

# The Politics of Assertion in the Memoir *In Search of Fatima* by Gada Karmi

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## ABSTRACT

Life writing includes biography, autobiography, memoir, personal diaries, letters, testimonies, blogs, vlogs, emails etc. It is the recordings of one's musings and reflections about oneself. Industrialization, urbanization and international trade and commerce helped much in developing life writing and memoir. This paper considers the memoir *In Search of Fatima*, by Gada Karmi to investigate the political undercurrents behind it. Politics means all social activities practiced by humanity singly or collectively. It's a discourse and dialogue that binds all human activities together. A memoir is a nonfictional narration which moves on the personal feelings of an author. It was considered a sub category of autobiography in the past, but now it is considered as separate genre. The memoir *In Search of Fatima* has three parts, affixed by a prologue and an epilogue. Part one has titled as Palestine, part two as England and part three as *In Search of Fatima*. The third part extensively deals with the peak of the trauma, experienced by Karmi or her persona Fatima. And the most important political stand taken by the author is keeping the memory alive because memocide is schematically practiced by Israeli forces, by bulldozing buildings, uprooting trees, destroying landmarks etc. It has to be resisted, according to the author. So, the resistance movement should be deeply planted by unearthing the history of the nation. This resistance can be seen in the writings of Karmi Gada. That is the politics of the memoir. The memoir *In Search of Fatima* becomes a political document. That political document gives the people a new energy, new power, a new dream, a new enthusiasm, and a new philosophy.

**Keywords :** Life Writing, Memoir, Memrist, Resistance, Politics, Space, Palestine

## I. INTRODUCTION

The term life writing is an umbrella term that puts under its shelter the genres like biography, autobiography, memoir, personal diaries, letters, testimonies, blogs, vlogs, emails etc. It is the recordings of one's musings and reflections about oneself or her immediate or otherwise proximity. During the second half of seventeenth century and throughout the eighteenth century, there was mushroomings in life writings in English, historically

analysing. The possible reasons for this boom were, among other things, industrialization, urbanization and international trade and commerce. Life writings have literary potentials and research potential, like other genres of contemporary relevance. By literary potential, we mean that, those writings can be read for both purposes, reading for pleasure or reading for instruction. Didacticism and pleasure principals are two objectives of reading, according to Aristotle (*See Poetics and Republic*). The phrase research potential is used to register the possibility of doing research, based on the life writing, because life writing provides

first-hand information about the author or about his subjects. These two potential aspects made life writing immensely popular. Confessional mode of writing, it is criticised, though, that the assertion of too much subjectivity is intolerable.

The approach and methodology of life writing differs from male to female, according to some thinkers. The women found it a very useful vehicle to transport their highly personalised life experiences and subjugated selves. The traumatised life experience of women and underprivileged got reflected in their life writing. Suzette Hencke made an attempt to theorize the positive relationship between women and life writing. According to her, women writers were given an opportunity by life writing to put the narrator and participant together. Thus the traumatised parts of a woman's psyche got integrated.

The intention of this paper is thoroughly considering the memoir *In Search of Fatima*, penned by Gada Karmi and investigating the political undercurrents behind it. By politics, the description intended, here, is not the party politics Indians are experienced, at all. Instead, it considers the word political in the full sense of the term. The term politics, here, means all social activities practiced by humanity singly or collectively. It's a discourse and dialogue that binds all human activities together. Be it administration, social gathering, wedding reception, male chauvinism and what not? As Heywood theorised, it is 'always a dialogue, and never a monologue' (Heywood 1). So, it is an engagement. Engagement with the society at large. This is the reason why politics become so prominent a discourse today, not as an independent discipline, but as multi and interdisciplinary. Hence, Politics is omnipresent. Our individual activities are entwined and designed in the cobweb of societal interactions. So, it has multiplicity of interpretations. By the advent of second wave feminism, the distinction between private space and public space got narrowed. Traditionally the term politics was attributed to public sphere, which was dominated by

men and other socially and economically privileged sections of the society. So the distinction and the difference gave birth to inclusion and amalgamation.

This distinction between the public and private has been problematised and disrupted by feminist political theory, and is well captured by the feminist slogan 'the personal is political', or, in other iterations, 'the private is political'. The phrase originated with second-wave feminism, a period of feminist activism that began in the 1960s and focused on issues like domestic violence and reproductive rights, previously considered matters of 'private' as opposed to 'political' concern. (<https://www.open.edu/openlearn/society-politics-law/what-politics/content-section-2.1.5>)

Thus reading a book, writing a book, wedding, birth, education, dress code, food habit, jails and punishment, moral policing, architecture, entertainment industry, sexuality etc. are discourses that come under the title politics, along with governance, judiciary and local self-governments, in the broader sense of the word politics. The word politics is used, in this sense, in this paper.

A memoir is a nonfictional narration which circumnavigates on the contours of personal feelings of an author. The readers consider the description matter fact and real, hence it becomes a valid and reliable source of information. It was considered to be a sub category of autobiography in the past, but now it is being considered as separate genre and entity. The terms like memorialist and memorist etc. are frequently used now in literary discourses.

*In Search of Fatima* has an explanatory subtitle. The subtitle is *A Palestine Story*. The memoir is prefixed by a prologue and suffixed by an epilogue. The structure of the memoir is metaphoric for the life, the speaker persona experienced. As many other memorialists have practiced, Ghada Karmi also presents an amalgamation of personal story with political history of her 'nation' Palestine. Since the establishment of Israel, in 1948, the confrontations between Palestinians and Israelites are quite

frequently seen. United Nations Organizations and many other international organizations passed dozens of resolutions against Israel, for its roguish nature and merciless atrocities against innocent Palestinians. The incidents and the narration of the memoir starts in the year 1948, which is the year of establishment of Israel. The memoir *In Search of Fatima* has three parts, affixed by a prologue and an epilogue. Part one has titled as *Palestine*, part two as *England* and part three as *In Search of Fatima*. The third part extensively deals with the peak of the trauma, experienced by Karmi or her persona Fatima. In the acknowledgement Gada Karmi successfully and deliberately proposes the politics and the genesis of her memoir.

This book could not have been written without the generous help of my family, whose memories of events before 1948 were indispensable. I wish especially to commend in this respect my father and my sister Siham, but also my brother Ziyad and my cousin Zuhair and Aziza Kasim. (See the *Acknowledgement*)

In addition to the *Acknowledgement*, there is an author's note also, attached with the book, which specifically argues that the following pages are not fictitious but records deeply planted in the real life situation any common Palestinian encounters. Thus the memoir become a bunch of anecdotes that poses many questions of identity and estrangement. She wants to hide many names, deliberately behind the curtain, because sometimes revealing names are very dangerous in Palestinian experience. "Most of people who feature in this memoir are known by their authentic names. In a few instances, however, to avoid professional and personal embarrassment, I have thought it best to alter the names" (See *Author's Note*). Throughout the memoir, Ghada Karmi presents the uncertainty and dislocation, faced by the child. Fatima can be any child who faces the perpetual threat of extermination at any point of time. The

opening lines of the section *Palestine* itself provides how frustrated and disillusioned the normal life there at Palestine, even in 1948. The first sentence of the memoir makes this bleak picture visible for the readers.

A mighty crash that shook the house. Something – a bomb, a mortar, a weapon's store?–exploded with a deafening bang. The little girl could feel it right inside her head...Shootings, the bullets whistling around the windows and ricocheting against the walls of the empty houses opposite, followed immediately.(Karmi 1)

As we said earlier, there are three parts between the epilogue and prologue namely, *Palestine*, *England* and *In Search of Fatima*. The scheme and symmetry of the memoir is a response to personal anecdotes of the life of the persona. It picturises the growth of the persona from childhood to adulthood, from 1948 to the year in which the memoir got published. Though the first part entitled as *Palestine*, it speaks about *England*. It clearly shows how the child got alienated and displaced in a foreign land. The reference to Oscar Wild is also symbolic. She senses the airport. Identifies it. And first time understands the differences between her homeland and a foreign land.

On a cold autumnal day I stood with my mother, sister, and brother in London Airport. It was not then called Heathrow. "Oscar Wild" were the only two English words I knew because one of the books in my father's library had borne this title, and when I was seven, he taught me to read the English alphabet. (Karmi 5)

The child was so curious to know the whereabouts of the airport. She compared and contrasted the place with the land of her own experience. The memorialist here says that she was only nine years at that time. She was unaware of the intention of reaching there. She was equally unaware of the duration in which the

family wanted to be there. Her expectation to meet her father is described in an emotional undertone. The airport really enthralled her too much. She describes the airport as something extra terrestrial. "The airport was a daunting place; it had immense halls with polished floors, vinyl and wood, which was the strangest sight of all. In Palestine, floors were tiled or made of stone" (Karmi 5). The story thread of the memoir and the life of Fatima develop hand in hand. In the memoir, historical incidents were drawn to arrest the attention of the reader. The frequent historical references in the memoir provided the reader to chronologically assimilate the major developments in the country and the dateline of resistance movement against all types imperialist assault on the land and the people. There was reference to the second world war in the memoir. The second world war was historic and decisive as far as the Palestinian experiences were concerned. It was the victory of the allied forces that made the establishment of Israel possible. Though the ambition of creating a Jewish nation was aired during the early decades of Twentieth century , it got a concrete step after the second world war. Arthur Balfour was the architect of Balfour declaration.

The Balfour Declaration was a public statement issued by the British government in 1917 during the First World War announcing support for the establishment of a "national home for the Jewish people" in Palestine, then an Ottoman region with a small minority Jewish population. The declaration was contained in a letter dated 2 November 1917 from the United Kingdom's Foreign Secretary Arthur Balfour to Lord Rothschild, a leader of the British Jewish community, for transmission to the Zionist Federation of Great Britain and Ireland. The text of the declaration was published in the press on 9 November 1917. (en.wikipedia.org).

The reference to the second world war should be read in the light of this political movement. From the year 1948, in which year she was born, she moves back to history to unearth and comment her existence, along

with the Palestine movement against occupation. Along with the reference to the second world war, the reference to the massacre of many Palestinian leaders made their reverberations in the memoir. One of such incidents took place is in Deir Yassine. On April 9, 1948, the Israeli army unleashed assault on the inhabitants of Deir Yassine. And massacred a large group of people.

The Deir Yassin massacre took place on April 9, 1948, when around 130 fighters from the far right Zionist Paramilitary groups Irgun and Lehi killed at least 107 Palestinian Arabs, including women and children, in Deir Yassine a village of roughly 600 people near Jerusalem. The assault occurred as Jewish militia sought to relieve the blockade of Jerusalem during the civil war that preceded the end of British rule in Palestine (en.wikipedia.org)

The will power and attachment of young Fatima towards the homeland is significant. It shows how the people of Palestine is embedded with the urge of resistance and independence. The family of Gadha Karmi became the ring leaders of the resistant movement. The memorialist narrates the resistance and suffering of the people. It was actually this massacre that pushed the family outside Palestine. Here the memory also functions. One of the remarkable steps taken by Israel is killing the people along with their memories. Memoricide is a deliberate scheme of the Zionist regime to wipe out the people. Unearthing the memory and pushing it to the foreground is one of the agenda of Gada Karmi, along with other Palestine writers.

"But why do we have to go?" She started to explain that it was not safe to stay on, but, as he spoke, the words suddenly lost meaning. A numbness began to come over me and I had a sudden feeling of utter helplessness. I had never met my grandparents and I didn't want to. I wanted to stay here at home, despite Deir Yassine (whatever that was) and however bad the shooting got (Karmi 118)

Gada Karmi memoir considers other issues of Palestine too. The genuine issues faced by the women and children are common in Palestine too. She narrates the personal, domestic and social life of Palestine. The recurring themes of alienation and estrangement are germinated in the prologue and in the first part of the book, *Palestine*. But, in the second book *England* proposes the extreme form of landlessness, which later becomes resistant in the coming books of the memoir. Part two of the memoir unequivocally moves around the greatest question which the memoir puts forward.

At the end of the memoir, the agenda of political emancipation get more oriented and that leads towards a dream of freedom and Palestine Liberation. Here, the politics of memory writing got prominence. The energy of the writer, the capacity to build mechanisms and the interactional methodology demanded are exceptionally embedded here. The politics of writing a memoir has two fold implications, here. Number one, her experience as a woman and number two, her life with traumatised memory and life history. Memory becomes one of the important tools of investigating and reassuring the craze for Independence. The modern memory studies or the theories of memory studies unambiguously picture this agenda of salvation or emancipation. Most of the memoirs depend on memories or oral histories because the available records were written by the colonizers or the privileged. So, naturally those archives become anecdotes of classical power hierarchy that subjugates the less privileged and societal underdogs. The only way out of this labyrinthine quagmire is exploring the potentialities of oral histories and memories, shrouded in oblivion. So these memoirs become deliberate attempts to fight against oblivion most often. In the post-colonial perspective, in order to create a world of their own, the marginalized and underprivileged sections of the society use their memories as seedbed of their literary creativity. It is an important tool for reorienting their

immediacies for a better future. Thus, the past becomes a source of inspiration for them, to lead a fruitful life.

The author dreamt of a Palestine where she spent her early years, the references to that land is actually a political tool. She tried to create a country named Palestine in another country called England, in the memoir. They are trying to create a world of their own. In the memoir *In Search of Fatima*, we noticed that deliberate attempt was made to make the dream come true. This belligerent remembering, of course, will lead them to the success. Success means return to their own homeland. So in the Memoir, some words are crucially used. For example, the word search. Search is a deliberate attempt. Searching is not accidental. It is not even coincidental. Searching is a deliberate activity shouldered by the seeker. She searches her own roots in the ocean of rootlessness. Landlessness, rootlessness, lack of history, lack of anecdotes etc, are phenomenally seen in the writing of this so-called diasporic or exiled writers. The third section of the memoir, entitled as *In Search of Fatima* the word "search" is very important. They are searching their country. And once you search your country, you will get to the ancient traditions and ancient episodes. These episodes are multifaceted ones. That fragrance of the smell of your land, the fruitfulness of your land and the fruition of your land.

And the most important political stand taken by the author is Keeping the memory alive because memocide is schematically practiced by Israeli forces, by bulldozing buildings, uprooting trees, destroying landmarks etc. It has to be resisted, according to the author. So, the resistance movement should be deeply planted by unearthing the history of the nation. This resistance can be seen in the writings of Karmi Gada. That is the politics of the memoir. She wants to give a new tool and weapon to the people who dream of the freedom of Palestine. In this way,

the memoir *In Search of Fatima* becomes a political document. That political document gives the people a new energy , new power, a new dream, a new enthusiasm, and a new philosophy.

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