
Journeying Back Home from Displacement and the (Im)Possibility of Return in Ghada Karmi's *Return: A Palestinian Memoir* (2015)

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Abstract

*The forcibly exiled Ghada Karmi writes about her return to Palestine to retrieve a sense of belonging, overcome the unsettling sense of exile and rootlessness, and reconnect with her Arab roots. Her journey to a denuded Palestine is devoid of a sense of inclusion and belonging as the possibility of a real and outright return falls asunder. This article presents a paper that examines Karmi's journey back home from England and her writing about it in *Return: A Palestinian Memoir* (2015). This article aims to scrutinize the act of homecoming and the journey back from/to displacement in Ghada Karmi's memoir. Using the lenses of Brendan O'Donoghue's understanding of the poetics of homecoming, along with other contemporary theorists on the conundrum of exile and return, this paper deconstructs how Karmi questions the (im)possibility of a real return in her narrative. Thus, the analysis in this article reveals how Karmi's perception of a true return becomes decidedly fanciful as she becomes encumbered by the new, grim reality of her homeland.*

Keywords: Homecoming; Palestine; Displacement; Ghada Karmi; *Return: A Palestinian Memoir*

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“This seeking for *my* home... was *my* affliction... ‘Where is—*my* home?’ I ask and seek and have sought for it; I have not found it.”(Friedrich Nietzsche)¹

Introduction

Home is a sacred place for all humans, especially for those who are far from it, and fundamentally for the displaced and the dispossessed. Once one is away from it, the yearning for one’s home becomes all the more intensified and insatiable, and the idea of homecoming and journeying back seems more sanctified and enticing. The question of home is a central conundrum to those in exile (Tozan, 2025). This idea of homecoming is central to Ghada Karmi’s book *Return: A Palestinian Memoir*. Home acquires a significant position in Karmi’s narrative, and the act of homecoming is rendered poetic, resembling a rite wherein a return to the roots is held sacrosanct. This Palestinian home also evokes sorrowful sentiments principally because it has lost its old and distinct lineaments that Karmi used to identify herself with.

After the Nakba² (catastrophe) in 1948 and with the menacing presence of Israel, Karmi asseverates that her home has become a repository of grief. The vicissitudes of the Nakba resulted in the expulsion of Palestinians from their own homeland to exile and displacement. Stricken by the ripples of exile, those displaced Palestinians were overwhelmed by pangs of nostalgia and longing for their homeland. Consequently, they dreamed and wrote about the possibility of going back to their homeland and fighting for their cause, “the Palestinian cause” (Karmi, *Return: A Palestinian Memoir*, 2015, p. 299). Like all these displaced and dispossessed Palestinians, Ghada Karmi expatriates upon the possibility of truly returning to one’s homeland. Her memoir is a narrative wherein home is eminently prioritized. However, Karmi’s return to her home is not without ramifications, especially since her home is the usurped and occupied Palestine. A Palestine where the possibility of homecoming appears unlikely, and the prospect of returning is not as dazzling as that of leaving. Hence, is a true and outright return to Palestine of Karmi’s childhood feasible? Does Karmi question the possibility of such return? If so, how does her return to her homeland unfold in her narrative? These are the questions that arise clearly when considering Karmi’s narrative, and the questions this paper seeks to answer. This present article, therefore, attends to Karmi’s endeavor of writing about her return home to retrieve a sense of belonging. This article seeks to probe into the act of homecoming and journeying back from/to displacement in Ghada Karmi’s memoir while also examining how Karmi questions the (im)possibility of a real return in her narrative.

Methodology and the Poetics of Homecoming: Journeying Back Home and Writing About Return

The idea of homecoming, as Brendan O’Donoghue notes in *A Poetics of Homecoming*, resonates with a range of meanings, shifting from common parlance to the mythical sphere. Home then appears as a place of belonging and a sanctuary where humans feel warmly welcomed (p. 5). O’Donoghue further asserts that the notion of ‘Poetics of Homecoming’ suggests that a sense of ‘home’ is substantially emphasized, thereby becoming a repository of belonging, meaning, and purpose (9).

In the case of *Return: A Palestinian Memoir*, the act of Homecoming and returning to the Palestinian homeland is indeed emphasized and prioritized. Karmi dilates on her journey back to Palestine, emphasizing the exigency of home and hoping to return to an old sense of herself and a former state of consciousness, namely, to a pre-Nakba, precolonial Palestine. In this vein, the venture toward home is by no means an emotional undertaking carried out for comfort and retrospection, nor is it a simple indulgence and yielding to one’s yearning. On the contrary, Karmi’s memoir can be regarded as an account that “reveals [her] attempt to immortalize the place of origin” (Hamamra, 2023, p. 2). In this regard, Karmi attempts to revitalize the act of homecoming and commemorate home as a place of belonging by writing a narrative on journeying back from displacement and

¹ Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (383)

² “the uprooting of the Palestinians and the dismemberment and de-Arabisation of historic Palestine.” (Masalha, 2012, p. 1)

returning home. For her return to Palestine, however tormenting this may be, was an act that allows one “to be reunited with a part of the old Palestine and a sort of return.” (Karmi, p. 244).

Karmi constructs a narrative about journeying back to Palestine, revealing that, at its core, writing about return stems from a “passionate longing for normality, for life to resume as it has always been” (Karmi 4). In constructing this narrative, Karmi weaves a discourse that seeks to restore, even through recourse to memory, a sense of equipoise that once imbued Palestine before the events of the Nakba. In so doing, she seeks to retrieve the last remnants of an old Palestine. Moreover, Karmi also reflects upon her homecoming after forty-three years of displacement: “It was not true that Palestine had gone: it was still there, albeit in others’ hands, and to banish it from our lives was to accept the Zionist claim to its ownership.” (Karmi 268). In this context, Karmi’s writing about her return to Palestine can be seen as a subversive act that aims at overcoming the “paralyzing violence of silencing” (Grinberg, 2009, p. 113) that limits the ambit of the Palestinian cause.

Burdened by the unsettling events of the Nakba and the pathos of exile, Karmi writes about her journey back to her homeland or the “torn-up, unhappy land” of Palestine (Karmi 7) as she describes it to show her firm commitment to the Palestinian cause. This journey into the place that once had been Palestine and then became Israel is not entirely a pleasant venture. As Karmi reflects upon her return, she laments what has become of Palestine: “It was a momentous journey that had filled me with bitterness and grief. I remember looking down on a night-time Tel Aviv from the windows of the plane taking me back to London and thinking hopelessly, ‘Flotsam and jetsam, that’s what we’ve become, scattered and divided.’” (7). Karmi describes her journey to Palestine as ‘momentous’. However, this Palestine that Karmi returns to has become exceedingly ‘scattered and divided’.

Upon her return to this dispersed, embattled, and tightly circumscribed territory of Palestine, Karmi bears the brunt of the tumultuous bedlam that emanates from Israel’s overarching and menacing presence. A glimpse of this turbulent bedlam can be found at the outset of Karmi’s memoir: “No one could be sure of entering the country, let alone getting anywhere inside it, and planning a journey in advance was something of a futile exercise.” (Karmi 12). Interestingly enough, and perhaps ironically, Karmi recounts at length the vexing difficulties she had to surmount in order to garner permission to do what should be well within her rights; that is, to be allowed a fast and smooth entrance into her homeland, Palestine. Karmi’s lengthy description of Israel’s vexing presence in the quotidian existence of Palestinians goes far deeper than a mere description. It reflects the yearning and mourning for the place that had once been and has now faded away. This longing fomented- as Said asserts, quoting Joseph Conrad- “a desire [that] lurks in every heart to write down what once and for all a true account of what happened”³ (Said, 2015, p. 224). Moreover, in her narrative, Karmi stirs up an unquenchable desire for a return, not only a physical but also a psychic return, thereby revealing her attachment to her natal homeland prior to the Nakba.

Furthermore, while Karmi’s journey to Palestine represents her “quest for belonging, to find [her] roots and a credible identity” (Karmi p. 13), her writing about a return to the homeland signifies, in Saidian terms, a contrapuntal endeavor whereby she reconstructs a relic of the lost homeland, an old yet idealized image of Palestine. In this sense, Karmi’s writing about return becomes a monument “to perseverance and defiance” and “a passionate desire for normality in an abnormal world” (37). Thus, both the journey back home and writing about return are two ways by which Palestinian intellectuals and writers, in general, and Karmi, in particular, try to resurrect and reconstruct the marginalized past of Palestine; a past in which the sense of ‘normality’ that Karmi speaks of is decidedly intact. Instead, it is a past that is replete with abject struggle and devoid of an uplifting sense of hope:

It was a life-and-death struggle, and it would continue until the end. There was no other choice, except abject surrender, which none was prepared to contemplate. What the outcome of this struggle would be no one could know, but it was certain that out of it a new reality would emerge, and it was they, the people on the ground, who would be its heirs. (Karmi, p. 314)

³ Said, "Between Worlds," in *Reflections on Exile*, 554-568

The idea that writing about return is a way of reconstructing the marginalized past of Palestine finds itself well-steeped in *Return: A Palestinian Memoir*. Karmi recognizes the exigency not only of homecoming but also of writing on return and Palestine. She reveals that ever since she left Palestine with her family, returning to the center of the Palestinian cause has been her sole hankering. She asserts: “It was the underlying theme of all my writings, my lectures and my political work for Palestine.” (Karmi p. 314). For Karmi, the journey towards home is at the heart of the issue. Without it, the injustice that had shattered Palestinian lives for generations would never cease (14), and the prospect of fighting for their cause would fall asunder.

Intriguingly, Karmi reflects on the first years of exile with her family in London, recalling how the necessity or even the possibility of a return to the homeland began to wane in her family’s considerations and how the notion of restorative nostalgia (a belief in the possibility of an absolute return to the past) (Boym, 2001, p. 49) was seemingly far removed from their quotidian existence:

Bewildered by our new lives and struggling to adjust, my siblings and I hardly ever mentioned Palestine... We never formed the habit of recalling the past in those early years and I do not remember that we ever discussed what had happened to us or how we had felt during those last terrifying months in Jerusalem. Our parents rarely spoke of it; it was as if the door had been firmly shut on Palestine, and only what was happening to us in England mattered. (Karmi p. 266)

Caught in the grips of exile and encumbered by the ache of uprootedness, Ghada Karmi’s family, as she describes, brushed aside the issue of Palestine from their lives as if the idea of a return to their home had become entirely fanciful. Karmi, on the other hand, maintained an intimate kinship with Palestine. Her memoir evinces her unwavering devotion to the Palestinian cause: “being Palestinian was the only thing that felt real” (13). As she journeys back to her homeland, she writes about her return as though the onus is only on her to resist and defy Palestine’s erosion. Words such as homeland, return, and homecoming are not mere words for Karmi. On the contrary, for Karmi, the longing for a return and the journey back to Palestine is the precondition and the preliminary act of reclaiming her lost home.

As such, this longing for a journey back home represents a yearning for a return to a former state of consciousness. A return to one’s home becomes a return to one’s true self, to an idyllic, unadulterated state of concord, stasis, and unity. Hence, writing about return offers a means of resistance, a means of subverting the existential sense of homelessness that befalls exiles, and a means through which one seeks to assert a claim to the Palestinian territory. For some, return is literal, while for others, return only takes on a metaphorical connotation. For Karmi, the return only takes a physical, corporeal form. As she journeys through the usurped villages of Palestine, Karmi realizes that the glistening hope of a real return to her homeland grows dim, and a psychic return to the Palestine of her childhood becomes impossible.

The (Im)Possibility of Return

Throughout her memoir, Karmi narrates her journey from the ripples of exile and displacement back to her homeland. As she documents her experience within the hostile and smothering environment of today’s Palestine, she realizes that she has become deterred by all the unfavorable circumstances. Karmi feels a sense of existential homelessness within today’s Palestine. The menacing presence of Israel instigates this sense of homelessness, making her feel alienated and exiled even though she is at the heart of her homeland. Karmi then questions the possibility of a return to the old Palestine, a return that goes beyond the physical act and steers toward an emotional and psychic return. At the outset of her narrative, Karmi recalls her first experience with the immigration officers. This experience made Karmi question whether she could enter Palestine: “No one could be sure of entering the country, let alone getting anywhere inside it, and planning a journey in advance was something of a futile exercise.” (Karmi 12). Karmi realizes that a return to her place of origin has become almost a contrived undertaking.

The Homeland constitutes a reference point for Karmi, a place of supposed sanctuary and a repository of a credible Arab identity and root. She returns home hoping to restore her sense of self and heal the other rifts in her life (Karmi 19) only to find that everything has exacerbated, almost

irrevocably. The toll that forced exile and displacement have exacted on her did not diminish after her return to a denuded Palestine. Karmi contemplates her journey back to her homeland lamenting the impossibility of a real return and the vexing conditions this journey has evoked: “Perhaps I was also something of a tourist, an observer of a scene I was not part of.” (85).

Karmi realizes that a psychic and emotional return to Palestine has become conceivably impossible and perhaps fanciful. She states that her return to the usurped homeland was imbued with a sense of disappointment, a disillusionment of real return:

Why on earth did I ever come to this place, I asked myself again? What had made me imagine that there was anything here for someone like me? I looked back on my whole assignment in ‘Palestine’ and realised that I had achieved none of my aims because it would never have been possible in the Palestine that I found. I had travelled to the land of my birth with a sense of return, but it was a return to the past, to the Palestine of distant memory, not to the place that it is now. the people who lived in this Palestine were nothing to do with the past I was seeking, nor were they a part of some historical tableau frozen in time that I could reconnect with. This Palestinian world I had briefly joined was different: a new-old place. (Karmi 313)

Karmi declares that her journey back to Palestine stemmed from a profound longing for a sense of return and reconciliation. However, this return to an idyllic homeland was not concomitant with the Palestine of today. As Karmi ruminates on her journey to the place of origin, she realizes the impossibility of truly returning to the Palestine of her childhood. A real return, which was once a reconciliation with oneself and one’s roots, has now become an impossibility, devoid of any solace or consolation. For Karmi, return only resurrects pangs of nostalgia for a lost home and a Palestine of the past, a Palestine that has almost faded away; it has become, as she describes, a place of a “distant memory”.

The impossibility of a real return is further manifested in Karmi’s narrative of her maid, Fatima. Karmi dedicates an entire chapter to ‘Fatima’, a former maid who used to work for her family and take care of her before they were exiled. This memory of Fatima is by no means a haphazard recollection. Through reminiscing about Fatima, Karma recalls the unblemished, peaceful Palestine of her childhood that Fatima embodies. Fatima represents an old yet lost sense of the homeland that Karmi yearns for. For Karmi, the quest and search for Fatima symbolize a search for a true sense of return.

This quest for the elusive Fatima is then a search for a return to a place of sanctuary, an idyllic version of Palestine “It was as if my quest for Fatima had opened up a magic chest that transported me to the Palestine of those days, brought back its colours and smells and the whole feel of it” (Karmi 271). Moreover, Karmi asserts that the Palestine she used to live in as a child is gone, and Fatima’s death is perhaps a part of that demise. Fatima’s absence signifies Karmi’s inability to feel at home in today’s Palestine, and her death indicates Karmi’s failure of her ambitious undertaking. That is, the abject failure of a psychic and emotional return to the homeland.

Karmi reveals the immense toll this return to Palestine has exacted on her. She feels displaced inside the “torn-up and “unhappy land” of Palestine. Her search for Fatima began in *In Search of Fatima* (2002). Fatima’s death indicates the impossibility of Karmi returning, feeling at home, or reconnecting with her roots. It is a symbolic death of historical Palestine (Qabaha, p. 72). It is also a symbolic death of the Palestinians’ possibility of an outright return to a precolonial Palestine.

After Karmi learns about the death of Fatima, she expresses with an overwhelming resignation that a return to a denuded homeland has decidedly become an impossibility for Palestinians:

What my time in Palestine had really shown me was that the two fundamentals I had always lived by were transformed out of all recognition. There was no national cause any more, and no unified struggle for return. What future we all had lay with those who lived here, in the West Bank, Gaza and Jerusalem under Israel’s occupation, at the mercy of their success or failure to rebuild our cause. And if ever we went back, it would be through them, and no one else. (Karmi 316)

The journey to/within today’s Palestine revealed to Karmi the impracticability of a real and psychic return to the Palestine of her childhood. Palestine has become a distant and evanescent memory for Karmi. She realizes that return, whether physical or only metaphorical, can no longer be considered

a subversive or even a transformative act. It has refrained from being a salutary remedy to the ache of uprootedness that the displaced Palestinians feel. Instead, return, for Karmi, has become a tantalizing endeavor that makes Palestinians like her lament the place that has now become Israel and had once been Palestine.

Conclusion

This study, by focusing on *Return: A Palestinian Memoir* (2015) by Ghada Karmi, raises important issues concerning the journey back from a forced displacement- emotional and tangible displacement- to a denuded and usurped homeland, Palestine in this case. Karmi narrates her journey to today's Palestine, documenting the toll that the impossibility of a psychic and outright return inflicts on the Palestinian exiles.

A return to one's home resounds with a multitude of meanings. Karmi travels to the land of her birth, her homeland, with a sense of return, hoping to fulfill her quest for belonging, overcome an unsettling sense of exile and rootlessness, and reconnect with her Arab roots. Her aim eventually falls asunder as she finds that the Palestine of her childhood is no longer a reality. The Palestine she returns to is in alien custody and her place of sanctuary is decidedly in tatters. It has become a place replete with vexing tribulations that are inflicted by this new and alien occupier. Though Karmi is burdened by the loss of her home and the impossibility of a real return to Palestine, she still retains a memory of the homeland, however shadowy and fragmented it is.

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