

On the Threshold of the Nakba: The Carried Memory in the Moment of Expulsion



As Ghassan Kanafani recounts in his elegy to his people, *Returning to Haifa*: “Saeed was able to see many things he once considered—and still considered—his own intimate belongings, things he had always imagined as sacred, mysterious possessions that no one else could understand, touch, or truly see.”

He continues: “There was a picture of Jerusalem he remembered clearly, still hanging where it had been when he lived there. On the opposite wall was a small Damascene rug that had always been there too. He could see two of the five chairs from the original set. The other three were new.

In the center was the same mother-of-pearl inlaid table, though its color had faded. The glass vase had been replaced with a wooden one, in which were bundled peacock feathers.

He had once counted seven. He tried to count them again from where he was seated but couldn’t. So he got up, approached the vase, and counted them one by one: only five remained.”

These tiny, lived-in details that Saeed and Safiyya notice during their visit to their

confiscated home in Haifa are not merely private memories. They represent a collective insomnia shared by millions of Palestinians whose lives were suspended at the moment of 1948: the vase, the broken doorframe, the dining table.

That sudden moment when they were forced to leave their homes for the town square, then to olive groves, neighboring villages, and finally into exile—an exile that gradually revealed itself as permanent, trapping them in the liminal space between the dream of return and the reality of displacement.

On that threshold of gray uncertainty, Palestinians left pieces of their souls behind. Some left the door ajar. Others abandoned bread dough on the table, convinced they'd be back in two hours.

Still others carried simple items that continue to haunt their memory like a pang of guilt: a stuffed vine leaves pot hastily hidden to feed the children, or a digging hoe slung over a refugee's shoulder. Everyone, it seemed, had left for a short journey—a journey that stretched into permanence.

From that hurried moment that became a catastrophe, and the guilt that tormented its victims for years, to the phobia of loss that began with land and crept into every aspect of their lives, this article attempts to make sense of a narrative lodged like a thorn in the Palestinian throat: impossible to swallow, and painful to spit out.

A story that begins with a mistake beyond repair, a loss beyond replacement, an abandonment turned into justification, and a burden that became a curse on the brow of memory.



The Palestinian Memory in a Suitcase

In her book *Palestinians in Syria: Nakba Memories of a Shattered Community*, writer Anaheed Al-Hardan notes that the dominant theme in Nakba narratives shared by what she calls “memory keepers” is loss.

These stories, passed down from grandmothers to the third generation of refugees, do not focus on combat or confrontation, but on what was lost—intentionally or not—during the expulsion.

Thus, the inherited memory is built on a single image: what the family once had, and what it lost in the Nakba.

Yet this memory can be viewed from another angle: what did families choose to take with them at the moment of expulsion? What did they decide to leave behind? This is the central question posed by the late researcher Rabiha Allan in her study on the role of rural Palestinian refugee women in preserving the family between 1948 and 1962.

She concluded that most families fled with nothing more than food, simple tools, and a few mattresses they used during harvest seasons in the fields.

This idea was reinforced by a social experiment organized by a women’s center in the Amari refugee camp near Ramallah. Titled “The Scent of the Homeland,” the event invited refugees to bring objects they had preserved since the Nakba.



The aim was to understand what, in that critical moment, women especially chose to carry: what seemed urgent and indispensable?

Among cooking pots, blankets, kitchenware, farming tools, food baskets, and keys to hastily locked homes never reopened, organizers realized most families left nearly destitute, and what they did carry was for survival.



Some of the destruction carried out by Zionists in the homes of Jerusalemites in 1948.

This meaning resonates in the testimony of Saduqiyyeh Khalil Abd al-Din, who was forcibly displaced from the village of Lifta near Jerusalem. She recalls: “We were sitting at home when bullets started flying from West Jerusalem, right over our heads into the house. When it got worse, my father had a truck.

We packed our clothes onto it and fled. We took some blankets and pillows. My mother, who had been kneading dough, carried it with her. We sat on the truck with our wheat grinder, sifter, and dough and escaped.”

Despite the fragility of what Saduqiyyeh’s family managed to bring, it sustained them through exile—unlike thousands who fled empty-handed. Some left in their nightclothes. Others were killed trying to sneak back for what they had left behind.

As blankets and pillows recur in refugee memories, so too does the story of dough carried by women, symbolizing continuity amid collapse. Zahra Abu Ta, displaced from Ramla, considers herself lucky for bringing two pots, a dough basin, and some clothing.

Saduqiyyeh still keeps that basin, a legacy from her mother who said: “This basin must stay for your children’s children. We must remember how we kneaded in our homeland.”

Saduqiyyeh adds, with a voice heavy with memory: “My mother, may God have mercy on her, used to knead in that basin after the expulsion, soaking the dough with tears. She cried over her clothes and gold, over our livelihood and land we left behind.”

The Absentee’s Property: Palestinian Assets After the Nakba

After the first blow, as Palestinians began to grasp that their separation from their homes and properties might be prolonged, some tried to sneak back to reclaim what they had lost. In the early months of the Nakba, before Israel had completed its territorial and property control, these attempts were frequent.

Some paid with their lives, shot by guards. Others returned to find their homes fenced off and added to what came to be called “Jewish Agency property.”

Within months, the historical fabric of Palestinian society unraveled. A society once composed of 60–62% peasants, and 34% city dwellers of whom 35% worked in light industry, 17% in transport, 23% in trade, and 7% in public services, became dependent on aid and relief.

Educated Palestinians had to accept any work to survive. Large swathes of once-productive people became destitute refugees. The UN Conciliation Commission for Palestine estimated that 556,000 refugees, forming around 158,000 families, were expelled from over 500 towns and villages. Their property was valued at

\$235.769 million USD at the time.

According to the report, 37,000 families—142,000 individuals—lost everything, while only 45,000 families (150,000 people) retained any form of income.

While estimates of loss vary across UN, Arab, and Israeli sources, Israeli archives reveal a systematic process of appropriation. Homes in Haifa and Jaffa were sealed as soon as they were confirmed empty and were inhabited within weeks by new immigrants.



Occupation soldiers stealing photographs from Palestinian homes in Haifa in 1948.

Tailor shops and blacksmith workshops were quickly absorbed into the Israeli economy and became sources of work and income for Jewish immigrants/settlers.

This organized seizure paralleled the establishment of the Absentee Property Custodian in June 1948. The Custodian issued a flood of legal regulations to legitimize confiscation and established mechanisms for storing and distributing Palestinian refugee property.

Through legal circumvention, vast properties were transferred to the Jewish National Fund (JNF), which reserved their use exclusively for Jews, barring Palestinians from any recovery or benefit.

Determining the fate of Palestinian property remains as elusive as their right of return. In 1951, a land survey was launched using British Mandate-era maps to precisely measure private Arab land within what became Israel and assess its value in 1947 terms.

Results showed that the total property value was over twenty times higher than the UN commission's estimates once non-real estate assets, jewelry, and livestock were included.

In 1964, Palestinian economist Yusif Sayigh published a comprehensive study on refugee compensation. This was followed by a 1988 report by land expert and former Mandate tax official Sami Hadawi, concluding that total Palestinian material losses amounted to no less than \$63 billion.

Among these losses was £130 million held in Palestinian names, frozen by the Bank of England when Britain de-pegged the Palestinian pound from sterling on the eve of the Nakba. These funds were absorbed into seized bank accounts in institutions like Barclays Bank, Ottoman Bank, Anglo-Palestine Bank (which became Bank Leumi), and even the Arab Bank, which had its branches closed and accounts confiscated.



Zionists looting the property of the village of Al-Malha in 1948.

In short, the Nakba was not merely the expulsion of 750,000 people from their homes, farms, factories, and shops. It was a collective denial of the right to

choose—the right to carry what they needed or to recover what they lost.

This happened through direct violence or via a complex legal apparatus like the Absentee Property Law, which deemed anyone absent from Israel at the time of its founding unfit to own anything—even if they wished to return but were barred from doing so.

Under these policies, three institutions divided Palestinian property: the Absentee Property Office (Finance Ministry) handled confiscation; the Israel Land Authority managed ownership and ensured exclusive Jewish transfer; and the Jewish Agency, through the JNF, invested these assets in settlement projects, shielded from legal accountability or restitution claims.

Thieves' Exhibitions: "If I Don't Steal It, Someone Else Will"

In her 2015 study, *Revisiting Dispossession: Israel, the Nakba, and Things*, cultural anthropologist Rebecca Stein sheds light on what she calls the "found lost": Palestinian belongings left behind after the owners' expulsion and seized by Zionist militias.

She argues that clothes, shoes, kitchen tools, family photos, and meals left on tables were not ordinary items. They held deeply rooted Palestinian identity, because they belonged to their rightful owners and their everyday lives.

Her study flips the narrative from loss to ownership, tracing how looted belongings were absorbed into the settler context and became material tools in Israel's denialist national narrative.

Stein met settlers living in former Palestinian homes, including Moshe Amira, who rented a medieval house near the village of Abu Ghosh, just ten minutes from East Jerusalem. She observed how Palestinian property had been turned into symbols of Israeli nationhood.



Israeli soldiers looting a Palestinian library in Qalqilya.

Antique Arabic items, some over 300 years old, were not preserved as Palestinian heritage, but justified looting through a narrative of “salvation”: “If I hadn’t taken them, they would have been destroyed.”

Stein recounts Amira’s story of taking an intricately carved wooden radio from the Qatamon neighborhood during the Nakba, encouraged by her mother: “Everyone’s going to take something. Why don’t you go too? So I went to Qatamon and took the radio.”

Such stories are not rare. Many Israeli testimonies describe shame over returning empty-handed from looted Palestinian homes.

That same year, an Israeli journalist described looting as a national frenzy: “Everyone, individuals and groups, men, women, children, rushed for the spoils: doors, windows, tiles, bricks, scrap metal, machine parts. Many of these thefts were committed by Jewish soldiers digging through emptied villages, searching for anything left behind: cash, equipment, trucks, livestock.”

This fever, embodied in Amira’s phrase “If I didn’t take it, it would be destroyed,” reflects the core logic of legitimized theft in the Zionist project. A mindset echoed decades later by settler Yaakov in Sheikh Jarrah in 2015, who told protesting Palestinians: “If I don’t steal it, someone else will.”

This behavior stems not only from personal greed, but from a deeper paradox in the Zionist psyche—one that first delegitimizes the Arab, then suddenly covets everything he owns: homes, workshops, even architecture.

Today, Israeli realtors still advertise homes in abandoned Arab villages as “authentic Arab-style houses, tiled floors, high ceilings, plenty of arches.”



Settlers looting abandoned Palestinian homes in the Musrara neighborhood at the end of 1948.

In Israeli commercial rhetoric, the Arab doesn't appear as an existential threat, just as his belongings weren't seen as losses during the Nakba, but as opportunities. But when the history of the Palestinian home is questioned, the threat reemerges, and the narrative of denial resurfaces.

The counter-narrative doesn't just justify the looting, it shifts the blame entirely onto Palestinians—just like the Absentee Property Law, which declared that their absence was negligence, and their dispossession a consequence of their own “failure” to register or tend their land.

In reality, barriers, bombs, and field executions ensured Palestinians couldn't return, even those who tried to sneak back to their villages. The war itself disrupted Palestinian agricultural cycles in the years leading up to the Nakba.

It is in this context that the justifications for theft, as portrayed by Ghassan Kanafani in *Returning to Haifa*, resurface. The usurper of the child Khaldun confronts Saeed and Safiyya with brutal reproach: “You shouldn't have left Haifa.

If you had to, you shouldn't have left your infant behind. If that was impossible, you should never have stopped trying to return. Has twenty years taught you nothing? If I were you, I would've taken up arms to get my son back.

Is there any stronger reason? Powerless! Chained by backwardness and paralysis! Don't tell me you spent twenty years crying! Tears don't bring back the lost or perform miracles!"



Jewish immigrant women looting Palestinian homes in the village of Ein Karem in Jerusalem.

This same mindset has endured for decades, transforming Palestinian possessions into political tools. Looted homes, seized books, even clothes were used to prove that “Arabs fled,” abandoning everything in panic. Meanwhile, Jewish “adherence” to these stolen items was portrayed as proof of rightful ownership.

In this inverted logic, Palestinians are denied the right to reclaim anything. Their belongings are displayed in Israeli exhibitions like trophies—as if they were refugees finally rescued by those who could appreciate their value.

Decades later, the line between Nakba and genocide blurs. Palestinians focus on their greatest losses: land and lives. Yet there are other things lost along the path to freedom—paid as a price for existence or stripped away as punishment for resistance. Together, they form a complex identity not grasped all at once, but accumulating within as silent voids, filled only by the determination to reclaim



everything lost: land, memory, suitcases, destinies—to speak in their own voice and grow once more from their own roots.

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