold it against those who had taken it from me."

#### **4. The reconnection with her own history.**

Ghada began a political activism which continues to the present day. From being a doctor she further became a historian and a scholar, which is perhaps the aspect of her life better known to us. This part of her life led her to consider living and working in Syria as a doctor, thus re-entering into an Arab cultural environment. She experienced what those who have lived and studied the complexities of migration know, that the individual becomes an original individual who has to accept not fitting both in the culture of origin or in the new hosting culture.

Her tremendous efforts which she made on a personal level, lay foundation to her courageous and original thinking. She is working on a strategic proposal which is included in her book "Married to another man" (this was how Palestine was described by the two envoys from the first Zionist conference in Basel in 1897, i.e. it was a land which was already inhabited by a native Arab-Palestinian) which Ghada came to present in Italy four years ago.

Ghada writes: "I am aware that the idea of one country is not a topic which is easy to write about. One immediately ends up becoming part of a marginal minority, and one becomes accused of utopia, anti-Semitism and betrayal. These are prejudices which are used to prevent thoughts which contrast with familiar and conventional opinions, or which serve different interests. Rather the idea of one secular and democratic state in the historical Palestine should be approached with a frank debate as, I hope to demonstrate, is the only possible way both for Palestinians and the Israelis".

**Thank you Ghada, and thank you Fatima**, whom I think Ghada has found within herself like a warm and loving core, and thanks to which she managed to bring a constructive and hopeful message to her people.

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*Cesare Pavese: "We need a homeland, even simply for the satisfaction of leaving it. Having a homeland means not being alone; the knowledge that within the people, plants and Earth there is something of you, which when you are not there remains waiting for you." La Luna e I Falò.*

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