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22-23 minutes**[SLIDE] Liminality of/in the refugee camp: *Sabra Falling* by Ismail Khalidi. 16h35**

[SLIDE] In siege, time becomes place
 petrified in its eternity
 In siege, place becomes time
 late for its appointment¹

“and our enemies ignite the light for us
 in the blackness of shelters”
 Mahmoud Darwish, “A State of Siege” (2002)²

“The refugee camp, the most squalid of all exile environments, is also the most ambivalent. It possesses all the elements of a symbolic landscape representing, like the desert and city, the placelessness of Palestinian experience: leaky tents, hastily built huts and tin shacks, long lines for food and medicine, poor sanitation, rain, cold, mud, and the endless wait for some news that will bring the nightmare to an end. Yet in some instances, the camp is also a potent symbol of resistance and steadfastness³.”⁴

Barbara Mckean Parmenter, *Giving Voice To Stones. Place And Identity In Palestinian Literature*, 1994, p.63-64

The action of *Sabra Falling* (2017) by Palestinian American playwright, Ismail Khalidi, takes place in 1982, on the eve of the massacre of the Sabra and Shatila in the Palestinian refugee camps⁵ of the same name in West Beirut. Between 2000 to 3,500 Palestinian and Lebanese civilians⁶ were killed by the Christian Phalangist militias, allied with Israel under the command of Ariel Sharon (1928-2014) who was then Minister of Defense (1981-83). The Israeli Defense Forces, which controlled the area, were accused of allowing the massacre to happen and failing to intervene. The event sparked international outrage and led to widespread condemnation of Israel and its role in the killings. The massacre remains an open wound and a deeply controversial and tragic event in the history of the Middle East. So the play ends at the threshold of this genocidal act. [UN general Assembly during 108th plenary meeting 16 December 1982 + “to disappear us” (69)]

[SLIDE: the cast] The play opens with the fall of an Israeli soldier, Eyal, who after ejecting himself from his jet to avoid death pierces the roof of an Arab family’s house, the Akawis, in the Sabra camp, and lands in their living room. The spitting image of the deceased son, Eyad, murdered by the Israeli army three years prior because of his political and literary activities⁷, Sofyan, the grieving father, believes in the return of his son, while the rest of the family—his wife Leena, their daughter Dalia, and their son Hani, a fighter in the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)—know who they are dealing with. The children want to get rid of the enemy or use him as a bargaining chip but the mother expresses her willingness to take care of him because he is hurt. As for Sofyan, a playwright in lack of inspiration, he hands the soldier, whom he takes for his son, his son’s typewriter so that Eyal can resume Eyad’s writing activities and fight oppression with the pen. The play that Eyal is writing is broached upon in scenes featuring Eyal’s mind and dream which interfere with the frame story and confuse the readers. The last character in the play is the ghostly figure of an Israeli General who appears before

¹ Mahmoud Darwish, “A State of Siege,” in *The Butterfly’s Burden*. Translated by Fady Joudah. Bloodaxe Books, 2007, p. 161.

² Mahmoud Darwish, *The Butterfly’s Burden*. Translated by Fady Joudah, Bloodaxe Books, 2007, p. 121.

³ Steadfastness=the quality of being resolutely or dutifully firm and unwavering

⁴ Barbara Mckean Parmenter, *Giving Voice To Stones. Place And Identity In Palestinian Literature*, 1994, p.63-64.

⁵ “We should note, first of all, five flaws regarding the common expression ‘Sabra and Shatila Camps.’” Bayan Nuwayhed al-Hout, *Sabra and Shatila September 1982*, p. 43.a&&

⁶ See chapter 8 “Counting the Victims” in Bayan Nuwayhed al-Hout, *Sabra and Shatila September 1982*, p. 275

⁷ Ghassan Fayiz Kanafani (1936-1972) and Kamal Nasser (1924-1973)

Eyad/Eyal to refresh his memory and order him to carry out his mission, namely, to kill the Palestinian enemy. The General is the obvious doppelgänger of Ariel Sharon who is easily recognizable when the Battle of Latrun in 1948 is mentioned and some factual truths about Sharon are revealed for instance the General explains he “lost men at Latrun in the fighting. Took a shot to my groin. My foot too” (64).

Problématique: I would like to argue that Khalidi’s use of liminality in the sort of no man’s land the refugee camp stands for and in the context of the temporal hiatus the state of siege installs, is meant to convey two clashing realities: the oblique presentation of a historical tragedy that is both undeniable and unavailable AND at the same time a sentiment of hope or a softening of the Palestinian affliction thanks to the resistance to oppression through writing. I first want to look at liminality as it applies to the question of place and identity. I will then analyze the treatment of time. Lastly, I will consider some of the metadramatic dimensions of the play.

I—Refugee camp: liminal spatiality, liminal identity

Death and life

The living conditions of the Akawis cannot but remind readers and viewers that the refugee dwellers live in a precarious state that verges on collapse, suffering shortages of water and power cuts. Considered as a living body, albeit on the brink of death, the Akawi home in Khalidi’s play is in need of an intravenous connection to keep on surviving Leena to her son: **SLIDE** “Hani, go out and see if you can link us back to the generator at the clinic” (14). In the camp, life and death seem indistinguishable from each other. When Eyal declares that “it smells like death,” Dalia bluntly replies: “That’s what life smells like here.” (68).

The hole in the roof testifies to the exposed and unsafe character of the shelter; it may be understood as a reference to the destruction and dereliction of the refugee dwellings, places that are in constant need of repair: LEENA: “[Sofyan] must need help fixing the shelter” (34). The roof, “or what’s left of it.” (3) as Leena remarks, betrays the precariousness of the camp which Mira, the Pilot’s mother disparages: “Why would you want to stay here in this shithole anyway?” (32)⁸. The refugee camp thus features a sick house, itself predicated upon a conception of home which is un-viable as it “shelters” people who are deemed unworthy of possessing a life. (concept of derealization and precariousness mentioned by Sibil this morning applies here of course)

If the house of the Akawis is caught in a liminal space, suspended between life and death, a parallel inbetweenness seems to be at stake when it comes to identity as the dead Eyad has been superseded by the living Eyal. The subtle movement from space to being was already ‘inferable from the title of the play *Sabra Falling* insofar as the term “Sabra” points to at least two referents highlighted in the following conversation between the pilot and his mother Mira. When the latter tells him “You’re a Sabra,” Eyal promptly replies “We’re *in* Sabra” (31). What may at first glance be interpreted as a misunderstanding between the two characters—one states that Sabra is an identity whereas the other claims it is a place—hinges upon a liminal space whereby place and identity are both separated and enmeshed. Sabra refers both to the Palestinian refugee camp in Beirut about to be invaded and the pilot, Eyal who is a “sabra or tzabar (Hebrew: צָבָר, plural: *tzabarim*)” that is, a Jew born in Israel or as his mother tells it “the new Jews” (31).

⁸“Tell him you grew up on top of the ruins of his shitty little village, pilot.” (62)

fusing identities (none are at home)

The onomastic proximity between Eyal, the amnesiac Israeli, and Eyad, the deceased Palestinian facilitates their interchangeability which is hinted at when Dalia for a split second neutralizes the final consonant of the names that distinguishes them: **SLIDE** “the other one. Eya... The pilot” (12). Not only is Eyal “a dead ringer for Eyad” (12) as Dalia puts it, but the pilot also speaks both Arabic and Hebrew as he is an Oriental Jew. The confusion between the two men culminates when Dalia notices that Eyal is “wearing Eyad’s clothes.” (35).

SLIDE The blending of Arabs and Israelis is so seamless when it comes to Eyal that when the General enjoins him to leave the premises and return to his unit, the soldier is concerned about being regarded as an Arab and shot: “But I look like one of them” (72). The conflation established between Eyal and Eyad extends also geographically since both families come from the same place, a Palestinian village, Abu Shasha (39, 61), destroyed and annexed by the Israeli army. Indeed, when Sofyan tells the story of the destruction of his village by showing him pictures, Eyal recognizes the place.

What’s true for Eyad and Eyal seems also to be true for Hani and Eyal. For instance, Hani, we are told in the very first scene “wears nothing but his underpants” (1) paralleling the state of the pilot: “Hani tears off the pilot’s uniform so that he is in his underwear.” (5). Besides, their respective status resonate as Eyal is declared “a prisoner of war” (8) under the Geneva Conventions while Hani bewails the fact that the refugee camp he lives in is nothing but a “prison” (46).

Such echoes are literalized with the female characters for the *dramatis personae* listed at the beginning specify that the two roles be played by the same actresses: **SLIDE** “* ULI is played by the same actor playing DALIA”(ii) and “** MIRA is played by the same actor playing LEENA” (ii).

Mira’s condition as a **Mizrahi Jew** reflects that of the Palestinian mother, Leena → “But I wouldn’t go back to the slums [in Tel Aviv] where they kept all the Jews like me who came from Baghdad. Sprayed us with DDT when we arrived in ‘51.” (30).

Transition: So, Khalidi chooses to substitute characters, actresses even to insist on their common humanity, and in doing so, to thwart the simplistic dichotomy that the General harps on about: “Every Israeli’s a soldier. And every Arab a terrorist.” (29). My contention is that Khalidi’s focus on what is common to both sides is revealed thanks to the suspension of time ushered by the state of siege.

II—Time: Liminality and the state of siege*siege temporality*

The play is preceded by an epigraph from Mahmoud Darwish’s poem [**SLIDE**] “A State of Siege”: “The siege is a waiting period/Waiting on the tilted ladder in the middle of the storm” (v). Ultimately, what is being waited for is the massacre itself. Such suspended temporality may be witnessed in the military position of the Israeli army. Dalia for instance reflects on the heroic resistance of the Palestinian rebellion: “Babba, this time we’ve fought the Israelis to a **standstill**.” (17). Hani corroborates the position of the Israeli side: “We’ve been asking for one [ceasefire] for days. The Israelis are **stalling**, trying to buy time, to bleed us, to break through our lines or hit the leadership.” (35). ~~The reference to the awaited ceasefire that will allow all the PLO fighters to exit the camp safely, and Lebanon is reiterated throughout the play (22, 35, 38, 48, 74). The ceasefire is effective at the end of Act 1 launching Act 2 which features the life of the camp without armed fighters and a supposedly guaranteed security for the camp dwellers.~~

Remembering/forgetting/past & present & future

The temporal void or the atemporal condition created by the state of siege is also what allows the distinct temporal instances (past, present, future) to coalesce in a stalled temporality, thanks notably to Khalidi's treatment of the dialectics of remembering and forgetting⁹. The seclusion within the house of the camp fosters reminiscences about the past on the part of Sofyan who counters the temporary amnesia of the soldier by narrating the indelibility of his traumatic story that comprises mass executions and rape. Incidentally, the story of Sofyan becomes in a way that of the pilot's play, and it is in the telling of Sofyan that Eyal will actually remember: "And when he's better it will come back and the words will flow again. But we have to help make him **whole** again; help him **remember** who he is." (16) If Sofyan wishes to refresh the pilot's memory, the General aims at exactly the opposite: "Well, a soldier with a **short memory** has a long career. You'll be taken care of back home." (71). The atrocities are simply belittled by the General: "It was quick. But **unmemorable**, really." (66) As Leena sententiously reminds her son Hani: "It's **hard to remember, easy to forget**." (36) and incidentally, the hole puncturing the roof may also be grasped as a metaphor of an obliterated memory, that of Eyal.

[SLIDE] Although the Sabra and Shatila massacre is not part of the action since the play stops right at the doorstep of the tragedy, it does loom nonetheless in an oblique fashion. In fact, the future of the event is contained in the past of another, namely, the reminiscing of the Battles of Latrun that took place in May 1948 and that Sofyan recounts in Act 2 Scene 2 in between the following stage directions: "Sofyan brings out a small slide **projector**." (61) and "Sofyan exits taking the **projector** with him" (67). Everything about the battle may be read as a prospective reenactment of what happened in 1948, something which is implied in idea of futurity in the etymology of the term *pro*-jector. If Sofyan recalls the story of the battle and what happened to his village in a retrospective manner, what he narrates amounts to a *projection*. By telling the story to the pilot, Sofyan's words revive the memory of the pilot and uncannily anticipates the tragedy:

"First they singled out the men who had fought the British. [...] One by one. [...] I saw it with my own eyes" (63)

"Then I saw two women. Taken aside.[...] They shouted and screamed. Kicked and pushed to get away but... [...]" (64)

"We fled. Men were shot on sight. I don't really like to talk about it, boy" (64)

Without being seen or heard by Sofyan, the General engages in the conversation and replies to every cue, confessing unapologetically his crimes and those of his units.

Yet, what is true of the past is also verified in the present by the pilot's dream which features none but the sexual assault of Dalia/Uli by the General: "([..] The General continues to undress Uli. She is down to a slip at most, but has 'become' Dalia again. The General restrains her from behind, petting her harder.)" (59) And upon raping her, he blurts out: "I'm going to destroy you, tear you up, and make you cry" (59).

Transition: I would like now to discuss the metadramatic tension of the play which may be read through the lens of liminality as the play oscillates between its performance, the rehearsal of its performance and its echoes with history.

III—Metadrama: liminal performance (internal audience)

The hole in the roof

[SLIDE] Opened by the pilot's crash, the hole in the ceiling ought to be apprehended as a threshold in itself as it connects the outside and the inside of the house and, more crucially perhaps, it yokes together the world of the stage and the world outside the stage. The

⁹ "In siege, life becomes the time / between remembering life's beginning / and forgetting its end." Mahmoud Darwish, "A State of Siege," in *The Butterfly's Burden*. Translated by Fady Joudah. Bloodaxe Books, 2007, p. 123.

presentation of the setting at the beginning states that “The roof has a hole in it, which can be suggested by lighting if needed” (iii). The hole therefore enables the theatrical light to pierce through the shelter and reveal the play that is unfolding, making it happen, so to speak. As a playwright, Sofyan prepares his next play “with actors that have either been killed or fled; in a theatre that’s been shelled” (6) says Leena. It is very tempting to equate the Akawi house and the theater house. Sofyan relates his personal past to the pilot and explains how he is used to be a barber before he entered the world of the theatre: “Once I got to the camps... It was. I was different. We all were. But I saw a poster one day for a play, I forget which. So I started sneaking into the city to be in the theater whenever I could. I would **stay in the back and watch rehearsals. I volunteered to hang lights at first**, cleaned costumes, swept the floors” (39-40). Interestingly, Sofyan began by taking care of the light which suggests that he has an all-encompassing view, an omniscient view. Some parallel may be drawn with the historical context limned in the play whereby light is an equivalent for truth. The light passing through the hole in the ceiling metaphorizes the forthcoming Israeli flares that will light up the pitch-black night at the end of the play to give the means to the Lebanese Phalangists to perpetrate the massacre. The following cue by the General is all too clear: “All you need to do is make your way to our lines and you’re home. Wait for my signal. **Look to the sky. When the light of midday explodes the night, the operation will have begun.**” (56). The end of the play, *offstage*, will confirm the General’s military plan to crush the “the (alleged) continued presence of 2,500 Palestinian fighters in Beirut”¹⁰ according to the false rumors bruited by Israel and the right-wing Lebanese government of the time. [SLIDE]

- “(The darkness is broken all at once by the explosion of flares in the sky above her. The night is illuminated with the crude light of day. Dalia looks up and then all around her. The sound of shots and commotion rises in the distance. She runs offstage.)” (79)
- “(Sofyan enters the room. The pilot sits on his stool looking through the hole in the roof. At his feet a stack of paper. The light of the flares above illuminate the room through the roof. The pilot jumps to his feet.)” (80)

And yet, the tragic end is suspended in a way while the massacre is on the verge of happening: [SLIDE] “The sound of screams outside, and more shooting.” (83)

- *a play within a play (a play that is being written, or simply rehearsed and not performed)?*
The hole in the ceiling partakes in underlining the concrete presence of the theatre house. The world of the stage as it relates to the playhouse and to playacting is also hinted at when Hani exclaims “He’s playing house¹¹ with an Israeli soldier!” (11). Yet the theatricality of the play transpires more palpably in the fact that the playwright that is Sofyan wants Eyal to write a play because he thinks he is Eyad. The play features key moments where the audience has access either to Eyal’s dreams or to his mind. The hole is therefore also what enables us to peek through Eyal’s consciousness/unconsciousness, the theatre within, in a way, where the figure of the General appears and displays its influence but where the General is also tamed and ridiculed for Sofyan’s intentions are clear: “As a character. The general. We’d kidnap him. Imprison him within the walls of your play. It will drive them crazy, Eyad, I promise.” (27). The play within the play that the pilot imagines is meant to unveil the original play the General conjures up, one that includes the killing of the camp dwellers—“The camps must be cleansed” (71) says the General—despite the evacuation of all the PLO fighters. In that sense, the play reveals a historical truth.

¹⁰ “The occupation was preceded by a number of Israeli claims centred on the (alleged) continued presence of 2,500 Palestinian fighters in Beirut. The initial pretext for occupying Beirut and besieging Sabra and Shatila was the need to deal with these.” Bayan Nuwayhed al-Hout, *Sabra and Shatila September 1982*, p. 3.

¹¹ Def. “to pretend in child’s play to be grown-up people with the customary duties” (Collins)

The play accessed only through the dream or mind of the pilot thus discloses the true script of the massacre to come and the power of words to rival with weapons. The play alleviates the tragedy which seems the only possible outcome: HANI: “So which play will it be, old man? Lear? Oedipus? Hamlet? Just tell us so we can learn our lines and you can move us around your stage.” (15). It does so not to deny the event, or to erase it but to maintain life and hope as tools of resistance. Neither a Greek nor a Shakespearian tragedy, the play can be directed from the inside with its own desired outcome. Sofyan knows it: “But it will be a theater death, Hani, nothing more. I’ll be alive again for the curtain call. Then we’ll do it all over again tomorrow.” (22). And the play ends on Sofyan’s question to Eyad/Eyal: “If this were your story, Eyad, how would it end?” (83)

(Sofyan reads the last page then looks up at the pilot as a banging on the door is heard. The two men, facing each other, **let out a kind of smile**. LIGHT CUTS TO BLACK...All is silent. All is still.)

Conclusion: [SLIDE]

To conclude, I would like to return to the question of the imminence of the massacre, that is to say the ending of the play. Why does the play end right before it? Here is Darwish fully quoted by Khalidi:

Here on the slopes of hills, facing the dusk and the cannon of time
Close to the gardens of broken shadows, We do what prisoners do,
And what the jobless do:

We cultivate hope.

[...]

The siege is a waiting period

Waiting on the tilted ladder in the middle of the storm. (v)

Without missing the tragedy of a historical reality although having not reaching it, we have in reading the play, in a performative manner, cultivated hope like Mahmoud Darwish, we have lived with the characters and haven’t witnessed their deaths. We have seen a wounded Jew tended by Arabs. So I believe that Khalidi’s opening, this breach in the roof is meant to cultivate hope in this “narrative of the limit” that Claus Peter mentioned this morning with the help of “a sea of words” (29) against “a sea of death” (36). 16h57

[SLIDE thank you]

~~“That’s why I’m telling you we can win only when we show them that they can never win. We are liberated by laughing at their jets and tanks. By creating beauty where they have left us none. Somehow, we must save them to save ourselves. That is all I know.” (19)~~