

A defense of the undefended



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Mourid Barghouti's *I Saw Ramallah* is a personal account (or memoir) of Palestinian displacement due to Israeli aggression and occupation. Barghouti recalls his experiences in different phases of displacement, and presents a testimony of his interpersonal emotions that occurred during these ordeals. According to the Freudian school of psychoanalysis, victims of trauma or unpleasant experiences unconsciously resort to defense mechanisms that are psychological strategies unconsciously used to protect a person from anxiety arising from unacceptable thoughts or feelings. Consequently, *I Saw Ramallah* can be viewed as an account of how a victim of displacement resorts to subconscious mechanisms, and what effects do they bear on his social life, career, family, and overall welfare. Barghouti confirms in the text of *I Saw Ramallah* the depth of the influence of the occupation on every aspect of the occupied's life and psyche when he says, "Occupation prevents you from managing your affairs in your own way. It intervenes in every aspect of life and of death; it interferes with longing and anger and desire" (p 48). An analysis of Mourid Barghouti's behavioral patterns, belief systems, and emotional states exposes several defense mechanisms such as Symbolization, Denial, Avoidance, and Autistic fantasy. This analysis signifies an in-depth, objective understanding of how behavioral patterns can arise in victims of displacement, and offers an additional understanding of the effects of occupation on the victimized people's psyche.

Symbolism, or Symbolization, is one of the defense mechanisms recognized by the founder of the School of Psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud as:

" an unconscious mental process whereby one object or idea comes to stand for another through some part, quality, or aspect that the two share in

common, with the symbol carrying the emotional feelings vested in the initial object or idea.”

Barghouti made the recognition of the presence of this mechanism in the Palestinian psyche as an intentional instrument of subjugation produced by Israeli occupation, thus he provides the mechanism with a conscious significance alongside its unconscious one. Barghouti says, “ I have always believed that it is in the interests of an occupation, any occupation, that the homeland should be transformed in the memory of its people into a bouquet of ‘ symbols’. Merely symbols” (69). This is the only quote wherein Barghouti explicitly mentions “ symbols”; however, there are several other places in *I Saw Ramallah* where symbolization is the recurring instigator behind certain beliefs and actions. Upon receiving the news from Madame Aisha of the outbreak of war between the Egyptians and the Israelis, and the presumably “ gladdening” news of the destruction of twenty-three enemy fighter jets, Barghouti’s only reaction—a reaction that he admits remains a mystery to him later years—was to throw his bottle of Pelican ink at a tree, causing it to shatter. He states:

I lean into the car, holding onto the door. Ahmad Sa’id is ecstatic on the radio. The patriotic anthems ring loud. A group of students collect around us. Comments fly around, assured and doubtful. I tighten my right fist on the bottle of the Pelican ink that is always with me in the exams. Until this day I do not know why with my arms I drew a wide arc in the air and, aiming at the trunk of that palm tree, hurled the bottle of ink with all my strength so in that midnight blue collision it burst into fragments of glass that settled on the lawn. (2)

Barghouti's action cannot but be interpreted on reasons of anger over the news of the fall of Ramallah into Israeli hands. This is made evident in the next page of his narration. It was only after he had thrown and shattered the ink bottle at the tree had he received the news of Ramallah's fall. Barghouti recounts, " And from here, from the Voice of the Arabs radio station, Ahmad Sa'id tells me that Ramallah is no longer mine and that I will not return to it. The city has fallen" (3). Both the Pelican ink and the action of throwing it can be viewed as having symbolic significance and signification. The Pelican ink may have symbolized Barghouti's ineptness and weakness to perform anything substantial in the struggle against Israel. To him, while Arabs were at war with Israel, carrying their weapons and, as Madame Aisha says, " We've brought down twenty-three planes!" (p 2) all he could do is take a written university exam. The actual act of throwing the Pelican ink and shattering it is another symbolization of his inner self disgust. It became the object of his inner rage, and shattering it is a temporary relief from these emotions. Another defense mechanism entwined in this narration is Denial. Denial is the failure to recognize obvious implications or consequences of a thought, act, or situation. Barghouti's failure to give or recognize a reason for the act of shattering the Pelican ink is evidence enough of Denial being utilized as a defense mechanism, " Until this day I do not know why" (2). There are several other evidences in I Saw Ramallah of Symbolization; Khali ' Ata, Mourid Barghouti's uncle, an officer in the Jordanian army, was one of the few soldiers to survive the battle of Sinai against Israel. He was narrated by Mourid Barghouti to be the embodiment (or symbol) of the idea of defeat. Mourid did not view him as a hero that fought against Israeli aggression, and managed to survive, but he subconsciously symbolized him as an " idea of

defeat". Mourid Barghouti says, " I did not see any of the returning soldiers except him, and that was enough to sadden the heart. One man was enough to embody the whole idea. The idea of defeat." (p 9). Olive oil also became a symbol to Mourid Barghouti. In his native Palestine, olive oil is one of the main sources of income. Mourid Barghouti narrates, " For the Palestinian, olive oil is the gift of the traveler, the comfort of the bride, the reward of autumn, the boast of the storeroom, the wealth of the family across the centuries" (58). After his displacement, Mourid could no longer freely access his native olive oil, and had to purchase it from Egyptian stores. Mourid Barghouti accounts, " After '67 my discovery that I had to buy olive oil was truly painful" (p 58). To Mourid, olive oil became a symbol of the pains of displacement. What was painful to him was not the actual act of buying olive oil, but the signification that it entails.

Avoidance is a defense mechanism that refers to the practice or an instance of keeping away from particular situations, activities, environments, individuals, things, or subjects of thought because of either the anticipated negative consequences of such or the anticipated anxious or painful feelings associated with those things or events. In *I Saw Ramallah*, Mourid Barghouti exhibits this defense on several occasions; when describing the character of " the stranger" he makes the notice that this person is of a mysterious nature, and is not comfortable with people breaking into his zone of comfort. Mourid Barghouti narrates, " He lives essentially in that hidden, silent spot of himself. He is careful of his mystery and dislikes those who probe into it" (p4). Moreover, while making a character description of himself, Mourid Barghouti admits that he could easily turn his back on any friendship and

retreat upon contact with something that does not strike his affinity—a mannerism (or mechanism) which he later regrets. Mourid Barghouti narrates, “ I can easily turn my back on any friendship if I find it tiresome” (p 42), “ My defect was that I find it too easily to retreat when I see something I do not like. I turn my back. The days have proved to me that it would have been better if I had put up with a little more and tried a lot more” (124).

Autistic Fantasy is another defense mechanism wherein the individual deals with emotional conflict or internal or external stressors by excessive daydreaming as a substitute for human relationships, more effective action, or problem solving. This behaviorism is found in two places in *I Saw Ramallah*. The first account was when Mourid was waiting in the small rooming at the crossing of the bridge. His heightened sense of anxiety at the anticipation of the Israel guard’s actions caused him to enter a state of Autistic Fantasy. He believed that spirits of deceased family members and associates came alive and communicated with him. Moreover, this defense is aimed at blocking whatever threatening outcome that might result from the Israeli guard himself, or what Mourid narrates as “ a deaf ear”. Mourid narrates this experience when he says:

I thought he would interrogate me. He said nothing.

And even if he spoke tome, or asked me anything, would I have heard him?

Or would I have turned a ‘ deaf ear’?

The dead do not knock on the door. Enter my grandmother, the poet (15)

Another account of Mourid's Autistic Fantasy would occur later on in the text. Upon the stress of orating his poetry (which he repeatedly states as being self-conscious of) to his family members and friends in his native Ramallah, Mourid's psyche regenerated this defense mechanism, and he was once again in visual contact with the deceased. This contact, however, was described as having been arisen out of the actual poem itself, " They stepped out of a poem" (p 68). Undoubtedly, since his actual poetry was the reason of his anxiety then this subconscious interweaving between the deceased and the poetry would have inevitably taken place. Mourid narrates, " They stood up in front of me in their bodies, their clothes, their white headdresses, their faces. They stood up as though they had not died. They stepped out of a poem into which I had written them in my exile" (68).