Research Article

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Longing for the Past and Resisting Oblivion: Palestinian Women as Guardians of Memory in *Bye Bye Tiberias* (2023)

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Abstract: This article explores the role of Palestinian women as the guardians of memory in *Bye Bye Tiberias* (2023), a documentary by Lina Soualem that intertwines personal testimony, archival footage, and cinematic reenactments to reconstruct intergenerational narratives of remembrance by centering four generations of Palestinian women. Drawing on memory studies, feminist film theory, and a colonial approach, this study examines how *Bye Bye Tiberias* employs memory and nostalgia not as passive longing but as an active means of historical preservation. The documentary foregrounds oral storytelling, visual documentation, and embodied memory as key strategies in sustaining cultural heritage and countering historical amnesia. Through a close reading of the film's visual and narrative techniques, this article argues that Palestinian women serve as custodians of collective memory, ensuring historical transmission despite displacement and generational fragmentation. Ultimately, *Bye Bye Tiberia*s reclaims lost histories and affirms the enduring significance of women's voices in shaping Palestinian cultural identity.

keywords: memory, nostalgia, intergenerational memory, feminist lens, women as memory guardians

> "The past is never dead. It's not even past."
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> — William Faulkner, *Requiem for a nun* (1951, p. 92)
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> "The past was born out of absence. The past calls on you with all it possesses…Memory, your personal museum, takes you into the realms of what is lost…Longing is the specialty of memory in beautifying what was hidden in the scene."
>
> — Mahmoud Darwish, *In the Presence of Absence* (2011, pp. 45–109)

Faulkner's words draw attention to the enduring presence of history in contemporary life, where memory is not confined to the past but continuously shapes our identities. Similarly, Darwish's reflection on memory as both an archive of loss and an active force in the present highlights the inescapable nature of the past. Nowhere is this more evident than in cinema, a medium that has been deeply entangled with colonial power structures yet equally vital to anti-colonial resistance.

This dual potential of cinema is well-documented in postcolonial film studies. As Kwon et al. (2022) demonstrate, film historically served imperial powers as a tool of domination, promoting colonial ideologies while monopolizing production and distribution technologies. Yet in response, postcolonial filmmakers transformed the camera into an instrument of resistance, deconstructing colonial narratives and reviving suppressed memories to reclaim historical agency. This dialectic, between cinema as a tool of oppression and a space of liberation, manifests globally in feminist and anti-colonial film traditions. Julie Dash's *Daughters of*

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the Dust (1991) recreates Gullah history through a dreamlike visual language, centering women's narratives as both cultural preservation and feminist intervention. Similarly, *Before Tomorrow* (2008) transforms colonial violence into acts of resistant survival, as Inuit elder Ningiuq repurposes a steel needle (originally a symbol of colonial intrusion) into a tool for intergenerational storytelling (Mayer, 2015 pp. 103–107). These films exemplify what Jean-Marie Teno theorizes through *Afrique, je te plumerai* (1992) – a practice of 'subversive countermemory' that disrupts colonial archives to reconstruct postcolonial identities (Thackway & Teno, 2020, p. 5).

In the Palestinian context, this struggle assumes urgent specificity amidst ongoing historical obliteration. Cinema does not merely reconstruct the past; it actively participates in shaping historical consciousness, transforming audiences into witnesses of mediated history (Cook, 2004, p. 2). Through visual storytelling, films enable the preservation, reinterpretation, and transmission of collective memory, often serving as sites of resistance against historical erasure (Landsberg, 2004, p. 15).

Fatma Kassem (2011, pp. 5–6) argues that memory, especially when approached through the lens of collective memory, becomes a form of national narrative, particularly when documented through the experiences of Palestinian women. They "continue to experience the present as connected to the past" (p. 6). Kassem draws on the academic work of Jeffrey Olick (1999), who connects individual and collective memory as both personal testimony and national historical narrative. She also references Fentress and Wickham (1992), who emphasize the vital role of women in preserving memory, especially in marginalized contexts.

In her 2023 documentary *Bye Bye Tiberias*, Lina Soualem engages memory as a cinematic tool to reclaim lost histories and resist oblivion, focusing on four generations of Palestinian women. By interweaving personal testimonies, archival materials, and cinematic reenactments, the film functions as a counter-narrative to hegemonic historical accounts, foregrounding the experiences of Palestinian women in the aftermath of the Nakba. Winter (2006) argues that memory operates as both a site of mourning and a mode of historical intervention, challenging linear historiography by foregrounding marginalized voices (p. 19). Similarly, Marianne Hirsch's (2012) concept of postmemory provides a critical framework for analyzing how Soualem's film bridges generational gaps by transmitting inherited memories through visual and oral storytelling.

The film also navigates the tensions inherent in nostalgia, raising questions about the role of longing in identity formation. Nostalgia has become a universally recognized term for reflecting on the past, encompassing both time and place in its embrace (Lowenthal, 1985, pp. 4–6). Walder (2010) observes that nostalgia connects people across both historical and national boundaries, driven by the need to reclaim lost times and places (p. 3). In colonial contexts, memory does not function solely as personal recollection but as a way to negotiate historical loss and reckon with the consequences of colonialism (Walder, 2010, p. 10). This aligns with *Bye Bye Tiberias's* portrayal of nostalgia as more than sentimental yearning; instead, it emerges as a powerful act of resistance and historical continuity. The displacement of Abbas's family is not simply an individual experience but part of a broader colonial condition in which memory becomes a means of reclaiming agency and affirming presence.

In *Bye Bye Tiberias*, nostalgia does not merely reflect loss of place and time; it becomes an act of defiance, a means of sustaining historical continuity despite displacement. This also aligns with Said's (2000) assertion that exile produces a contrapuntal consciousness, a dual awareness of both belonging and estrangement that shapes identity.

This article examines *Bye Bye Tiberias* through the lenses of memory studies, feminist film theory, and postcolonial cinema. The film's engagement with Palestinian women's histories takes on particular significance given the broader context of historical erasure. As scholars have documented, Zionism, as a settler-colonial project, has long operated, and continues to operate, through systematic erasure of people, places, and historical narratives. This process involves the physical destruction of Palestinian villages, the renaming of geographic sites, erasing archival memory, and the rewriting of historical records to exclude or distort Palestinian presence. Yet Palestinians have consistently resisted this erasure and actively preserved their identity (Khalidi, 2020; Lentin, 2010; Makhoul, 2020).

The filmmaker's own trajectory reflects these transnational memory struggles. Born in Paris to Palestinian and Algerian parents, Soualem brings her training in History and Political Science from La Sorbonne to her cinematic practice (*Lightdox*, 2023). Her debut *Their Algeria* (2020) established her approach of using intimate family narratives to explore postcolonial identity and intergenerational trauma (Belkaïd, 2023, p. 49). *Bye Bye*

Tiberias extends this method to Palestine, with its global reach, premiering at Venice before screening at over 50 international festivals, including Toronto and IDFA, demonstrating how personal memory resonates transnationally. The film's critical reception, including awards at London and Dublin festivals,[1] underscores its significance as both artistic achievement and memorial act.

1 Palestinian Cinema: Memory and Women

Since the early 1930s, Palestinian filmmakers have used cinema to assert identity and presence, challenging colonial narratives by documenting everyday realities that highlight Palestinians' deep ties to the land (Barakat, 2013, pp. 10–11; Gertz & Khleifi, 2008, pp. 13–15). This cinematic tradition was disrupted by the 1948 Nakba, a catastrophic event that saw the destruction of over 350 Palestinian villages, creating a refugee population comprising nearly half of Palestinian society. The devastation was so comprehensive that Gertz and Khleifi (2008, pp. 11–19) characterize the subsequent 1948–1967 period as the "Epoch of Silence," marked by the near-total collapse of Palestinian cinematic production. Despite this rupture, Alawadhi (2013, p. 17) emphasizes that memories of pre-Nakba life and the enduring longing for return persisted, later reemerging in post-1967 films shaped by decades of displacement.

It was within this revived cinematic landscape that, in the late 1960s, Sulafah Mirsal who pioneered women's crucial contributions to documenting Palestinian lived realities through film, co-founded the Palestine Film Unit (PFU) with Mustafa Abu Ali and Hani Johariya. The PFU sought to document trauma, memory, and resistance, employing cinema as both a political instrument and an archival medium. It later received institutional support from the PLO, which viewed cinema as a vital tool for advancing its cause and chronicling the revolution (Barakat, 2013; Ibrahim, 2001).

This period, termed the "cinema of revolution," emerged after Israel's 1967 occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, which displaced Palestinian cinematic production into exile. Initially based in Jordan before relocating to Beirut, Lebanon, after the PLO's 1970 expulsion from Jordan. This phase ended with Israel's 1982 invasion of Lebanon, which displaced both the PLO and its cinematic institutions from Beirut (Gertz & Khleifi, 2008; Yaqub, 2018).

Amidst these relocations, Palestinian cinema consistently functioned, as Yaqub (2018) emphasizes, not merely as a tool for resistance, but also as an attempt to build a cinematic archive of the Palestinian revolution. Like other forms of Palestinian art, cinema consistently centered on memory and the loss of land. This mission is closely reflected in the work of the PFU and other Palestinian filmmakers who emerged after the Nakba. As Yaqub explains, the PFU was tasked with documenting all aspects of Palestinian life during the revolution, from daily routines in the refugee camps and memories of 1948, to the activities of resistance. Material objects such as keys, photographs, school records, and personal documents served as remnants of a lost homeland and also as anchors of collective memory in Palestinian cinema. Alongside the recurring motifs of landscape and trauma, these everyday items become cinematic symbols of loss and the enduring desire for return (Alawadhi, 2013, p. 17).

In this era, Palestinian filmmakers and institutions increasingly turned to cinema as a political and cultural tool to expose injustice and narrate the Palestinian struggle (Ayash, 2011, pp. 49–52; Gertz & Khleifi, 2008, p. 22). Despite the conscious shift towards depicting struggle and the future during the 1970s, Palestinian cinema avoided constructing a historical narrative; yet, Gertz and Khleifi argue, this historically repressed past surfaced traumatically within the films, as Gertz and Khleifi describe:

> The cinema of that period is based, therefore, on forgetting history rather than on constructing it. Yet, although it seems obscured, unanalyzed, and unfamiliar, the repressed past still surfaces in the films. It emerges as a traumatic memory, obsessively returning to two points in time: to the lost object, the pre-destruction past reincarnated in the present, as an

1 Details regarding screenings, awards, and critical reception were sourced from the official film page on Lightdox. For more information on festival participation, audience reach, and jury commentary, visit: https://lightdox.com/bye-bye-tiberias.

> idyll of beauty and perfection, and to the 1948 defeat the cinema revives and displays as if it were occurring in the present. (Gertz & Khleifi, 2008, p. 60)

These cinematic shifts often coincided with major political events, such as the 1967 occupation, the expulsion of the PLO in 1970, and the outbreak of the Intifada in 1987, which redefined both the conditions of film production and the thematic concerns of Palestinian filmmakers. A new phase in Palestinian cinema emerged in the turbulent 1980s, identified by Gertz and Khleifi (2008) as the "Fourth Period" and shaped by economic decline and the 1987 First Intifada. With institutional film support collapsing, directors increasingly turned to European funding and foreign technical crews, a necessity that became an artistic catalyst. Many of these filmmakers, having honed their craft in exile, developed a hybrid cinematic language that fused European arthouse techniques with urgent Palestinian political themes. This cross-cultural collaboration birthed a distinctive aesthetic, one that visualized displacement and occupation through innovative storytelling.

The era propelled Palestinian cinema to international prominence. Pioneering figures like Michel Khleifi, who returned from exile to produce his documentary *Fertile Memory* (1980), laid the groundwork for later directors such as Annemarie Jacir. Her film *Salt of This Sea* (2008), for instance, interrogates intergenerational memory and displacement. Though often living in exile, these directors remained deeply connected to their cultural and historical roots (Gertz & Khleifi, 2008, pp. 30–51; Hudson, 2017, p. 33), using film to resist what Ronit Lentin (2010) describes as Zionism's layered erasure, a settler-colonial system that suppresses Palestinian presence.

As Lentin (2010) elaborates: Zionism is not only a settler-colonial project of territorial conquest but also a structure of cultural and historical erasure that operates across multiple layers, from land and locality to family and individual memory:

> This erasure by Zionism has four layers: First at the level of country/nation – the level most responsible for producing melancholia; the second level, less abstract and more painful, is the level of locale, town or village occupied, destroyed, and erased from memory. (Lentin, 2010, pp. 76–77)

The first casualty, she adds, is the very name Palestine, replaced by *Eretz* Israel in a gesture that signals not only conquest but the "denial and active silencing" (p. 76) of an entire people's presence, history, and right to narrate. In this context, Palestinian cinema becomes a defiant act of memory (Lentin, 2010, pp. 76–77).

Directors began to craft narratives that challenged monolithic representations, bringing forth voices that reflected the diversity of Palestinian experience, across age, gender, geography, and class (Gertz & Khleifi, 2008). This aligns with Harlow's (1987) work in *Resistance Literature*, which highlights that cultural productions, such as films, serve as powerful tools of resistance and as means of articulating memory, particularly in contexts like Palestine, Nicaragua, and South Africa. She also affirms the role of women as integral to these resistance struggles (Harlow, 1987, p. 102). According to Lentin (2010), Palestinian filmmakers resist not only political occupation but narrative dispossession; through cinema, they reclaim the "right to tell one's story," a right Bresheeth (as cited in the study by Lentin, 2010, p. 76) identifies as central to the struggle against Zionist erasure.

This turn is apparent in Michel Khleifi's work, especially in *Fertile Memory* (1980), a film that foregrounds Palestinian women's experiences. Through the intertwined lives of Roumia, a widowed laborer in the Galilee, and Sahar Khalifa, an urban intellectual, Khleifi constructs a subtle yet profound meditation on identity. Their personal struggles and reflections unfold not in abstraction but through the intimate details of daily life, situating memory in the domestic and emotional landscapes of Palestinian womanhood. In doing so, the film redefines resistance: no longer merely political, but deeply personal and generational, where women emerge not just as victims of displacement, but as guardians of history and narrators of an enduring past (Gertz & Khleifi, 2008).

Khleifi constructs a very interesting parallel between two categories of Palestinian society, Roumia, the peasant/worker, and Sahar Khalifa, the intellectual feminist, to unleash their "intertwined memories." Their narratives converge as "living icons of the physical relationship of Palestinians to their territory" (Telmissany, 2010, p. 15), epitomized by Roumia's "stubborn and legitimate claim" to confiscated land, rooted in the "memory of the place" (Telmissany, 2010, p. 15). This defiance transforms personal history into political

resistance, framing women's resilience as fertile memory against erasure. Juxtaposing Khalifa's liberationist views with Roumia's conservatism, the film reveals both confront "the same primordial injustice: displacement by force" (Telmissany, 2010, p. 18), proving "liberation of the land [is] inseparable from women's liberation" (Telmissany, 2010, p. 18). Khleifi thus elevates domestic spaces where memory becomes "an inalienable right" (Telmissany, 2010, p. 19), a tactical weapon against oblivion.

This concern with memory also informs *Canticle of the Stones* (1991), where Khleifi's use of fragmented and shifting spaces, alternating between claustrophobic interiors and vast, open landscapes, reflects his broader cinematic strategy. The disruption of spatial boundaries in the film creates gaps, or alternatively, an omnipresent atmosphere, in which resistance to occupation can surface and memory can stand against the threat of oblivion (Hudson, 2017, p. 180).

In *Salt of This Sea* (2008), also, Palestinian director Annemarie Jacir constructs a poignant narrative where memory and gender converge through the figure of Soraya, a Brooklyn-born Palestinian woman determined to reclaim her ancestral identity. Her journey back to Palestine becomes a confrontation with erasure, personal and historical. The film blends fictional storytelling with documentary elements, producing a surrealist atmosphere that Soraya must navigate, a landscape shaped by memory and saturated with trauma (Hudson, 2017, p. 159). When she stands in her grandfather's former home, now occupied by an Israeli woman, Soraya's plea, "I want to buy my house from you," captures the raw emotional dissonance between two opposing relationships to memory. For Irit, the current occupant, the house is merely a place detached from any historical burden. For Soraya, it is the embodiment of a legacy denied, a site of belonging, trauma, and unresolved inheritance. Jacir's lens does not frame this merely as a property dispute; rather, it becomes a symbolic reckoning with a stolen past and the ache of dislocation (Armes, 2015, p. 278).

As Soraya seeks to recover her grandfather's frozen bank account and explore a homeland she never physically knew but always carried within, the film articulates exile and return from a distinctly feminine perspective. Jacir's portrayal is intimate and sharp, capturing how Palestinian women inherit memory as both pain and purpose. This becomes strikingly clear in another scene, when Soraya and Emad, disguised as Israeli settlers, camp among the ruins of Dawayima, Emad's ancestral village destroyed in 1948. Mistaken by an Israeli schoolteacher for tourists visiting ancient ruins, their presence is reinterpreted through a colonial lens that erases the Palestinian past and rebrands it as a Jewish historical site. As White (2023, p. 78) argues, this moment crystallizes the film's broader critique: memory, in the Palestinian context, is not only threatened by forgetfulness but by active misinterpretation and appropriation. Through Jacir's direction, *Salt of This Sea* becomes a cinematic resistance to amnesia, centering women as bearers of memory and as agents of historical reawakening.

In this light, it is important to consider Bresheeth's (2006, p. 499) argument in *The Nakba Projected: Recent Palestinian Cinema*, where he emphasizes that the Nakba is not merely a memory of the past but a living trauma that continues to shape the present. He writes that contemporary Palestinian films "demonstrate that the Nakba is not only a memory of the past but a continuity of pain and trauma reaching from the past into the heart of the present, as well as a continuity of struggle in which the losses of the Nakba fuel the resistance to Israeli occupation and subjugation." This perspective reinforces how Palestinian cinema as a whole treats memory as a force that transcends generational time, manifesting both as unresolved grief and as political consciousness.

Like its predecessors, *Bye Bye Tiberias* carries forward this tradition of exploring memory and identity through the lens of Palestinian womanhood. Through the personal journey of filmmaker Lina Soualem and her mother, actress Hiam Abbass, the film weaves together layers of familial and national history. It stands out by combining intergenerational memory with documentary intimacy, offering a feminine perspective that resonates with earlier cinematic works while adding new emotional and visual dimensions and exemplifying a critical feminist intervention in Palestinian historiography.

Soualem's centering of women as guardians of memory in *Bye Bye Tiberias* reframes the relationship between nationalism, gender, and history. Davis (2011) observes that Palestinian national history was traditionally told through grand narratives of male heroism, marginalizing personal and local stories. However, the documentary *Bye Bye Tiberias* illustrates how women's memory practices, oral storytelling, intimate gestures, and emotional archives transform recollection into a feminist intervention in the national record. Rather than

reinforcing a male history vs female memory binary, women's narratives actively reshape national identity. Kassem (2011) notes that a male-dominated narrative has long rendered women invisible in public memory. Yet through storytelling, women become historical agents who produce collective memories that resist Zionist erasure and patriarchal nationalism. Kassem calls this memory work a radical contribution to Palestinian historiography: women do not just recall the past, they shape it. Allan (2014) argues that Palestinian women's everyday memory work defies both the fragmentation of exile and male-centered nationalist symbols. Soualem's visual storytelling positions memory not as an appendix to history but as an alternative historiographical act grounded in presence, continuity, and defiance.

2 Four Generations of Women: Memory, Trauma, and the Echoes of the Past

> "Every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably."
>
> — Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (1968, p. 255)
>
> "These photos are the treasure of my memory; I don't want them to fade away."
>
> — Lina Soualem, *Bye Bye Tiberias* (2023)

In safeguarding these images from oblivion, memory in *Bye Bye Tiberias* transforms from passive recollection into an act of defiance. Years after leaving her Palestinian village to pursue acting in France, Hiam Abbass returns with her daughter, director Lina Soualem, to reconnect with their roots. The documentary traces four generations of Palestinian women, as Soualem accompanies her mother to the family's former village near Lake Tiberias, from which they were displaced in 1948. Revisiting key sites and stories, from pre-Nakba Tiberias to the present, the film centers on the voices of Soualem, Abbass, her grandmother Naïma, and great-grandmother Umm Ali, who recount their experiences of exile and loss.

Halbwachs (1992) explored how individuals use their present mental images to reconstruct and interpret their past in his study of collective memory. His central argument asserts that memory can only function within a collective context. This aligns with Hirsch's (2012) concept of postmemory, which describes how the descendants of displaced individuals inherit the trauma and memories of their ancestors, providing a crucial lens through which to understand the film's structure. Soualem, who has never physically lived in pre-Nakba Tiberias, reconstructs it through the voices of her foremothers.

The film's opening scenes show grainy archival footage of Tiberias in 1992 – a VHS recording of the director, barely three years old, swimming with her mother in the waters of Lake Tiberias during their first trip to Palestine. As Lina narrates over the footage, she reflects on having been born and spending her early childhood in France. She adds, "As a child, my mother brought me to this lake to swim. As if to bathe me in her story." This scene not only highlights the bond between Lina Soualem and her mother, Hiam Abbass, but also evokes a ritualistic significance reminiscent of Christian baptism. It is as if the mother is immersing her daughter in the waters of Palestine, allowing the history of her homeland to seep into the child's very being.

The narrative then shifts to Abbas's collection of pre-Nakba black-and-white photographs, which serve as both a family archive and historical testimony. These images closely resemble the cultural materials, such as archival photographs of Palestinians before and after 1948, discussed by Allan (2014) and Davis (2011) in their works. In *Bye Bye Tiberias,* the photographs themselves function as palimpsests, layered visual texts in which multiple temporalities coexist and are continuously reinterpreted. Soualem's montage literally overlays archival family photos onto present-day footage, making past and present cohabit within the filmic frame. This strategy evokes what Alexander (2005) defines as a palimpsest: "a parchment that has been inscribed two or three times, the previous text having been imperfectly erased," such that "the past is visible and acting upon the present" (p. 190). Every photographic image in the film thus accrues stratified meanings over time; one can view it as a multilayered signifying object carrying a timeline of changes inscribed in its very composition

(Batchen, 2001). Rather than static snapshots of a bygone moment, these family photos are continually activated through intergenerational storytelling and cinematic superimposition. In this way, the film embodies Langford's (2021) notion that photographs, especially in family albums, are open-ended, orally structured material records of memory, which a storyteller can unlock and reactivate even generations later (pp. 5–199).

The film also deploys the archival photographs and intergenerational storytelling to explore Palestinian trauma in ways that resonate deeply with Susan Sontag's insights about images of suffering. Sontag argues that photographs of pain "haunt us" but, without narrative, they fall short of understanding – "narratives can make us understand" (Sontag, 2003, p. 89). Soualem's film vividly demonstrates this: family snapshots of 1948 displacement gain force only when bound to personal testimony, so that memory and image together convey the Nakba's legacy. The film also embodies Sontag's warning that passive sympathy "proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence" (2003, p. 102); indeed, Soualem insists that empathy be earned. As Sontag notes, images by themselves provide at best an "initial spark" of compassion (2003, p. 103), and *Bye Bye Tiberias* extends that spark through sustained narrative. The camera lingers on Abbass and her foremothers in everyday acts of remembering, reading letters, reenacting youth, and grounding collective loss in individual experience.

In one intimate scene, a ritual of remembrance unfolds as Soualem and her mother carefully arrange family photographs on a wall. At the center, they place a portrait of Umm Ali, surrounded by images of Naïma, Hiam, and the younger generations, visually reconstructing a lineage. Among these is a photograph from 1948, the year of the Nakba, which Soualem describes as the beginning of exile. During this period, over 700,000 Palestinians were forcibly displaced with the establishment of the state of Israel, one of the most profound traumas in modern Palestinian history (Khalidi, 2020). Another image shows the family just before leaving Tiberias, a final moment of unity before displacement shattered their world.

These carefully arranged photographs, and Soualem's broader cinematic strategy of superimposing archival images onto present landscapes, demand interpretation through the lens of photographic theory. Azoulay (2008) discusses the political ontology of photography, arguing that images of displacement function both as evidence of past injustices and as a demand for recognition in the present. She emphasizes that while photography cannot secure rights, it makes struggles visible, offering a framework to understand its connection to memory, citizenship, and resistance. Barthes (1982) further highlights how photographs act as 'punctum,' an emotional wound that disrupts linear time, allowing the past to resurface in the present. Soualem's visual strategies directly enact these concepts, creating a layered dialogue between past and present that disrupts the erasure of Palestinian presence. These images powerfully reinforce the argument that memory, in its various forms, shapes historical perception, forging connections to the past while reflecting evolving identities and socio-political transformations (Landsberg, 2004, p. 22).

This visual memory work is intrinsically linked to oral testimony. The mother's oral storytelling, infused with the specificity of daily life before displacement, provides a counterpoint to dominant historical erasures. Her recollections of architectural spaces, market life, and familial bonds reclaim a Palestinian past. Abbas' testimony becomes an act of witnessing, ensuring that the memories of her grandmother, Umm Ali, do not fade into oblivion. Testimonies, as Laub and Felman (1992) argue, are crucial in articulating historical trauma, where the act of narrating becomes a means of survival. Abbas begins reading from her own writings and reflects on the life of her grandmother:

> "I cannot imagine Umm Ali as a little girl. To me, she entered my world in 1948 when war broke out. She and her husband, Husni, along with their children, were forced out of Tiberias and pushed into history."

Her narration takes us through their desperate search for refuge, moving from village to village until they reached the Lebanese border, where they were stopped. There, Umm Ali learned that her eldest daughter, Husniyya, had already crossed into Syria. She wanted to follow her, but her husband refused.

> "I will never leave this country," he told her.

Exhausted, the family slept under the shade of olive trees, while Umm Ali's stifled sighs echoed into the moonless night. Unaware that Israeli forces had seized their home, Husni attempted to return, only to realize he had lost everything. During the Nakba of 1948, entire villages were depopulated and destroyed, families

torn apart, and a nation fragmented, leaving generations in exile or under occupation (Khalidi, 2020). Grief consumed Husni, and he gradually descended into despair until his death.

Left alone with eight children, Umm Ali turned to sewing to provide for her family. This act of survival mirrors Fanon's (1961) argument that colonial displacement is not just about the loss of land but about the reconfiguration of existence under oppression, where resistance becomes embedded in the everyday acts of survival and remembrance:

> For a colonized man, in a context of oppression…living does not mean embodying moral values or taking his place in the coherent and fruitful development of the world. To live means to keep on existing. Every date is a victory: not the result of work, but a victory felt as a triumph for life. (Fanon, 1961, p. 308)

Hiam Abbas's portrayal of her grandmother, Umm Ali, is one of dignity and endurance: "She was one of the most beautiful women in the world despite her advanced age. In the deep lines of her face, her story was etched." One particularly moving scene captures Abbas recalling a moment with Umm Ali:

> "One day, she told me: I have never known happiness like the days I spent in Tiberias. It has been fifty years since I set foot there, and life has changed, not only in Tiberias but throughout the entire land."

This longing, the persistent ache of displacement, runs through the film like an unbroken thread, binding past to present. Mahmoud Darwish[2] captures this sense of nostalgia and transformation in his poem, expressing it through the following lines:

> A stranger on the riverbank, like the river. water binds me to your name
>
> Nothing brings me back from my faraway to my palm tree
>
> not peace and not war.
>
> Nothing makes me enter the gospels.
>
> Not a thing. (Saadawi et al., 2025, pp. 75–76)

Similarly, Lenrie Peters,[3] in *Home Coming* (1981), conveys this feeling of irreversible change:

> Too strange the sudden change
>
> Of the times we buried when we left.
>
> (Peters, 1981, as cited in Walder, 2010, p. 1)

These poems align not only with the words of Abbas's grandmother but also with Abbas herself, who returns home after spending a long time in exile. She interweaves additional archival footage of herself, her mother, and Lina Soualem as they retrace the family's history, revealing how change evokes a deep sense of sadness.

The impact of the Nakba on women's lives is further underscored through the story of Naïma, Hiam Abbas's mother. Abbas narrates: "What I know is that in 1948, just months before her graduation, war broke out. She was only sixteen, and all of her dreams were shattered." Expelled from Tiberias with her family,

2 Mahmoud Darwish (1942–2008) was a Palestinian poet and writer, widely regarded as the national poet of Palestine and one of the most important Arab literary figures of the twentieth century. His poetry is deeply rooted in themes of exile, identity, resistance, and love. Darwish was born in the village of Al-Birwa in Mandatory Palestine. In 1948, during the Nakba, his family fled to Lebanon when Israeli forces occupied their village. When they returned, they found Al-Birwa destroyed, and Darwish grew up as an internal refugee in what became Israel. This early experience of displacement and statelessness profoundly shaped his poetry (Mattawa, 2014).

3 Lenrie Peters (1932–2009) was a Gambian poet, novelist, and surgeon. His writing often explores themes of identity, colonialism, post-independence struggles, and the conflict between tradition and modernity.

Naïma did not yet realize that her life had been irreversibly altered, that she would never again see her childhood home. Her narrative reflects the broader tragedy of Palestinian displacement, where a generation was severed from their land, forced to navigate a world that no longer held a place for them.

As Soualem and her mother traverse the space of their lost land, they encounter the material traces of settler colonialism inscribed onto the geography itself. She portrays home and homeland spaces as layered with memory and history, reflecting Edward Soja's notion of Thirdspace, which he defines as a "simultaneously historical, social, spatial palimpsest" where meanings are "constantly reinscribed, erased, and reinscribed again" (Soja, 1996, p. 18). This concept links real and imagined geographies, making even a family apartment or a deserted Tiberias street fraught with emotional and political resonance. Thirdspace highlights how such everyday places can become sites of historical longing and cultural negotiation. In The Production of Space, Lefebvre argues that space is not a neutral container but a social relationship formed through historical and material practices (Lefebvre, 1991). He describes "representational spaces" as lived environments imbued with symbolic and emotional meaning, shaped by individual and collective histories.

Lefebvre notes these spaces are "redolent with imaginary and symbolic elements…[with] their source in the history of a people as well as in the history of each individual" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 41). In *Bye Bye Tiberias*, Soualem's juxtaposition of Parisian interiors with archival Tiberias footage exemplifies this logic: both exile and homeland become representational spaces animated by displacement and intergenerational memory. The film thus creates a diasporic Thirdspace, a hybrid landscape where private and public histories, personal memories, and national trauma coexist. As Soja (drawing on Homi Bhabha) explains, Thirdspace is marked by "radical openness," "hybridity," and the emergence of "other positions at the margins of dominant spatial orders" (Soja, 1996, p. 14). In this sense, *Bye Bye Tiberias* transforms ordinary domestic and urban scenes into a cinematic articulation of space as memory-laden, historically situated, and politically charged.

The film captures the manner in which the Israeli settler-colonial project is enacted spatially, transforming Palestinian villages into sites of erasure, where history is overwritten by the construction of settlements and militarized zones. Wolfe (1999) theorizes settler colonialism as a structure rather than an event, one that is predicated on the logic of elimination, whereby indigenous presence is actively effaced to make way for the settler's permanence. This process operates through a combination of territorial control, military dominance, and legal apparatuses that render Palestinian dispossession an ongoing and institutionalized reality. Césaire (2000) extends this analysis by conceptualizing colonization not merely as a mechanism of conquest but as a form of "thingification," wherein entire societies are stripped of their historical and cultural substance, reduced to objects of domination, and subjected to systematic ruination.

Through the lens of Hiam Abbas and her daughter, *Bye Bye Tiberias* foregrounds the lived experience of these colonial transformations, making visible the mechanisms of spatial and historical erasure. As Abbas explains the relentless expansion of Israeli settlements, the camera juxtaposes contemporary scenes of encroaching infrastructure with remnants of Palestinian villages that have been forcibly depopulated. Their journey culminates in Jerusalem, where the omnipresence of military checkpoints, heavily armed soldiers, and fortified barriers underscores the persistence of colonial power. Mbembe (2001) describes this phenomenon as the "postcolony," wherein colonial structures continue to function under ostensibly new regimes, manifesting through bureaucratic control, securitization, and militarization. The militarized urban landscape thus emerges as both a symbol and an instrument of settler colonial governance, transforming Palestinian movement into a regulated and restricted act of subjugation.

The film reinforces this critique through its use of archival footage, which serves as both historical testimony and a mode of resistance against colonial amnesia. Abbas's narration becomes a conduit for Palestinian memory, bearing witness to the violent ruptures of 1948 that laid the foundation for the contemporary landscape of dispossession. The archival material reveals the catastrophic transformation of Palestinian localities, depicting homes reduced to rubble, entire neighborhoods obliterated, and the flames of destruction consuming once-thriving communities. Interwoven with images of contemporary military incursions, fortified checkpoints, and the expansion of settlements, these sequences assert that the Nakba is not merely a historical event but a continuing colonial condition, one that operates through cyclical displacement.

Further emphasizing the enduring reality of exile, the film revisits archival footage of Palestinian refugee camps following 1948. Khalidi underscores the all-encompassing upheaval brought about by the Nakba, a

moment not just of physical displacement but of profound social and economic fragmentation, leaving Palestinians in a state of profound dislocation, stripping them of their homes, livelihoods, and communities, while dismantling the social and economic foundations that once sustained their existence (Khalidi, 2020, p. 82).

The stark imagery of makeshift tents, overcrowded encampments, and desolate landscapes underscores the systemic nature of displacement, situating it within a broader framework of statelessness and dispossession. The visual narrative of the film recalls the personal and collective tragedies of exile, particularly through the story of Husniyya, Umm Ali's eldest daughter, who, like countless Palestinians, was permanently denied the right to return to her homeland. Khalidi further describes a similar experience in the case of his grandparents:

> This was the case for my aged grandparents, who were abruptly uprooted from their routines and from their home, losing most of their possessions…they were obliged to move among the homes of their children, who were now scattered from Nablus and Jerusalem in the West Bank to Beirut, Amman, and Alexandria… Neither of them ever saw Palestine again. (Khalidi, 2020, p. 82)

In the film, Abbas recounts her journey to Syria to meet Husniyya, whom she eventually reaches. Upon their reunion, Husniyya embraces Hiam tightly, as if unwilling to let go, and begins to inhale her scent deeply. At the same time, she tells her neighbors that Hiam carries the fragrance of Palestine, the essence of every member of her family, and the scent of her hometown. As Said (2000) argues:

> Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted. And while it is true that literature and history contain heroic, romantic, glorious, even triumphant episodes in an exile's life, these are no more than efforts meant to overcome the crippling sorrow of estrangement. The achievements of exile are permanently undermined by the loss of something left behind. (Said, 2000, p. 173).

Much like memory, nostalgia in the film becomes a shared space, shaped not only by longing for a place or a time, but also by the collective experience. As Walder (2010) observes:

> Nostalgia is usually thought of in terms of longing and desire—for a lost home, place, and/or time. But it is also more than that: it is a longing for an experience—subjective in the first place, and yet, far from limited to the individual. It is possible to speak of a group or even a whole society as nostalgic. (Walder, 2010, p. 4)

3 The Cinematic Archive and the Feminist Lens

Central to *Bye Bye Tiberias* is the role of Palestinian women as the primary custodians of memory. The film's feminist intervention in historical discourse is evident in its refusal to relegate women to the margins of national memory, a corrective to what Swedenburg (2003) identifies in *Memories of Revolt* as the systematic erasure of women's contributions to anti-colonial resistance. He notes how Palestinian communities often embedded nationalism within local structures of honor, land, and gendered roles, where women were not mere background figures but essential to the resistance effort. As he and others show, women's roles in nationalist struggles have historically been overlooked or reduced to auxiliary tasks, yet their participation reveals how gendered forms of memory and resistance coalesced at the heart of Palestinian political life.

Soualem's camera actively inverts Mulvey's (1975) male gaze, transforming Palestinian women from passive subjects into narrators, historians, and archivists. As Kaplan (1983) contends, this female gaze constructs a counter-narrative that prioritizes subjectivity and agency, one where women reconstruct history through storytelling and familial transmission rather than symbolic representation. The film thus bridges Swedenburg's historical analysis with contemporary feminist film theory, positioning oral testimony and domestic rituals as acts of historiographical reclamation.

Furthermore, the body itself becomes an archive. The grandmother's gestures, her hands tracing the shape of the Tiberias home she was forced to leave, become a physical manifestation of memory. These haptic

close-ups (Marks, 2000) invert the colonial gaze, embodying spatial reclamation as feminist counter-archiving. This feminist historiographical approach challenges the erasure of women's experiences from dominant narratives by making the body a site of resistance, where memory is preserved not just in words but through movement and reenactment (Ahmed, 2014). She writes:

> The memory can be the object of my feeling in both senses: the feeling is shaped by contact with the memory and also involves an orientation towards what is remembered. So I might feel pain when I remember this or that, and in remembering this or that, I might attribute what is remembered as being painful…Feminism involves such histories of contact; feminism is shaped by what it is against, just as women's bodies and lives may be shaped by histories of violence that bring them to a feminist consciousness. (Ahmed, 2014, pp.7–174)

Abbass gathers with a group of Palestinian women, some of whom are family members, while others are close friends, to reminisce about their past. Their conversations weave through childhood memories, stories of love, and moments of personal struggle. In this shared space of recollection, Abbass revisits a pivotal moment in her own history, the love that once compelled her to confront her father. She reenacts this scene on a stage where she had performed as a young girl, using performance as a medium to reclaim and reinterpret her past. Through these acts, she not only relives her experiences but also reaffirms her identity, demonstrating how personal history remains an active force in shaping the present. The emotional atmosphere of these gatherings oscillates between joy, as she and the women celebrate their cherished memories, and moments of silence, where unspoken sorrow lingers beneath the surface, her body language conveying her inner emotions. This interplay between memory and emotion reflects the profound role that the past plays in shaping identity.

As Lowenthal (1985) asserts, the ability to recall and connect with one's own history gives life meaning, purpose, and value. The ancient Greeks associated individual existence with what was memorable, while post-Renaissance European thought increasingly emphasized the past as a fundamental component of personal identity. Rousseau's Confessions and Wordsworth's poetry illustrate how the self is constructed through an accumulation of lived experiences. Even painful or traumatic recollections remain integral to emotional history, as those who suffer from amnesia not only lose access to their past but also experience a crisis of identity. In this sense, the ability to engage with one's earlier life stages is crucial for maintaining both integrity and well-being. Abbass's reenactments and shared storytelling exemplify this principle, reinforcing the idea that identity is a continuous process shaped by memory. Each woman in the gathering embodies a unique history, yet together, they form a collective narrative of resilience and self-assertion. Their stories demonstrate that the past is not merely a distant recollection but an enduring presence, a foundational element of selfhood. As Lowenthal (1985, pp. 41–42) posits, "the sureness of 'I was' is a necessary component of the sureness of 'I am,'" a sentiment that resonates deeply within Abbass's act of remembering and performing her past.

4 Conclusion

Bye Bye Tiberias stands as both a cinematic act of remembrance and a profound exploration of intergenerational memory. By centering Palestinian women as the custodians of history, the film challenges dominant narratives that have historically marginalized their voices. Through a rich interplay of archival footage, oral storytelling, and visual reenactments, Lina Soualem constructs a counter-narrative that resists historical erasure, positioning memory as an active and political force. The film does not merely document the past; it reclaims it, ensuring that the lived experiences of Palestinian women persist beyond displacement and fragmentation.

Nostalgia in *Bye Bye Tiberias* is not a passive longing for what was lost but a form of defiance – an assertion of cultural continuity despite exile and statelessness. The documentary foregrounds the embodied nature of memory, where personal recollections, tactile artifacts, and sensory experiences sustain a connection to a homeland that remains physically inaccessible. By capturing the generational transmission of memory, Soualem affirms the role of women not only as witnesses to history but as its narrators and archivists.

Ultimately, the film situates Palestinian memory within a broader discourse of resistance, demonstrating that remembering is itself an act of survival. In a world where Palestinian histories are continually threatened with erasure, *Bye Bye Tiberias* ensures that these narratives endure, carried forward through storytelling, cinematic representation, and the collective will to preserve a history that refuses to be forgotten.

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