

expression to the tragedy of Palestine for both those indigenous who have been driven out and for those settlers who have since moved in, neither able to be fully restored to what it was nor able to remain what it is today, if these are indeed the wishes of either group, the merging of past and present in the guide perhaps also gives expression to a hope of what it might yet become. With the inclusion of the author's previously published return plan, largely schematic in character, the Atlas aims to map out how this transition might take place. A useful starting point, the plan nevertheless raises a host of issues that deserve detailed consideration, not least of which are questions relating to the generation of political will, the merits of top-down, bottom-up and mixed approaches to conflict resolution, the identification of lessons learned and best practices applicable to the Palestinian refugee case and how they inform or militate against the basic elements of the author's plan.

As a document that explicitly aims to connect past and future, the *Atlas of Palestine* raises an important question about how to bridge the abyss separating the two. In other words, beyond the use of memory to help clarify what happened and what went wrong, how does one employ or (re)deploy memory to facilitate transition from conflict to a shared understanding of the future? Writing history from the vantage point of political decision-makers and power-brokers, as the author does in section one of the Atlas, certainly aids in understanding the policies and practices which contributed to the massive displacement and subsequent dispossession of Palestinians during and after the 1948 war. This vantage point appears less useful in relation to the future. Indeed, it suggests a certain lineality, determinacy and even *fait accompli*. While the maps contain a panoply of information regarding the people and the land as they and it existed in the decades leading up to, during and after the 1948 war, what seems missing from the history of this period are the voices of the peoples themselves. Limited, in part, by the Atlas format, the apparent absence of these voices raises an important question about the role of counter-factual and subaltern history – of decisions not taken, of ideas set aside, of local, grassroots or bottom-up efforts, separate and joint, to envision and create an alternative future – among others, in bridging the divide between past and future. Far from the only element needed to bridge that divide, it may nevertheless be a critical one.

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The Responsibility of Writing

Selma Dabbagh, *Out of It* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011). 312 pp. Paperback. ISBN 978 1 4088 2130 5

In 'The Burdens of Interpretation and the Question of Palestine' (*Journal of Palestine Studies* 16,1, Autumn 1986: 29–37), Edward Said wrote that any kind of knowledge about human history is a form of engagement in it. This statement seems to become particularly true while reading *Out of It*, the first novel of Palestinian writer Selma Dabbagh. In fact, it might be suggested that the story shows the difficulties and predicaments of political commitment

in the context of Palestine, a land attacked from outside and divided in fratricidal and factional struggle from within. Yet beyond the impasse that being politically involved can imply, engagement is staged as imperative in this intriguing literary work, which is in part a response to an over-determined media scene of proliferating images and news about Palestine.

The novel narrates the experiences of the members of a family from Gaza, partly surviving there, under bombardments and inhuman life conditions caused by an unending siege, partly scattered around the world, dispersed and displaced, living on borders, frontiers and checkpoints, continuously out of place and under surveillance. The plot centres around the vicissitudes of Sabri, the oldest brother, constricted on a wheelchair after the explosion of his car, and the twins Rashid and Iman. Rashid is a twenty-seven year old boy who cannot bear the life there, and hence attempts to find escape routes in the way he can, smoking grass and falling in love. He seems to be very different from Iman, an unsatisfied girl who is full of energy and good will but has to learn how to channel her energy into conscious forms of political participation. The novel, which captivates the reader in an almost continuing, uninterrupted flow of events, is fragmented into sections set in Gaza, London and the Gulf. Some elements of it may remind the reader of some examples of the Palestinian literary tradition, of which Selma Dabbagh's work is now an important part. For instance, the physical amputation of the legs of the oldest brother, in its more than literal value, could refer to the stories of Ghassan Kanafani, where this figurative component has been significantly adopted. Among dramatic episodes of death and violence, the unfolding of the novel manages to maintain a vitality that results in some funny passages, brilliant and thought-provoking. Some interesting aspects emerge when one attempts to make sense of the title, *Out of It*, a phrasing that keeps returning in many parts of the narrative, from beginning to end. 'Out of it' may suggest a reflection on escape and abandonment, the reaction of those characters attempting to find a way out of the conflict, like the father who, remarried in the Gulf, tries to forget, distance himself from his family and be as much as possible detached from the political situation in Palestine. Rashid, who may be identified as the main character of the novel, cannot stand the expectations of the people around him and seems to be asking for a real act of love, an understanding of people from Palestine simply and fully as human beings, first of all. Indeed, Rashid may incarnate the persistence of a sense of humanity in inhuman conditions, yet a humanity that, in the end, has to cope with historical circumstances and find a form of engagement in them. There is no way 'out of it' then, because history, the history of war, pain and suffering of your people will not leave you, your efforts to leave it notwithstanding. Similarly, family secrets cannot be hidden forever, as he and his sister Iman will discover in London. *Out of It* can also be understood as a geographical, emotional and physical distance, the obstacles that keep families and peoples, peoples and places apart. In fact, *Out of It* is also a story of exile and migration, and all the suffering that distance may impart to relationships. The Mujaheds, like many Palestinian families, are not just people whose land is being colonised, they are people who cannot find their place out of it, a place to newly call home, and in this impossibility they are condemned to displacement by war and occupation.

However, 'out of it' could also be the ending of an unwritten sentence that could sound like 'to make something out of it', a creative act, a gesture of resilience and resistance, perhaps epitomised by the personal stories described in the book or by that other book that the novel includes but does not reveal. That other history book is, in fact, a chronicle of the war which Sabri keeps working on, writing and researching, which will document all of it, like the novel itself is doing for us. It would be very interesting to know what that will look like, a writing born out of the events witnessed by the Mujaheds, as well as their common, everyday stories of love, friendship, fidelity and betrayal. In the final scene, an intense and moving episode will allow Rashid to find a way out, that is, a way in, as no

way out can be that does not result in a return, the rejoining of a common history and a common story in which, hopefully, the reader will find her/himself deeply implicated. As Rashid meditates, towards the end of the book, on how 'a way out was no longer a way out,' in the same way the reader may be led through the reading to come closer to the people living and surviving there, a response to their stories and to their voices. Through the eyes and dialogues of young characters masterfully represented, *Out of It* could be read indeed as a call for responsibility: not only the burdens of writing about Palestine today, but also a call for responsibility in the reader, those burdens of interpretation which require a different, conscious response to a complex history, a form of engagement which remains fraught with difficulties, yet at the same time inescapable.

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The Tragedy of Babylonian Jews and the Palestinian Nakba

Victor Sasson, *Essays from Occupied Holy Land* (Bloomington, New York: iUniverse, Inc., 2010). Pp.199. Paperback. ISBN: 978-1-4502-2563-2

The title of this book is in fact a misnomer. It is not a usual book at all, it does not have a beginning (introduction), thesis, development of a thesis, and a conclusion. Instead, after a very short preface signaling the motivation as to why the 'book' was written in the first place, and being told that it was occasioned by a visit to the Holy Land in 2008, which was followed by the devastating conflagration of the Israeli demonic attack on Gaza in 2009, the 'book' plunges right into the subject matter. That subject matter turns out to be a series of episodes, told more like anecdotes, repeated like political and social commentaries or opinion pieces on current events, intentionally unconnected into themes, chapters, and the like.

And yet it makes an extremely enjoyable read, had it not been for the ever-present tragedy that undergirds almost all of its episodes. It reads like a long fragmented modern poem, or should I say a dirge, with a distinctly clear theme permeating all of the detailed anecdotes. The theme is the multifaceted reverberations of the colossal catastrophe that befell the Iraqi Jewish community—Babylonian Jews as the author would like to call them—towards the middle of the twentieth century, a few years after the creation of the state of Israel, and as a consequence of it. Reading through the episodes, under whatever title they are grouped, one cannot feel anything other than a deep sadness, generated by the exposure to flashback scenes from the life of a community that survived for at least two and a half millennia, if not more, in its natural habitat, peacefully, harmoniously with its cultural surroundings, where it managed to outlive Assyrian invasions, Mongol devastations, early Islamic conquests of the land between the rivers (Mesopotamia), to say nothing of the continuous warfare between the two major empires of the historic Near East, Sassanian Iran and Byzantium, during the first millennium of the Common Era. Then, within a very short period, in the early to mid 1950s, a scheming alien ideology under the name of Zionism, through all sorts of twisted means and machinations, managed to uproot them from their homes, neighborhoods, schools, synagogues, and districts and turn them into refugees in a fictional land, concocted by an equally scheming British colonial power which