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Tracing History and Reclaiming Identity in *Mo* TV series

Season 02

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to the voiceless, marginalised, and invisible individuals who have been deprived of agency and who aspire to have the opportunity to declare aloud, “We exist.” I recognise your existence, and I respect your difference.

This work is dedicated to the memory of all dispossessed individuals who were forced to leave their homes and have passed away without reuniting with their loved ones or revisiting the remnants of their lands.

This work is dedicated to my Palestinian brothers and sisters, whose dispossession has never been able to erase their essence or usurp their historical heritage. Their suffering has affected not only them but all individuals who regard themselves as HUMAN. To my Palestinian brothers and sisters who struggle for their land, armed with the unwavering conviction that on this land, that which is deserving of life and defence.

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List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
U.S.	the United States of America
UN	the United Nations
IDP	Internally displaced persons
ICE	Immigration and Customs Enforcement
AIC	American Immigration Council
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organisation
CBP	Customs and Border Protection
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
ACLU	The American Civil Liberties Union
IDF	Israeli Defence Forces

Abstract

Humans have historically borne the consequences of the destruction and chaos resulting from political systems. Statelessness is one of the grievous outcomes of the modern political system, leaving individuals in an invisible space beyond the reach of legal recognition and protection. This research analyses season two of the *Mo* TV series as a narrative that articulates the legal and existential void experienced by displaced stateless populations. The series depicts the journey of a stateless Palestinian family residing in the United States, facing the complexities and absurdity of the American immigration system while preserving their cultural ties to their homeland in Palestine. Legal and political research often characterises statelessness through the lens of lack and victimhood, including deficiencies in documentation, protection, and disenfranchisement. This research utilises the series as a case study to humanise the experience of the stateless and to explore the ongoing, proactive processes of reclaiming identity and tracing the history of indigenous ancestors. Through a critical content analysis, the study investigates the narrative, illustrating how the characters navigate bureaucratic, political, and structural barriers not merely as voiceless victims of state exclusion, but as active agents of their history. The research, therefore, demonstrates that displaced individuals assert a profound right to exist that transcends the presence or absence of legal documents.

Keywords: cultural memory, displacement, identity reclamation, indigeneity, Palestinian diaspora, Statelessness, television and media studies.

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General Introduction

1. Background of the Study

Every human is born an empty slate, shaped by family, society, and the state. Family provides love, care, and values; society provides a sense of belonging, cultural continuity, and social recognition. However, these benefits lose all meaning when the state offers neither political affiliation nor legal recognition. The lack of official legal recognition places individuals in an invisible space where their individuality loses all significance. This constitutes the essence of statelessness, which touches on the question of nationality and citizenship. Statelessness occurs when an individual lacks formal citizenship that establishes their belonging to a recognised state. Hence, citizenship is not trivial, which underscores the severity of statelessness as one of the most dreadful political fates in modern life (Siegelberg, 2020).

A stateless person is everywhere an outsider. He/she does not belong to any fixed piece of land. Always a sojourner, a stateless individual is an exile. An exile, in the words of Edward Said (2000b, "Reflections on Exile," para.21), "is always out of place." Wars, Imperialism, and political conflicts have been sources of multifarious disastrous consequences, among which are the mass destruction of multiple nations' infrastructure, international economic deterioration, and, perhaps, the most devastating are statelessness and displacement. Statelessness is a constant process of denationalisation and dehumanisation. It is "a driver of insecurity and injustice, including in situations of conflict and displacement" (Albarazi & van Waas, 2016, p. 05). Mira L. Siegelberg (2020) observes that statelessness is more than a mere legal anomaly. The concept of statelessness reveals the fragility of the modern political system. It is linked to human suffering and exclusion, leaving displaced people and refugees without protection, rights, or belonging. These individuals live in limbo, outside the structure of statehood, which destabilises both their lives and the international system that is supposed to protect them.

Said (2000b) argues that exile, which has become a defining feature of our era, has uprooted millions of people, cutting them off from their roots and severing their connections to their cultural traditions, family ties, and land. Beyond the boundary between those accepted as members— “us”—and those who are excluded— “outsiders”—there exists a risky and unstable historical “territory of not-belonging” (“Reflections on exile,” para.9). In this condition, individuals are denied membership, identity, and protection, and do not integrate into any community. Currently, this same state of exclusion is manifest in the struggle of millions of refugees and displaced individuals who traverse borders without obtaining membership in any nation or state. Exile is not merely a physical uprooting; rather, it is a fracture in identity and a rupture in history. To survive, exiled individuals often construct powerful narratives of return, resistance, or restoration.

Cinema and television serve as powerful platforms for addressing social realities and highlighting racial and ethnic issues. Said (2006, as cited in van Gils & Shwaikh, 2016) argues that Palestinian cinema functions as a counter-archive. It challenges erasure and stereotypes by asserting Palestinian presence. Each film or series serves as both a cultural expression and a political declaration, emphasising the struggle for recognition since 1948. Similarly, across its two seasons, the Netflix TV series *Mo* (2022 – 2025) serves as an important medium for exploring both the perilous condition of statelessness and for reclaiming and tracing Palestinian identity and history. While the series operates in a fundamentally different mode compared to non-fiction documentaries, serving as a semi-autobiographical Netflix drama-comedy loosely based on Mohammed Amer’s real experience as a Palestinian refugee in Houston, it achieves a parallel political utility. It incorporates actual immigration procedures, detention conditions, and cultural practices, which make it function comparably to a counter-archive in certain respects. The series explores the challenges faced by a stateless Palestinian family as they navigate hardships while maintaining their cultural identity, dramatising the administrative cruelty of the asylum system alongside the resilient, everyday cultural practices of migrants. The series preserves and highlights

a collective memory that official state histories actively suppress. This study examines how the context of Palestinian statelessness shapes the narrative, emphasising political recognition, identity negotiation, and tracing a lost homeland through the geography of memory in the second season of the *Mo* TV series.

2. Statement of the Argument

Narratives have long been an indispensable tool for transmitting lived experiences and preserving cultural heritage. In the broader discourse of refugee and forced migration studies, they are a valuable resource for understanding how refugees in host countries face adversity while maintaining their identity and sense of belonging. Similarly, the *Mo* TV series, as a case study, represents a significant opportunity to shed light on the situation of stateless refugees who face a state of limbo, neither fully accepted nor granted asylum in the country of destination, nor recognised by any other country. Hence, this study aims to analyse recurring images of cultural resilience, identity preservation, and geography of memory in the second season of the *Mo* TV series. The research, furthermore, seeks to investigate how cultural narratives challenge existing stereotypes about displaced stateless individuals and serve as a means of tracing history and reclaiming identity.

3. Research Questions

Throughout its two chapters, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

- 1) How does statelessness as a precarious condition affect people's resilience and sense of belonging in exile?
- 2) What role does indigeneity play in reclaiming native identity and maintaining cultural heritage in exile?
- 3) How does season two of the *Mo* TV series depict the experience of displaced statelessness and illustrate images of history tracing and identity reclamation?

4. Literature Review

Statelessness has emerged as a broad political problem touching on sovereignty disputes, mass displacement, and climate change (Siegelbirg, 2020). According to Jain (2022), although refugees and stateless persons were said to be treated as a single category, some attempts were made to differentiate between the former, as displaced persons seeking asylum in a foreign country, and the latter, as individuals who lost the diplomatic protection of their state without gaining another nationality. This distinction blurred during the interwar period when Nazi Germany stripped Jews of citizenship, producing people who were both dispossessed of nationality and forced to flee. Jain further argues that the overlap between refugees and stateless persons increased when the first formal UN attempt, in 1948, to address statelessness focused mainly on those who had crossed borders—displaced stateless persons. Both the Refugee Convention and the Protocol on Stateless Persons were drafted.

It was only in the aftermath of the Second World War that the broad, politically charged notion of statelessness was narrowed into precise legal categories through international conventions. Notably, the 1954 Convention Relating to the Status of Stateless Persons established that a stateless individual is characterised by the absence of nationality under any state's law, indicating they have no affiliation with any recognised state. Conversely, the 1951 Refugee Convention is often associated with individuals fleeing their country of origin (Siegelbirg, 2020). The 1951 Convention encompasses both nationals and non-nationals outside their country of former habitual residence who face persecution and are unable to return to their countries due to a well-founded fear of persecution (UNHCR, 2019, para.34). Together, these frameworks codified humanitarian protection while affirming the principle that states control membership and borders. In this way, the conventions transformed statelessness from a political problem into a legally defined status, distinguishing it from refugeehood and setting the rules for life beyond the boundaries of state protection (Siegelbirg, 2020).

The majority of stateless persons remain in their own country; their statelessness is in situ, that is, in the country of long-term residence, particularly their country of birth (UNHCR, 2025). Nevertheless, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Handbook (2014) states that statelessness can emerge in both migratory and non-migratory contexts. Statelessness can intersect with forced displacement, as the UNHCR (2025) notes that asylum seekers and refugees may also be stateless. According to the American Immigration Council (AIC, 2025), a large number of people have fled violence and political unrest over the past decade, seeking safety and a better life. These people often have two options: either they leave for another place within their home country, in which case they become internally displaced persons (IDPs), or they flee to a foreign country, where they become refugees and asylum seekers when submitting a demand for official recognition of their need for protection. In June 2024, the number of forcibly displaced people reached 122.6 million. The Council asserts that currently, 1 in 67 people are forcibly displaced as a result of new or escalating conflicts in countries like Afghanistan, Colombia, Palestine, Syria, Sudan, and others.

Interiano-Shiverdecker et al. (2019) note that published scholarly research has shown that, while escaping danger, refugees lose not only their material resources but also non-material assets such as identity, social networks, and a sense of belonging. These material and non-material resources are referred to in Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) theory as cultural and social capital. The former encompasses the set of knowledge, including educational qualifications, literacy and language skills; behaviour, including cultural attitudes, norms, and practices; as well as professional and personal competencies. As for the latter, it refers to belonging to a social group and community ties. It is often difficult for refugees to adapt, as they face frustration with the host country's culture, language barriers, poor socio-economic conditions, and anxiety about their legal situation. In the absence of cultural and social capital, even countries with well-established administrative foundations, such as the United States, present considerable challenges for these

individuals as they navigate institutions—schools, the employment system, healthcare—thereby making their experience a struggle.

Berding-Barwick and McAreavey (2024) describe how forced migrants rise above the challenges they face in the host country as a form of resilience. They frame resilience as a process spanning multiple temporal dimensions: the past, present, and future spheres of life. While navigating adversities in the new home, refugees and asylum seekers experience disruptions to their past recollections, present experiences, and future aspirations. These disruptions originate from a variety of factors. These include legal restrictions, such as immigration policy and social issues, such as stereotypes and non-recognition. They also stem from institutional obstacles, including housing conditions, as well as discrimination concerns, such as limited opportunities. Finally, they are driven by economic barriers, namely employment bans and poverty, alongside cultural barriers, such as identity erasure, imposed labels, and humiliation. After displacement, refugees often face new hardships in the country of destination, such as discrimination, social isolation, and a lack of opportunities. Forced migrants are generally blamed for their struggles, which are treated as inherent or individual, notwithstanding facing restrictions on their everyday lives. Resilience among refugees is not limited to toughness and adaptation; rather, it is structural, emerging from restrictive systems or policies. If resilience becomes a consequence of structural restrictions, the ability of forced migrants to navigate difficulties despite constraints becomes central.

Marita Eastmond (2007) argues that narratives are a mode of both resistance and resilience. Researchers consider narratives a crucial medium for understanding forced displacement. They argue that narratives provide profound insights into the lived experiences of refugees that cannot be solely captured through statistics or legal documents. Forced migrants narrate their experiences to contest structural hardships rising from legal, social, and political constraints, such as bureaucratic discrimination and stereotypes that reduce them to a generalised image of passive victimhood. They use storytelling to resist the struggles of survival in the host

society, while also demonstrating resilience by preserving identity, sustaining continuity, and protecting cultural heritage despite rupture and displacement. Therefore, narratives are not merely stories describing refugees' lives, but active processes by which forced migrants make sense of displacement, reclaim identity, and bear witness to violence. Gandhi and Nguyen (2023) hold that refugee stories document wars, genocides, colonial histories, global power struggles, the changing borders, and the rise and fall of nation-states. They also reveal the uncertainty of spaces between sovereign territories and how laws determine inclusion and exclusion.

Refugee studies have been substantially enriched by research investigating the complexities of refugees' situations within the broader community of forced migration, as well as the intersection of several structural challenges faced by this category: legal rejection, economic marginalisation, and resilience strategies. These studies advocate for further research concerning the plight of stateless refugees and asylum seekers, who face dual vulnerability as they are both displaced and denied national recognition. This study will analyse the second season of the *Mo* TV series as a case study, offering insights into how the condition of statelessness frames cultural narratives by exploring portrayals of identity reclamation and history tracing in exile.

5. Aims of the Study

The study aims to explore the concept of statelessness and uncover its human, cultural, and political dimensions. It seeks to investigate the fragility of this urgent human crisis and the ways in which states impose persecution and discrimination on stateless individuals. Through a thorough analysis of the *Mo* TV series, season two, the research delves deep into the series' narrative to investigate how cultural memory anchors stateless displaced people in an exilic setting that constantly operates to erase their existence. Moreover, it intends to analyse recurring images that depict how stateless persons interpret their statelessness, maintain their identity, reclaim their history in exile, and reconnect with their homeland through their indigeneity and geography of memory.

6. Significance of the Study

This study adds to the growing body of academic research that utilises television and film as case studies to analyse the complexities of statelessness. It enriches the broader field of refugee and forced migration research by examining similarities and differences between the stateless and refugee populations. By humanising the abstract concepts of lack of nationality and disenfranchisement, this research explores a lived experience of displacement and identity negotiation. The series serves not as a mere illustration of statelessness but as a social reflection, shedding light on the harsh experiences of people who exist beyond the reach of the law and the protection of the nation-state. Ultimately, this research articulates the connection between international policy and the human consequences of exclusion. It shows how, through a satirical comedic lens, the series transforms rigid, bureaucratic policy restrictions into an intimate human experience. The research highlights the emotional reality of displaced stateless people who, despite uprooting and dispossession, continue to bounce back and rise against legal injustice. It focuses on individuals who navigate daily life despite lacking papers, highlighting their resilience and agency rather than viewing them solely as victims of state policy.

7. Methodology

This study follows a qualitative approach and utilises a critical content analysis to answer the research questions. The qualitative approach helps contextualise and understand the discourse on forced migration and asylum seeking. Furthermore, this approach helps capture the depth of human experience and explore how stateless refugees interpret their experiences with displacement, survival, and identity negotiation. Moreover, this research executes a critical content analysis to deepen this exploration. This method allows moving beyond surface-level themes to interrogate how the series' narrative actively exhibits patterns, themes, and images of cultural resilience and identity reclamation. It also helps decode the series' narrative and investigate how it reflects lived experiences of identity reclamation in exile. The analysis is grounded in a

multidisciplinary theoretical framework principally driven by Edward Said's foundational concepts of exile, displacement, and Palestinian narrative struggle.

8. Structure of the Study

The dissertation comprises two chapters. The initial chapter, titled "Exploring Statelessness: The Intersection of Policy, Identity, and Cultural Memory," provides a theoretical foundation regarding the concept of statelessness and investigates its various aspects. It begins with an introduction to the fundamental concepts at the intersection of statelessness and displacement. It then examines how the notion of statelessness was manufactured as a result of the rise of the nation-state system. Finally, the chapter explores the strategies used by displaced stateless individuals to reclaim their identity and trace their history in an exilic context.

The second chapter, "Tracing History and Reclaiming Identity in the Mo TV Series, season 02," offers an analytical perspective on a real-life experience of displaced statelessness, based on a critical content analysis of the season. It starts by introducing season one of the semi-autobiographical series to delineate the scope of the protagonists' experience. Subsequently, it explores the second season of the show, emphasising recurring images of stateless refugees resisting legal exclusion and state persecution by maintaining their indigenous connections to their homeland, and reclaiming their erased, often stolen history.

CHAPTER ONE:

Exploring Statelessness: The Intersection of Policy, Identity, and Cultural Memory

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Introduction

This chapter explores statelessness as an intersection of policy, identity, and memory. It starts by defining two central concepts: “a stateless” as a condition of deep vulnerability and precarity, and “refugee,” since statelessness might intersect with displacement. Then the chapter examines the role of sovereignty, rooted in trade and colonialism, in the manufacture and proliferation of statelessness. Stateless and forcibly displaced people often face a plethora of adversities when crossing international borders and joining a host country, in which they are strangers and sometimes unwelcome. Henceforth, the chapter addresses several strategies used by stateless displaced people to challenge the rising hardships and to cope in the new environment. By extension, the majority of these people, to feel a sense of belonging and anchor their existence, often carry with them the memory of their homeland as an inseparable part of their identity, preserved from the ravages of history. To this end, the chapter turns to how stateless refugees make sense of their homeland, underscoring the power of memory in mapping lost territories and reminding them of what has been lost. Through narratives, storytelling, and cinema, uprooted people preserve a cultural heritage that helps maintain their existence in their imagined homelands and pass on the legacy of their pain and hopeful return to future generations. Given that this research is devoted to analysing a series whose events take place in the United States, the chapter closes by examining the situation of the stateless population in the U.S.

1.1. Statelessness as a Condition

Said (2000b) argues that the current epoch has become the age of refugeehood, displacement, and mass immigration due to modern warfare. This includes armed conflicts, the Arab-Israeli wars, imperialism with colonial powers drawing arbitrary borders and creating stateless groups by denying them citizenship. Exile has become a defining condition of our era, not only a mere marginal phenomenon. He describes exile as an unhealable rift that creates a rupture between a person and their homeland, between the self and its sense of belonging. No matter how literature tries to capture exile in heroic, romantic, or glorious terms, these portrayals

are attempts to overcome the deep pain of estrangement. Being exiled or displaced is a sadness that can never be fully healed.

To understand how displacement and marginalization operate within contemporary geopolitical frameworks, it is necessary to unpack the legal and existential realities of life outside state protection. This section examines statelessness, not merely as a bureaucratic anomaly, but as a lived condition of systemic exclusion. It begins by defining the legal condition of statelessness, focusing on the absolute lack of formal nationality and citizenship and how this deprivation strips individuals of political rights. It then explores the legal definitions of refugee across international and regional frameworks. Finally, it analyses the critical intersection of these two legal categories by investigating how statelessness overlaps with forced displacement. This final subsection illuminates the profound state of vulnerability, rightlessness and precariousness experienced by individuals who are simultaneously denied both national recognition and a physical homeland.

1.1.1. Who is a Stateless Person?

According to Article 1 of the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons (the “1954 Convention”), a stateless person is someone “who is not considered as a national by any State under the operation of its law” (p.06). Stateless individuals have no nationality, which means they do not belong to any state. The Convention proceeds to articulate numerous articles that grant stateless persons rights such as freedom of religion and practice (article 4), employment rights (articles 17–19), housing, public education, and social welfare (articles 21–23), protecting labour rights, including working conditions and social security (article 24), in addition to others. Article 15 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which proclaims that “everyone has the right to a nationality” and that “no one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality nor denied the right to change his nationality,” reinforces this legal framework. Nationality thus emerges as “a legal bond between a person and state” (UNHCR, 2010, p.01), providing a sense of belonging and creating a binding political identity that defines rights, duties, and recognition. However, in practice, stateless persons are deprived of both nationality

and the right to have one, leaving them in a state of precarity and vulnerability outside the protection promised by International Law.

Furthermore, the political theorist Hannah Arendt (as cited in Allard, 2015) argues that the absence of nationality and citizenship reduces individuals to “bare humanity,” which, in her view, is politically invisible and insufficient to secure rights. This condition deprives stateless individuals of political subjectivity, thereby preventing them from acting and being recognised within a shared community. In other words, although the rights of stateless persons are secured and protected on paper under international law, in practice, without citizenship, these rights are unenforceable. This paradox is captured in her observation that:

The paradox involved in the loss of human rights is that such loss coincides with the instant when a person becomes a human being in general—without a profession, without a citizenship, without an opinion, without a deed by which to identify and specify himself—and different in general, representing nothing but his own absolutely unique individuality which, deprived of expression within and action upon a common world, loses all significance. (1967, as cited in Allard, 2015, p. 321)

Once stripped of the legal bond that ties them to a state, profession, opinion, and deeds that connect them to a community, stateless persons are left only with their individuality. However, their individuality, without a shared community in which it can be expressed and recognised, becomes insignificant. That is, each person’s uniqueness matters only when it is manifested and acknowledged within a shared political and social space. Once they are excluded from that space, their unique individuality becomes politically invisible and loses all meaning because no one recognises it.

1.1.2. Defining “Refugee”

Said (2000b) notes that refugees are the product of the twentieth-century nation-state system, which provoked large numbers of uprooted people who required urgent international aid. The word “refugee” is a legal term under international law and has been defined in various ways

in the scholarly literature. These definitions vary depending on the legal framework applied, its interpretation, and the regional context in which individuals seek refuge, as there is no universal consensus among scholars on this matter.

The U.S. Law and the UN adopt the UN 1951 Convention's definition, under which a refugee is an individual who has been forced to flee his or her country, by reason of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution, on account of race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or belonging to a particular social group. This definition is broadened by the Cartagena Declaration on Refugees—signed by most Latin American countries and the Caribbean—to include people fleeing internal conflicts, massive human rights violations, violent social environments, or public disorder. Moreover, under the African Union Convention, a refugee is not only an individual who meets the UN 1951 Convention definition, but also any individual who is forced to leave their country of origin to seek refuge in a foreign country due to external aggression, public unrest, occupation, or foreign domination. Each use of the term refugee designates a distinct segment within the broader community of forcibly displaced individuals (AIC, 2025).

1.1.3. Displaced Statelessness

According to Hannah Arendt (1973), the modern refugee emerged in interwar Europe, precisely when the consolidation of the nation-state structure produced masses of stateless peoples excluded from narrow definitions of national belonging and thus denied state-granted citizenship rights (Gandhi & Nguyen, 2023). After WWII, Arendt described how these masses of people became nonhuman through denationalisation and forced displacement, living outside the reach of the law (Belton, 2015). Since then, the number of stateless and forcibly displaced people has increased dramatically, with the 2026 report of the UNHCR estimating over 136 million individuals, among whom over 31.8 million are refugees, 8.8 million are asylum seekers, and over 3.4 million are stateless.

Belton (2015) claims that stateless persons, even if they do not physically move, are socially and politically displaced. Drawing on Arendt, Belton argues that they lose agency over

whether to belong to the community of their birth. Their belonging is trapped in limbo—an in-between state, neither completely excluded nor fully included. Stateless individuals are pushed into an ambiguous state in which they lack nationality and rights. When states refuse to tolerate their ambiguity further, they resolve statelessness by forcing stateless individuals into foreign nationalities with which they may not identify.

The causes leading to individual or collective statelessness vary. Statelessness can arise through state succession, when a newly established state defines who can belong to its body of citizens and excludes a segment of the population (Albarazi & van Wass, 2016). The example of Palestinians can effectively illustrate such a situation. Said (2000a) explains how, in the 1948 Nakba, 750,000 Palestinians were driven out of their lands and homes, their property taken, and their villages destroyed as a result of the state of Israel's establishment. He further notes that the newly established entity has no constitution; instead, it has a set of basic rights, including the Law of Return. This latter entitles any Jew on earth the right to be a citizen of the region; whereas Palestinians, who for long lived there and were pushed out, do not have such a right. Another situation where statelessness can occur is when states design nationality legislation with discriminatory criteria based on ethnicity, religion, or political affiliation, preventing certain groups from acquiring citizenship or even stripping them of it. This is illustrated in the 1989 denationalisation and expulsion of many Mauritians by the Arab-dominated governments (Albarazi & van Wass, 2016), and in the above-mentioned example of Jews.

Displacement is a useful lens for demonstrating the similarities between stateless persons and refugees in terms of the challenges they face (Belton, 2015). Although the legal definition of a stateless person does not require the person to be a refugee or migrant, the legal definition of a refugee allows for the possibility of recognising the stateless individuals as refugees if they also meet the definition of Article 1 of the 1951 Refugee Convention—that is, facing persecution in their country of origin. While they often remain “in situ,” large numbers of stateless persons are forced to cross international borders and become refugees. Stateless persons may also

find themselves internally displaced—within their country of residence—forced to leave their homes and places of habitual residence due to armed conflicts, violence, massive human rights violations, and natural or human-made disasters. Once more, statelessness and displacement intersect, highlighting that the stateless can also be displaced both outside and within carved borders (Albarazi & van Wass, 2016).

When stateless persons cross international borders, whether voluntarily or forcibly, they may be refused re-entry to their country of residence. Likewise, they risk prolonged or even indefinite detention, unable to return home. This represents exclusion and disempowerment in their most extreme form (van Waas, 2009). According to Albert Cohen (as cited in Stone 2018), stateless refugees face three major handicaps: first, they are foreigners everywhere with no homeland to return to. Second, they lack the protection of any government. Third, they are often treated with suspicion and contempt as powerless outsiders. This highlights the deep vulnerability and precarity of stateless refugees, who face alienation, lack of protection, and social stigma all at once.

1.2. Policy and Sovereignty

The rise of the nation-state system created millions of uprooted people forced to leave their homes, property, and long histories behind, leaving new generations stateless, living on the edge of society and wandering across borders with an uncertain future. The nation-state functions as a site of exclusion, vulnerability, and conflict. In many respects, the story of displaced people is inseparable from the story of the nation-state itself, its creation, evolution, and mechanisms of power (Gandhi & Nguyen, 2023). To understand the structural origins of statelessness, it is necessary to examine the historical emergence of state sovereignty and the global consolidation of the nation-state system. This section demonstrates that statelessness is not an accidental by-product of administrative failure, but rather an inherent, structural consequence of the nation-state model itself.

1.2.1. Sovereignty and the production of Statelessness

Sovereignty is the assumption that there exists, within a political community, an absolute local authority, and that no other absolute final authority exists beyond it. In a system of nation-states, mutual recognition between states was formalised, with each state exercising final authority over its own territory (F.H. Hinsley, as cited in Croxton, 1999). Moreover, the Britannica dictionary (2026) defines sovereignty as the equivalent of supreme power. In political theory, the ultimate authority of a state is to maintain order and make decisions.

In *Sovereign Bodies*, Hansen and Stepputat (2005) trace the evolution of sovereignty from its monarchic, classical form to its modern expression in liberal democracies. They explain how sovereignty in recent times has shifted from monarchs to citizens. The authors point to Foucault, who argues that although sovereignty appears to belong to people through rights and democracy, those rights are granted and limited by the state, which still exercises hidden power over populations. The authors further assert that sovereignty, on the one hand, arises from itself with no justification, as a raw power of an absolute, violent will to dominate; on the other hand, this power is inscribed in the human body where violence and resistance meet. Sovereignty in Europe developed gradually through colonialism, where colonies served as fertile testing grounds for techniques of control—urban planning, health, crowd management, and sexuality. By the late 19th century, colonial powers established permanent administrations, bureaucracies, and sharp borders, integrating colonies into the European system that had dominated relations between European states and their colonies. (Hansen & Stepputat, 2005).

The formation of modern statehood shifted statelessness from both an empowering and a disempowering condition to absolute vulnerability. After World War I, to enforce their borders, states introduced documentation systems, including passports and identity cards to prove belonging—distinguishing nationals from non-nationals—and to control movement. Nationality, thus, became essential in the post-WWI international system. This worsened the situation of stateless persons. Before the dominance of the nation-state system, being stateless was not only

precarious but could also offer advantages, such as freedom of mobility. However, the rise of nation-states redefined statelessness as a condition of extreme vulnerability and precarity since mobility was tied to nationality and citizenship. Statelessness as a legal category was formalised after WWI, when many people applied to domestic courts to be recognised as stateless to avoid penalties for being identified as foreigners from enemy states. Yet, although statelessness was legally recognised, stateless people were still treated as almost non-human, dangerous outsiders, thereby remaining marginalised and feared (Jain, 2022).

Following WWI, the newly established League of Nations was seen as a potential actor to address the rights of those not considered nationals by any state. Cautious of challenging state sovereignty, the league treated statelessness as a technical issue defined by conflicting nationality laws, rather than a political problem of exclusion. Thus, international efforts were shaped to protect the nation-state's sovereignty rather than stateless rights (Jain, 2022). Similarly, the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness was perceived as a significant legal instrument to address the global challenge of statelessness. However, due to inherent deficiencies, the convention fell short of eliminating the issue, which has grown significantly in the decades since, leaving millions without nationality today (UNHCR, 2026). Emerging from the post-World War II displacement crisis and the need to transform the Universal Declaration of Human Rights' "right to a nationality" into a binding duty for states. The treaty was diluted during negotiations in order to safeguard state sovereignty and encourage widespread ratification. Drafters opted for a compromise approach, abandoning a strict eradication model in favour of a weaker framework aimed only at reduction. This compromise opened the door for states to insert conditional exceptions, such as permitting governments to impose barriers before granting nationality at birth. Moreover, while the convention provides important protection against arbitrary loss of nationality, it also allows states to strip citizenship on security grounds, a gap that remains particularly problematic in the contemporary counter-terrorism context. Ultimately, the treaty does not serve as a comprehensive global solution, but rather as a conditional state-dependent baseline for legal

reform (Foster, 2022). Likewise, the balance between states' internal authority and international laws was carefully preserved. In the interwar period, statelessness was viewed as a problem for states, not for individuals. Stateless people were treated as an unwanted burden, floating between borders and disrupting states' ability to control inclusion and exclusion (Jain, 2022).

1.3. Reclaiming Identity and Agency

The lack of nationality and displacement place individuals in a deeply insecure position. Van Wass (2009) argues that studies consistently show that stateless individuals are among the most vulnerable groups worldwide. Their experiences are defined by marginalisation and exclusion, with practical barriers preventing them from accessing many rights and services, and denying them civic privileges such as the right to vote. In "What Would Life Be Like If You Had No Nationality?" by the UNHCR (1999), if you are a stateless person:

You may not be able to 'go to university; get a job; get medical care; own property; travel; register the birth of your children; marry and found a family; enjoy legal protection; have a sense of identity and belonging; [or] participate fully in developments in a world composed of states, in which nationality is key to membership.

While the architecture of the nation-state created profound systemic vulnerabilities, displaced stateless individuals demonstrate sophisticated resilience in the face of the adversities and challenges they face in the host country. This section unpacks the multifaceted strategies of survival and resilience employed by stateless communities to assert their humanity. It begins by examining the structural resilience required to navigate institutional hardships, moves to the conceptualisation of the body as a territory where state violence and personal resistance collide, and concludes by demonstrating the vital role of narratives of exile, which serve as a crucial mechanism through which identity and sense of belonging are actively constructed and preserved.

1.3.1. Resilience: Rising Against Structural Barriers

Refugees demonstrate remarkable courage and strength by enduring extreme hardship and surviving in the face of adversity. Once recognised as refugees, they have to confront the challenges of resettlement in a foreign land while coping with the pain of separation from their families and cultural roots (Hutchinson et al., 2012). Resilience describes the ability of a changing system, be it an individual, family, community, or society, to adjust effectively when facing disturbances that endanger its survival, functioning, or capacity to grow and develop (Masten, 2014, as cited in Southwick et al., 2014). Resilience is best understood as a dynamic process in which individuals and communities actively mobilise their available resources to sustain well-being, even in the face of adversity (Panter-Brick & Leckman, 2013, as cited in Southwick et al., 2014). This perspective expands the definition of resilience from merely avoiding sickness to actively sustaining a state of personal growth and fulfilment (Panter-Brick, 2014, as cited in Southwick et al., 2014).

Hutchinson et al. (2012) argue that refugee resilience is deeply shaped by personal qualities. According to the authors studies highlight that optimism, adaptability, perseverance, inner strengths, and determination empower refugees to cope with adversity. Looking ahead to the future, accepting present realities, and actively moving on rather than passively bouncing back are central strategies. In this light, resilience becomes an act of agency and control, enabling refugees to survive and rebuild their lives despite displacement. Correspondingly, refugee resilience is shaped not only by inner strength but also by the environments in which they live. Family, social networks, and ethnic communities provide emotional and practical assistance, reinforcing coping during resettlement. Resilience is a dynamic, socially constructed process, continually shaped by person-environment interactions.

This community support helps preserve heritage languages, which are essential for migrant communities as they sustain cultural identity, traditions, and collective belonging across generations and borders. Heritage language preservation strengthens solidarity and resilience in new environments, supported by community spaces like religious ceremonies and cultural

gatherings where language use is normalised. Similarly, intergenerational transmission, especially through parents, plays a central role in identity maintenance. Ultimately, heritage languages serve as identity markers, reinforcing pride, distinctiveness, and continuity while maintaining connections to ancestral traditions and histories in new societal contexts (Al-khresheh, 2025).

Moreover, religion and spirituality are powerful sources of resilience for refugees. Faith traditions and spiritual practices provide structure, meaning, acceptance, and a sense of control, while also fostering community integration. Belief in God or a higher power helps refugees cope with trauma, regain hope, and endure adversity. Spirituality thus acts as both an inner strength and a socially integrative force, reinforcing psychological and emotional well-being in the face of displacement (Hutchinson et al., 2012).

Berding-Barwick and McAreavey (2024) argue that resilience is an active social process centred on maintaining identity continuity, enabling them to bounce back and to bridge their past, present, and future selves despite the disruption of forced migration. While resilience is undermined by discrimination, language barriers, stereotyping, isolation, and restrictive policies, it is strengthened through religious faith, education and employment opportunities, social support networks, and access to justice and equal rights. In this way, resilience emerges as both an expression of identity and a collective process of adaptation, requiring a supportive environment.

On the other hand, Shwaikh (2023) argues that being resilient is undeniably a vital, positive and life-saving physical and mental capacity for displaced and vulnerable communities seeking to survive. However, she counterpoints that the discourse surrounding it turns a symptom of oppression into a moral virtue. Vulnerable and precarious people do not actively choose to be resilient in a vacuum. They are obliged to bounce back precisely because of structural injustice, colonial realities, economic disfranchisement, and harsh systemic restrictions. Therefore, elasticity is a direct reaction to institutional failure. The critical danger of the mainstream resilience discourse, as Shwaikh further highlights, is that it actively individualises these structural conditions. By treating resilience as a sign of personal strength or as an institutional program to be

taught, global development frameworks depoliticize suffering and push marginalized subjects to permanently struggle to accommodate themselves to a dangerous world rather than change its structure. Consequently, the responsibility for survival shifts away from the state and international systems and is placed onto the shoulders of the oppressed. In doing so, a universalising, flattering lens is applied to diverse communities, whether they are refugees, stateless individuals, occupied populations or historically marginalised groups, masking deep-rooted trauma as heroism. Ultimately, Shwaikh demonstrates that celebrating a community's ability to resist allows the hegemonic systems to escape accountability entirely. It risks normalising the very violence these communities are forced to navigate, reproducing an unjust condition under the name of empowerment.

1.3.2. Body as a Territory: The Interplay of Violence and Resistance

Sovereign power has always been biopolitical, according to Agamben (1998), for it produces bare life by reducing human beings to mere biological existence, and then decides who belongs to the community and who is excluded. He adds that sovereignty works by expelling citizens who once had rights, or by degrading others to less than fully human, outside dignity and rights, reduced to bare life. Hansen and Stepputat (2005) assume that this logic of violent sovereignty persists in modern times, manifesting in both totalitarian and democratic forms of governance. They claim that sovereign powers turn life itself into politics and politics into medicine, framing community as a living organism to justify interventions and legitimise control and exclusion through medicalised language. Agamben (1998) adds that the condition of exception, where the state decides inclusion and exclusion, and over life and death, is a constitutive logic of sovereignty. Hansen and Stepputate (2005) distinguish three forms of exception in which this logic appears: first, the improvement of people by disciplining them and turning them into good citizens, in such case, sovereignty decides who is worthy of inclusion; second, control over biological life through medicine and genetics, where sovereignty decides over the body itself; and

third refugee and asylum seekers camps where displaced persons are kept outside community waiting for possible inclusion.

Bond (2018) explains how scars resulting from inflicted torture and abuse become evidence of systemic power and domination. They are recognised as inscriptions of injustice and symbols of oppressive structures that produce them. The body becomes an archive that records trauma while forcing recognition of the system's brutality, even as the victim's own experience risks being silenced. The author gives the example of the Czech authorities, in managing the refugee crisis in Europe, marking migrants with inked numbers, the same dehumanising practice of Nazi tattooing prisoners in concentration camps during WWII. These marks symbolise attempts to contain and constrain identity, reducing people to objects of control.

Through her description of the skin, Bond (2018) frames the body as a surface where the full weight of human experience is stored and displayed. She argues that the skin is not only a biological covering but also an envelope that holds identity, an archive that stores memory and history, and a canvas on which people communicate their inner state of mind. A cultural border that records the marks of migration, displacement, and identity transformation. It becomes a surface where identity, meaning, and memory are inscribed. As Freud (2001, as cited in Bond, 2018) suggests, the surface of the body mediates between subjectivity and external perception. Skin translates the invisible—thoughts, emotions, identity—into visible form. Yet, drawing on Fanon's (1967, as cited in Bond, 2018) concept of "epidermalization," which describes how racial identity is inscribed onto the skin, the skin is vulnerable to misconception and judgment, when visibility in its positive sense—acknowledgement and recognition—becomes hyper-visibility, a process of racializing where the human body is over-read, stereotyped, and controlled. Thus, the skin becomes a site of imposed identity, where racialised visibility breeds oppressive scrutiny and enforces surveillance.

Nevertheless, some individuals reclaim their skin as a medium of self-expression, rather than being passively marked by systemic constraints. Dermal manipulation—tattoos,

inscriptions—can be acts of confrontation against injustice. Voluntary markings transform the skin from a site of oppression into a site of resistance and agency. Many Eritrean displaced people have decided to get tattoos before getting involved in the dangerous journey of migration. Tattoos included sentences such as “Rule of Law,” “I love Mum,” and “rely on the cross.” These Tattoos become condensed symbols of life stories, spanning past, present, and imagined futures. They record fear, love, loss, hope, and faith. Skin emerges as a canvas of agency on which identity and migration are written and reclaimed, and a layered medium of witnessing, remembering, and expression, allowing migrants to inscribe their own narratives. Accordingly, through scars and tattoos, the body becomes a living archive, bearing witness to trauma, displacement, and resilience (Bond, 2018).

1.3.3. Constructing Identity in Exile Through Narratives

Said (2000a) reminds us that to study history, it is important to shed light not only on the big deeds of big people, but also on the stories of small ones, commenting on Howard Zinn’s reflection (1998) that marginalised historical events expose much about the racism and inequalities that shape history, highlighting the atrocities of colonialism and imperialism hidden behind the big narratives. Said (2000b) argues that exile as a political punishment must be understood beyond the literary exile of famous writers like Joyce and Nabokov; instead, it is important to examine the countless masses of displaced people whose identities are reduced to numbers and whose return is impossible.

Moreover, Said (2000b) observes that poets, such as Mahmoud Darwish, reassemble identity in the face of the discontinuities and fractures of exile, challenging and resisting erasure and imagining the impossible homecoming. Darwish depicts his sense of homelessness in an incomplete and unfinished picture, where he cultivates a sense of emotional void rooted in the detachment from the physical and spiritual security of his homeland. According to Elini Coundouriotis (as cited in Gandhi & Nguyen, 2023), narratives serve as evidence in legal contexts proving persecution and violence. She asserts that these narratives humanise refugees, portraying

them as agents rather than passive or voiceless. Gandhi and Nguyen (2023) further argue that refugee narratives represent the shared experience of displaced communities, not merely individual accounts or testimonies of suffering. Each narrative is both personal and part of the larger historical and social record. Yet refugee writing is not merely about witnessing war, violence, and displacement; it also challenges the power of the nation-state, which claims the right to determine the social parameters, such as identity and belonging, and to define political life.

Bakara (2020) holds that witnessing the changing realities of political life has long been central to the earliest works of modern refugee literature. He gives the instance of B. Traven's novel *The Death Ship* (1922), in which the stateless protagonist, rejected at every European border, ultimately realises that "the passport (. . .) and not the sun, is the centre of the universe" (Bakara, 2020, p.289). For B. Traven, himself a stateless person for nearly twenty years, the rise of the passport signalled the rise of a new political order, which the refugees, though unwilling, came to understand and articulate with particular clarity.

For Gandhi & Nguyen (2023), narratives are creative, imaginative acts. Refugees do not simply document their displacement; they actively imagine alternatives—possibilities, futures, and ways of belonging—that challenge the failure of current political and social systems. Refugee writing is predominantly about the experience of 'rightlessness,' a condition in which people are stripped of legal and political protections. Thus, literary aesthetics becomes a medium for creating new ways of thinking about belonging and rights beyond the nation-state. Narrative representation creates imaginative and ethical spaces that challenge nationalist frameworks and highlight refugee voices and histories. Furthermore, literature can uncover hidden dimensions of refugee life—memory, geopolitics, cultural histories—that humanitarian discourses often overlook. Therefore, literature and storytelling provide non-coercive spaces in which statelessness can be explored without reducing refugees to statistics or policy objects.

1.4. Imagined Homelands: Cultural Memory and Representation

Gandhi and Nguyen (2023, p. 1) delineate the image of exile as forced-displaced persons compressing and carrying their lives in “an opened suitcase” that “holds the miniature model of a crumbling room.” This metaphor serves to highlight the psychological intersection of memory and displacement. The room’s cracked walls symbolically project the destruction and decay, evoking the loss of stability and collapse of domestic life. At the same time, its dusty furniture suggests the warmth, family, and everyday moments that once existed but are now frozen in memory. For refugees, this home is conceptualised not merely as a memory but a fragment of identity placed in the suitcase and carried forward in the ongoing process of displacement. The imagery therefore underscores a conceptual framework wherein memory and identity are entirely interrelated and inseparable.

In his essay "Invention, Memory, and Place" (2000a), Edward Said argues that identity is constructed through memory and narrative. He claims that memories are shaped around ideas of who “we” are and who “they” are. Similarly, national identity is built through narratives of a nation’s history and defining events. Moreover, he asserts that our era “has become an era of a search for roots” (p.177) and of people trying to locate a history that feels uniquely theirs, anchored in the shared memory of their race, religion, community, and family, and protected from the disruptions of history and the instability of the present. The way history is represented shapes collective loyalty and belonging. In schools and universities, history becomes a nationalist project, designed to foster pride, loyalty, and a sense of insider identity with one’s country, tradition, and faith. Whoever controls the narrative of history controls cultural memory and thus influences national identity and political fidelity. According to Bose (2000), history without memory is empty, but when it embraces memory, it becomes a source of imagination. For partitioned—displaced—communities, memory is the key to imagining a homeland not as a fixed territory but as a lived and remembered space. While states build official collective memories, refugees construct alternative, profoundly cultural ones. Their memories help them bridge the disjunction

between past and present, and in doing so, they continuously reinterpret the meaning of homeland and belonging.

Refugees often define themselves through what they remember of their homeland, community, and way of life before displacement. Their sense of self is not only about the present but about continuity with a past that has been disrupted (Bose, 2000). Homeland is shaped not only by material access—being physically there—but also by symbolic imaginings and longings. Homeland is as much an idea as a place (Tawil-Souri, 2014). Bose (2000) holds that refugee identity is inseparable from memory. Drawing on Kumar’s view (1999, as cited in Bose, 2000) that the “past-in-the-presentness of partition as a history that is not done with or refuses to be past,” Bose (2000) explicates how the past lives on in the present, highlighting that trauma and consequences of displacement continue to shape lives today. Refugees live with the past as something active and unfinished, which shapes a layered identity and fuels both personal subjectivity—who they are—and collective claims to a homeland—where they belong.

Said (2000a) explains how memory itself becomes a battlefield over history and the right to the land. He considers that Palestinian’s most profound struggle has been to defend their right to remember and narrate their own history, because without it, the claim to homeland and collective identity risks erasure. For Palestinians, remembering destroyed villages, uprooted lives, and obliterated society during the Nakba is a way of keeping the homeland alive in consciousness, even when dispossession makes physical return difficult. According to Palestinian French historian Elias Sunbar (as cited in Ghanayem, 2023), Palestinians’ displacement from their land in 1948, the Nakba, caused them not only to lose physical territory, the material anchor of identity and belonging, but also continuity of history. This creates a sense of being “out of time,” unable to situate themselves in a linear narrative of past, present, and future. Said (2000a) in this context asserts that Palestinians’ inability to produce a unified national story, due to disorganisation, self-serving leadership, and shifting interests, has compounded victimhood, leaving them unable to resist Zionism’s expression, which continues to claim land and rewrite history. He states that only

with the rise of the PLO in 1970 did Palestinians begin to reclaim their past through poetry, fiction, art, and scholarship. These works gave voice to experiences of dispossession and exile, turning memory into art and literature, and served as acts of resistance, ensuring Palestinian presence in cultural and historical consciousness. Said adds that historians and scholars such as Abu Lughod, Walid Khalidi, and others produced studies and compilations documenting Palestinian life before and after 1948, giving substance to national memory and showing the persistence of Palestinian collective life, despite displacement, occupation, and denial. For Said, this work stitched together fragments of memory into a collective historical reality, ensuring that Palestinian identity persisted and that a right to a homeland was preserved.

Literature and memory together testify to the pain of displacement and the hope for new belonging. Memory is an act of resistance and truth-seeking. By selecting, framing, and reflecting, memory challenges silence and denial and constructs meaning and identity out of fragments of the past. Refugee memories reveal the complicated adjustments and transitions they have endured, showing that rehabilitation is a living, evolving process rather than something dependent only on state aid or official support. These recollections demonstrate that rebuilding life after displacement is not straightforward or linear, but involves identities continually being shaped, interpreted, controlled, maintained, and sometimes denied (Bose, 2000).

According to Bose (2000) literature and film preserve personal and marginalised experiences—displacement, violence, and minority uprooting—thus creating a collective memory that challenges dominant accounts and keeps alive the lived realities. Bose (2000) explains that displacement and trauma after partition are captured in oral and literary narratives, which depict ordinary people's responses to historical tragedy and highlight memory's dual role as both a record of the past and a means of representation. In the same way, Ghanayem (2023) maintains that storytelling allows Palestinians to move back and forth between homeland and the lived reality of exile. It connects the past, a place that was, with the present, a place divided by occupation.

Furthermore, Palestinian identity and emotional life are shaped by the constant negotiation of unstable, shifting spatial environments. Tawil-Souri (2014) suggests that spatial displacement is a fundamental aspect of the Palestinian collective experience, arguing that their “structure of feeling is one of negotiating a shifting spatiality” (p.173). She asserts that if Palestine exists in these uncertain, contested zones, between occupation and exile, presence and absence, homeland and displacement, cinema becomes the medium by which these fragments of experience, both conscious memories and unconscious feelings, are gathered and represented. Cinema captures lived experiences, memories, and dreams, while also opening a hidden dimension of myths, spirits, and realities that exist beyond and between its images, evoking unseen layers of meaning, imagination, and cultural memory.

1.4.1. Indigeneity, Hope, and Embodied Homeland

Ghanayem (2023) affirms that both indigeneity and refugeehood are intertwined narratives of colonial displacement. In exploring the American Indian writer Deborah Miranda’s *Bad Indians: A Tribal Memoir* (2013), Ghanayem explains the way personal family history reflects the broader story of California’s colonial past. Miranda’s memoir shows how settler colonialism fragmented both land and family. She framed the land itself as a layered narrative of colonial violence, indigenous survival, and personal family. The personal conflicts she recalls, such as abuse and alienation, mirror the historical clash between settler colonialism and indigeneity. Miranda ties her own childhood pain to the deeper colonial rupture; her “out-of-placeness” is both personal and historical. Notwithstanding the colonial declaration of California Indians “extinct” through policies like allotment, blood quantum, and miscounted censuses, which reinforced landlessness, Miranda insists that physical existence itself resists erasure, where bodies become “bridges” across landscapes of loss. In addition, storytelling transforms land into evidence, proving that indigenous ties to home cannot be severed. For Miranda, even if displaced, Natives cannot lose their homeland because it is embodied and narrated. For American Indians, homeland is not

just a geographical territory; it is carried in bodies, memory, and narratives, ensuring survival against claims of extinction.

Ghanayem (2023) also described how the Palestinian writer Mourid Barghouti's memoir *I Was Born There, I Was Born Here* (2009) is deeply connected to the geography of Palestine, yet that geography has been scarred and reshaped by colonial power. His narrative revolves around a homeland wounded by occupation. Colonial Apartheid Wall, checkpoints, and uprooted trees become symbols of collective suffering. Barghouti highlights how colonial cartography naturalises the settler colony and erases Palestine's historical geography. His "literary map" opposes this erasure by documenting wounds and asserting Palestine's presence. Barghouti's memoir depicts Palestine as a homeland marked by barriers and wounds, where colonial power dictates movement and belonging. His writing turns geography into testimony, resisting erasure by narrating the pain of place.

Native people may be displaced or forced into refugee status, but they cannot lose the essence of what first defined them. Their homeland remains within them, impossible to cut. As Miranda explains, they became living bridges, carrying descendants across vast terrains of loss. Against settler colonial attempts to erase them, land survives as narrative, and narrative survives as land. This fusion means that indigeneity is inseparable from place. Both Barghouti and Miranda root their memoirs in tangible places, using the memory of land as a foundation that endures even when fractured. Through storytelling, they construct a literary mapping attentive to the layered, often conflicting identities of indigenous and exiled people, of light and dark, of "here" and "there," all within the realities of settler colonialism, showing how narrative itself transforms when land becomes the central subject (Ghanayem, 2023).

Ultimately, Ghanayem (2023) shows that both Palestinian and American Indian writers highlight the importance of hope as a response to colonial erasure. These authors reveal how memory and imagination intertwine to maintain cultural identity and redefine the concepts of 'home' in contexts of displacement. Home is not just a physical space but an internal landscape,

anchored by memories and reimagined through creativity. The hope of restoring refugees to their homelands is one of the central elements that helps in understanding why displaced authors write. Indigenous hope creates stories that affirm life, reconnect dispersed people, and imagine communities beyond violence. Through their works, writers like Barghouti, Miranda, and Abulhawa show that colonial settlement can never fully erase home, because hope itself becomes a place of belonging. This imaginative process counters effacement, reinforces a sense of rootedness, and preserves the dream of return.

1.5. USA: A Hidden Dimension of Statelessness

The history of the U.S. is built upon immigration. Since its foundation, the country has witnessed numerous waves of immigrants, some seeking better lives and promising opportunities, while others fleeing discrimination and persecution. By the mid-twentieth century, following World War II, the immigration population in the United States increased. As a result, the need for a definitive policy to govern these waves of immigrants and address the rising number of foreigners emerged. However, the immigration and refugee policy did not emerge overnight; rather, it was gradually shaped by public opinion, political struggles, and legislative change. Between generosity and restrictions, the asylum and refugee policy faced two opposing views: those in favour of a generous humanitarian system and those who viewed refugees as a burden and a threat to national security (Wasem, 2020).

In the aftermath of World War II, the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees was established to protect individuals forcibly displaced by the conflict. Notably, the 1951 Refugee Convention was limited to people who fled before January 1951 and to Europe. At this point, the U.S. did not sign this Convention. This shifted with the 1967 Protocol, which removed time and geographic limitations, expanding the definition of refugees worldwide. Only then did the U.S. pledge commitment to protecting displaced persons under international law (Ma, 2025). Subsequently, the U.S. enacted the Refugee Act of 1980, marking a humanitarian shift that established a generous, rights-based asylum system consistent with international law. At this stage,

the U.S. policy considered asylum as a moral commitment, admitting large numbers of refugees and asylum seekers (Wasem, 2020).

In the post 9/11 era, the national security concerns intensified, leading to a reduction in admissions, viewing asylum seekers and refugees as security risks. During the first Trump era, the asylum process became more politicised. Trump's anti-immigrant sentiment encouraged him to order the construction of a wall along the U.S.-Mexico border to obstruct unauthorised entry. While the wall was conceptualised to secure the southern border of the country and block illegal migrants, it also held back many asylum seekers fleeing violence and persecution (Wasem, 2020). Ultimately, these structural impediments slowed the asylum petition system, leading to the backlogging of nearly 1.5 million asylum cases by the end of 2024, according to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (Ma, 2025).

Stateless migrants in the U.S. live isolated lives under constant immigration scrutiny, with uncertain rights: whether they can work legally, whether their requests are granted, and whether they might be re-detained at any moment. This creates a legal limbo in which they are neither deported nor securely integrated, leaving their existence precarious (Baluarte, 2020).

U.S. courts do not treat statelessness alone as grounds for refugee protection, but they grant asylum when statelessness is tied to discriminatory persecution, often based on race or religion. Examples include Roma communities in Europe, Palestinians in the Middle East, and Ethiopians of Eritrean descent. In such cases, courts have extended asylum protections when statelessness results from discriminatory denationalisation, that is, being deliberately stripped of nationality because of identity. Furthermore, when a stateless migrant in the United States is denied asylum, immigration authorities still issue a removal order, even though deportation is practically impossible because no country will accept them. The law does not require proof that another country is willing to readmit the person before deciding on deportation, which creates a paradox. The migrant is ordered to leave the United States, but lacks a destination to which they may go. This often results in prolonged detention, as an unsuccessful official attempt to negotiate their

return elsewhere. Eventually, the migrant is released, but only under parole, a fragile and temporary status that leaves them under the constant discretion of immigration authorities. Their daily existence remains insecure, as they lack permanent legal protection and face the ongoing risk of being re-detained. In effect, stateless individuals denied asylum are trapped in a cycle of legal limbo, extended confinement, and conditional release, with little hope of stability or resolution (Baluarte, 2020).

Conclusion

In light of the above, when individuals are stateless and universally regarded as foreigners, possessing no home to return to, no protection, and no social recognition, statelessness becomes not only a legal void but, more commonly, an existential condition. Notwithstanding that statelessness is not their fault, stateless individuals bear the sole burden of its severe consequences. When statelessness and displacement overlap, stateless persons face an even more precarious condition in which they lose not only physical belonging to a specific piece of land but also agency and a wide range of rights. Be that as it may, as stateless displaced individuals, these people exhibit remarkable strength and resilience in confronting increasing hardships and structural adversity. Through their faiths, bodies, memories, cultural and linguistic heritage, and narrative, their very existence serves as a means of witnessing, remembering, and expressing.

This chapter has established the theoretical framework for statelessness and how the identity and history of stateless displaced persons are negotiated and reclaimed in exile. The following chapter will, hence, examine the manifestation of identity reclamation and history tracing in this research's case study. The chapter will apply a critical content analysis to understand social exclusion, cultural expression, and indigenous resistance. Ultimately, the analysis will demonstrate how displaced stateless subjects turn persecution into tangible acts of survival, resistance, and belonging.

CHAPTER TWO:

Tracing History and Reclaiming Identity in *Mo* TV

Series, Season 2

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Introduction

In light of the first chapter, which explores statelessness, its origins, and how individuals reconnect with their native identity amid uprooting, this chapter explores the second season of the *Mo* TV series as a vivid example of the harsh realities of statelessness and forced migration. The study employs critical content analysis to explore elements of identity reclamation and historical tracing. While the Netflix dramedy's second season serves as a rich platform for the restoration of cultural identity and a modern portrayal of Palestinian statelessness, it is essential to acknowledge that, as a Netflix production, the series operates within distinct commercial constraints. The imperatives of platform audience reach, established comedic and dramatic genre conventions, and the fundamental need to entertain inevitably mediate between Amer's lived reality and the show's representation of statelessness, balancing socio-political critique with the structural demands of mainstream global streaming.

The chapter begins with an introduction to the two main characters, Mohammed Najjar, famously known as Mo, and his mother, Yusra Najjar, as the anchor and the concrete representation of the vivid Palestinian identity in the U.S., and an overview of the first season, which introduces the roots of Mo's identity reclamation and history restoration. Subsequently, this chapter highlights the struggles of Mo and his family in season two, emphasising the stateless Palestinians' sense of belonging in a world that refuses to recognise their statehood. While the first season highlights Mo's statelessness in the United States, season 2 broadens the perspective to a global scale. The second season illustrates that for Palestinians, particularly, and stateless individuals generally, issues of identity and belonging are not merely emotional but legal struggles against systems aimed at erasing them. Consequently, the chapter examines how the second season exemplifies the process of reclaiming history and demonstrates the resilience of identity amidst systemic heritage theft. Ultimately, it concludes by exploring Palestinian statelessness both in exile and within occupied Palestine.

2.1. The Architecture of Exile: The Seeds of Identity and History Reclamation in Season One

Mo is a semi-autobiographical comedy-drama—a dramedy—created by Mohammed Amer and Ramy Youssef. The series consists of two seasons. The first season, which debuted in 2022, offers a tense portrayal of the asylum-seeker experience in Houston, Texas.

The story follows Mohammed Najjar, a Palestinian stateless refugee known as Mo, who has lived in the U.S. with his family for over 20 years after having fled their adoptive home, Kuwait, during the Gulf War, due to fear of political persecution. The Najjars have been living in Texas since Mo was a kid, awaiting a resolution to their asylum case. Despite living a local lifestyle, Mo and his family are stuck in the bureaucratic nightmare, waiting for their asylum claim to be processed so they can obtain U.S. citizenship. The semi-autobiographical Netflix dramedy revolves around the tension between Mo, a common man seeking a regular life as an American citizen, and the stateless survivor with remarkable abilities and wittiness who is prevented from establishing a legitimate life.

Mo's life is loosely based on Mohammed Amer's real experience. Mo, or Hamoudi as his family calls him at home, is witty, charismatic, and fluent in three languages: Arabic, English, and Spanish, yet he constantly navigates the reality of being undocumented. Given that he lacks a work permit, he often struggles to hold down a steady, constant job. This leads him to spend the season jumping from one side hustle to another—selling counterfeit high-end merchandise out of his trunk, working odd jobs to support his family, and working under the table at an olive farm.

Mo embodies the tension between survival and dignity, reflecting both resilience and the struggle of displacement, showing how humour and hustle are required to survive when the system is designed to exclude you. Occupying a hybrid space, he is too American for some and not American enough for the law that denies him and his family citizenship. Mo loves Houston and carries a bottle of Palestinian olive oil in his pocket to correct the taste of restaurant food.

Yusra Najjar, Mo's mother, is a steadfast woman, deeply rooted in her traditional Palestinian heritage. She is spiritual, protective, and renowned not only for her unwavering

devotion to tradition but also for the golden olive oil she presses by hand, a symbol of memory and continuity. Mrs Najjar symbolises the family's cultural bridge. While Mo struggles with everyday challenges in Houston, Yusra is the keeper of the family's Palestinian identity. In an environment that constantly pushes the Najjars to assimilate or disappear into the system, she anchors them through numerous ways. On the one hand, Yusra's defining passion is her commitment to authentic, Palestinian olive oil. Like Mo, she often carries a small bottle in her handbag, refusing to settle for bland American substitutes. This habit is her way of keeping alive a tangible link to the land and traditions her family lost, famously stating, "olive oil brings light, and I want to brighten my life" (Amer & Youssef, 2022, episode 02, 00:17:45). On the other hand, at home, she primarily uses Arabic when speaking to her children, weaving cultural continuity into everyday life. Her love is expressed through elaborate Palestinian dishes, which are rituals of care and resilience, offering comfort and healing to the family amid displacement.

The Najjar family also consists of Mo's older brother, Sameer, who is on the autism spectrum, and Nadia, Mo's older sister, who has married a Canadian to be granted citizenship. With Sameer, Yusra is incredibly patient and protective, ensuring he feels valued despite his social challenges. In her relationship with her daughter, she struggles to let go of traditional expectations of how an Arab-Muslim daughter should not marry someone outside of her faith. As for Mo, Yusra strongly relies on him as the 'man of the house,' but often clashes with his impulsive nature and is strongly sceptical of his relationship with Maria—Mo's supportive Catholic Mexican-American girlfriend. Yusra fears that if Mo also marries outside the faith, his family's heritage and religious continuity will be lost. This refusal highlights the tension between Yusra's traditional Muslim values and Mo's secular, modern lifestyle.

Early in the first season, Mo is shot in a grocery store. Due to his undocumented status and lack of insurance, he is unable to seek medical treatment at a hospital and consequently consults his friend Chien, a tattoo artist, for assistance. Chien sutures his graze and provides him with lean—coded as codeine—to alleviate the pain. Mo's recurrent use of codeine results in

addiction, exemplifying his dependence on transient solutions for pain management and personal difficulties. The season also uses flashbacks to 1991, showing the family fleeing Kuwait during the Gulf War. It exposes the death of Mo's father, Mustafa, who was tortured in Kuwait. This trauma haunts Mo, manifesting in his refusal to deal with his own physical and emotional pain.

Moreover, Mo begins employment in an olive grove, working as an olive picker. He also assists Buddy, the grove owner, who faces persistent theft of his trees, by setting up olive-shaped tracker devices to help monitor potential future theft. During the process, Mo is subjected to racial profiling, as his action was likened to wiring a bomb. Mo becomes upset when Buddy makes this remark, which reflects a broader pattern in which Arabs are frequently subjected to such accusations.

After several years of frustration with their initial Palestinian lawyer, who has proved unprofessional and ineffective, the family finally hires a new attorney, Lizzie Horowitz, a competent professional who offers them a glimpse of hope. As the Najjars prepare for their asylum hearing, Yusra recalls hardships she and her family went through: being forced, by the IDF, out of Haifa and Burin in Palestine, leaving Kuwait after the Gulf War due to Iraq threats, witnessing her husband's imprisonment and torture, and spending 22 years in the U.S. without legal status.

After their case was imploded, Yusra and Sameer now prepare to start their business in selling Yusra's hand-pressed olive oil. She chooses to call it '1947,' the year before the Nakba, emphasising their connection to and entitlement to the land as the rightful owners, despite living on the other side of the world. Olive oil for Yusra and her family is a sign of continuation in the face of dispossession and rejection. She demonstrates strong resilience despite the failure of her family's asylum case, underscoring her faith in her heritage, proudly stating, "us Palestinians, we carry on ... Olive oil is who we are" (Amer & Youssef, 2022, episode 08, 00:05:30).

The season ends with a heist where Mexican cartels steal Buddy's trees from the olive grove. Mo negotiates with Buddy, promising that if he recovers the trees, Buddy will let Mo's mother press her oil at the farm. Hiding in the thieves' truck, Mo takes a risky trip to the U.S.-

Mexico border, eventually fleeing to Mexico after an explosion in the tunnel intended to bring him back to the U.S. and a gang fight. The finale scene shows him wandering the rugged border terrain, symbolising his literal and figurative losses.

2.2. Adversities and Challenges in Mo TV Series (Season Two)

The second season of the series deepens Mohammed Najjar's struggle with identity and history. Mo, living a fully American lifestyle, is now tracing his ties to his homeland, Palestine, seeking to reconnect with his ancestral heritage through food, memories, and dreams. Throughout the season, Mo encounters numerous structural, emotional, and psychological challenges that reshape his self-perception and his relationship with others.

The first season ends with Mo in a deeply precarious condition, as he is illegally taken to Mexico against his will. After six months in Mexico, he remains unable to re-enter the United States due to his undocumented status and faces constant denial of entry. In both Mexico and the U.S., Mohammed confronts significant impediments in attempting to restore his life before his abduction. The series depicts his experience as a reflection of the vulnerability of undocumented people who must constantly navigate the hardships in exile.

2.2.1. In Mexico

The season opens with Mohammed consulting a U.S. Embassy employee in Mexico, seeking assistance to facilitate his re-entry into the United States. Although the employee has been seeing Mo almost daily for the last six months, he remains unable to monitor Mo's condition as his rescheduled asylum hearing approaches. The employee repeatedly asks for documentation that Mo has never possessed, and for which he has waited 22 years. A passport, which can easily enable his return to the U.S., remains unattainable. His lawyer, Lizzie, asked him to obtain a laissez-passer, a document that facilitates legal entry into the country; however, for individuals who are not recognised as citizens under any national law, obtaining a laissez-passer is like navigating a labyrinth without a map. In the employee's words, Mo is now Mexican.

In the face of an obscure future, Mo shows considerable resistance. Unable to return to the United States, he is obliged to work to support his family in Houston. Maria, who becomes his ex-girlfriend in the second season, introduces him to her two aunts, who teach Mo how to make tacos, inspiring him to create a cart selling Taco Falafel, a combination of two culinary traditions: the Mexican taco and the Palestinian falafel. Mo's reliance on multiple side jobs has remained his defining feature as an undocumented person.

Confronting a bureaucratic quagmire, Mo continues to dispute with the embassy employee to resolve his situation, yet it remains impossible to obtain a *laissez-passer*. The employee fails to comprehend the severity of Mo's condition and mocks him, pretending to call international organisations regarding Mo's urgent case. When Mo expresses frustration, the employee changes his mind about Mo being Mexican, attributing Mo's aggression to American attitudes.

With no options left and diminishing hope, he seeks contacts to reach the ambassador for help. Ultimately, a regular customer of Mo's taco falafel cart is revealed to be the ambassador's wife, who invites Mo to her home to meet her husband, who might help secure a *laissez-passer*. Mohammed heads to the ambassador's residence, his last chance to attend the asylum hearing with his family. He has uncomfortable interactions with the ambassador and his wife. Though the ambassador initially promises help, he later evicts Mo because he refuses to describe the situation in Palestine as a conflict, arguing that the term implies two equal sides, while the situation in Palestine constitutes an occupation.

Ultimately, Mohammed must consider illegal entry to reunite with his family at the hearing. He plans to cross the U.S.-Mexico border with help from his Mexican friend's cousins, known as Coyotes—people who facilitate unauthorised crossings from Mexico to the U.S. Despite Lizzie's warnings against this course of action, Mo, with no alternatives, joins a group of migrants enduring even worse conditions than his own. The first episode depicts the refugees' harsh journey,

emphasising their dire circumstances. Mo, being emotional by nature, is deeply affected by a newborn seeking a better life.

2.2.2. In the Detention Centre

While crossing the border, Mo is apprehended and taken to a detention centre. There, he not only encounters difficulties with the responsible authority but also witnesses that other detainees experience even more severe displacement than his own. He is subjected to numerous racial slurs alluding to his Arab origins. The detention officer directs several racist terms at Mo, including “9/11,” “English,” and “Al-Qaeda.” Disregarding his request to contact his lawyer, the officer escorts Mo to a cell with other detainees, who face difficult conditions, including high heat, overcrowding, and substandard food, in the centre.

While detained, Mo and the others find a way to distract themselves and temporarily escape the dehumanising treatment they endure. During this time, Mo negotiates with the officer to secure a phone call to his lawyer. Mo is subsequently transferred to a smaller, more crowded, and unsanitary cell, where detainees are often treated as less than human. After an extended wait, he was taken to participate in an online deportation hearing with his lawyer, where the judge granted his release on the condition that he appear with his lawyer in Houston at a later, unspecified date.

2.2.3. In the U.S.

When Mo finally restores his life, he discovers that his family, whose asylum was granted during the hearing he missed, is already moving forward. They have begun the olive business on Buddy’s farm without his assistance. His mother suggests he keep the leadership with his autistic older brother, who is finally overcoming social challenges. Meanwhile, his friends Nick and Hamid are preoccupied with their families. Even his ex-girlfriend, Maria, has started her second project at her car repair shop and is seeing someone new. It appears that Mo is the only one not only stuck in the past but also lingering in its shadow.

Things escalate when Mo finds out that Maria is seeing an Israeli chef who owns a restaurant specialising in Mediterranean cuisines, particularly hummus—the Palestinian traditional dish—which he refers to as Israeli hummus. The situation worsens as Mo's asylum application is rejected after he took matters into his own hands while trying to re-enter the United States illegally. The situation worsens further when the judge orders his deportation and mandates an ankle monitor to track his location in the United States. Since he is not a Kuwaiti citizen, he cannot be deported in the traditional sense, and he certainly cannot be sent back to Palestine. While the state of Palestine holds a UN Non-Member Observer State status, officially accorded by the United Nations General Assembly in resolution 67/19 (2012), and enjoys bilateral recognition by over 140 nations (Al-Jazeera, 2024), entry, exit, and legal status of individuals within the territories remain fundamentally bound to an external administrative framework managed by the occupying force (Griffiths et al., 2022). Thus, the legal recognition of Palestine at the international level stands in sharp contrast to the domestic reality, rendering traditional deportation for Mo and Palestinians in general a physical impossibility. This has distressed Mo as he realises he cannot obtain travel documents and will be unable to visit his homeland with his mother and Sameer. Humiliated, he begins to cry, hardly overwhelmed by the absurdity of the immigration system, which issues work permits to deported individuals but denies them to asylum seekers. This injustice is now personally inscribed on his own body.

As Mo's struggles grow each day, he learns that Buddy is selling the farm, risking the family's olive oil business. Buddy arranges a meeting with the new farm owners, who are committed to continuing the Najjars' business due to their support for women of colour's agency and authenticity. Mo and Yusra are scheduled to meet the CEO next week to finalise the agreement.

Mo discovers that the chef, who previously stole Maria and hummus, has now stolen his taco-falafel recipe and is selling it at his restaurant. Frustrated, he heads to the restaurant, where he spots his dish on the menu and his family's olive oil on customers' tables. He begins loudly arguing with Guy, accusing him of stealing recipes from various Mediterranean cuisines. The

troubles escalate as customers grow worried and start filming him as he screams at the chef. The ankle bracelet alarm suddenly rings, and due to his appearance and the bomb-like sound, he again faces racial profiling. When he asks the woman, who is about to call the police, to keep eating her ‘hummus,’ she mistakenly thinks he says ‘ Hamas.’ His embarrassing video then goes viral on TikTok, showing a Palestinian man named “Mohammed” blasting an Israeli restaurant while a bomb-like sound plays. This shameful incident causes the company to withdraw from their previous promise to work with them.

2.3. The Weight of the State: Marked Bodies, Erased Identities

Throughout the series, in both the first and second seasons, Mo is reduced to what Agamben (1998) describes as *bare life*. The state exercises control not only over his life but also over his sense of belonging. For the state, he and his family are regarded as numbers within an extensive list of asylum seekers, lingering in an invisible space, neither fully integrated nor completely excluded. They embody complete non-entities and faceless subjects, unseen by the system that attempts to disregard them. In the first season, when Mo is shot, he is unable to receive hospital treatment due to his lack of documentation and insurance; instead, he risks his life by seeking assistance from his friend Chien, the tattoo artist, which leads to his codeine addiction and could have led to other dangerous side effects. This situation mirrors the incident involving a diabetic gangster who has lost his leg after seeking treatment not in a hospital but from Mo’s friend Chien, not knowing his diabetic condition, in a similar manner. This highlights how undocumented individuals may risk their lives because of their lack of access to health care. The body becomes a canvas where injustice and marginalisation are inscribed.

In the second season, Mo finds his body in Mexico, but there, his soul feels out of place. His undocumented status leads to mixed perceptions—sometimes seen as Mexican, other times as American. After 22 years of displacement and lingering in the shadows of the United States, he comes to the conclusion that the passport—recognising his existence and helping him regain his adoptive home—rather than the sun, is the centre of the universe. His body tells the

story of the struggles of side hustling in Mexico, where he cannot find stable employment without a work permit. One of his side jobs is wrestling, enduring nightly beatings, which underscores how political and social systems trap undocumented individuals in illegal, often dangerous jobs.

Moreover, the series depicts Mo's body as having experienced displacement twice: first from Kuwait and later from Mexico. During his first escape, Iraqi soldiers threatened him and his family and searched their luggage for money or valuables. On his second journey, he crosses the US-Mexico border after walking for a long time, eventually having to cross a river. He is apprehended and taken to a detention centre. The severe conditions in detention centres underscore the dehumanising nature of the American immigration system that detainees face. In these facilities, individuals are treated as less than fully human, with officers appearing desensitised and caught in a repetitive routine they perceive as personal imprisonment. The series' portrayal of institutional cruelty matches the severe abuses documented at actual facilities. According to a report published by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), detainees describe a toxic environment where guards routinely weaponise physical assault, sexual abuse and psychological intimidation to maintain control and silence grievances. This atmosphere of terror is compounded by profound material deprivation. The ACLU notes that severe overcrowding forces detainees into tents and bathrooms flooded with foul water mixed with urine and faeces, all while facing critical food shortages that lead to rapid weight loss and widespread illness (Gassama, 2025). When the series concentrates on the psychological and physical devastation within these environments, it portrays a verified reality where institutional neglect is actively upheld through violence. This portrayal affirms the series' depiction of detention as a site of profound dehumanization, leaving a lasting impact on the bodies and souls of individuals apprehended during irregular border crossings.

The ankle monitor placed on Mo following his deportation symbolises the persistent injustice inflicted upon him. Due to his statelessness, he is not physically deported, despite being politically and legally marginalised. He remains in a non-legal limbo, now marked by an ankle

bracelet. Apart from its humiliating aspect, the device represents dehumanisation and oppression in its very instance. Mo loses his personal identity and is reduced to a dot on the map, with the state controlling and tracking his movements. In a moment of dark humour, Mo tells Lizzie, crying, “If you need me, you can just ... find me on Google Maps, apparently.” (Amer & Youssef, 2025, episode 04, 00:02:55). The bracelet causes skin irritation and rings unexpectedly, leading to confusion and discomfort. It represents state surveillance and the connection between the body and the bureaucratic system that refuses to acknowledge his full personhood.

This perfectly illustrates the Agambenian concept of bare life, the state in which a person is stripped of all legal rights and reduced to pure survival. When Mo seeks the ambassador’s help, the latter makes a bold, disrespectful, and unethical request involving Mo’s body, demonstrating how men in power misuse their authority and take advantage of vulnerable people for personal pleasure. By turning a crucial travel document like the laissez-passer into a tool for sexual extortion, exchanging the document for a sexual relationship with the ambassador’s wife, the diplomat leverages his official power against the displaced. For an undocumented person, losing a homeland means more than just losing a place on a map. It strips away their political identity and reduces them to nothing more than a vulnerable physical body. Trapped outside the law’s protection, but completely at the mercy of its power, Mo’s very body becomes a target for the state’s predatory system. The ankle monitor, on the other hand, functions as a digital brand of criminality. When the monitor rings in public, it turns the body into an acoustic target for immediate racial profiling, reinforcing the subject’s status as someone physically present in the territory but permanently excluded from its political protection. the ankle monitor effectively strips the individual of political personhood, transforming their body into a digital dot on state surveillance map, the individual is no longer recognized by their legal rights, but rather by their raw physical location monitored by the state.

Mo’s body signifies more than blood, bone, and flesh. It functions as a historical record and an archive of displacement, trauma, and exclusion. His body bears witness to symbols of

oppression and injustice, evident through the gunshot scar, the trauma of displacement, the fear of deportation, the ankle monitor, and the racist profiling he faces because of his skin colour and Arabic background. As noted in the first chapter, the human body transforms into a site of oppressive surveillance and scrutiny where identity is marginalised and often erased.

Despite enduring severe oppressive and unjust circumstances, Mo continues to move forward. He demonstrates strong adaptability and robustness. The gunshot graze becomes a scar that testifies to his resilience and to the fact that everything shall pass. Regardless of the obstacles, he persists with a sense of humour that helps him overcome hardships. As mentioned in the first chapter, personal traits enable refugees to cope with whatever challenges they face.

2.3.1. Sovereignty of Memory Against a Stolen History: Tracing Persistent Selves and Defending Ancestral Roots

The series' events are based on Mohammed Amer's real experience of displacement and exclusion. Numerous tense events reflect a phenomenological engagement with displacement, rejection, and deracination. The series' narrative itself is an act of resistance, investigating a lost, often-stolen history and reclaiming identity through the right to narrate a witnessed journey of exclusion. When he was invited on *The Daily Show* (2025), hosted by Jon Stewart, Mohammed Amer said most of the emotional scenes were recreations of his actual memories with his grandmother. Although it was very painful to go through, it was the most realistic way to tell the story of the stateless Mo without hiding or sugarcoating the absurdity of the American immigration system. According to Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Ihmoud (2014), narratives recreate identity, re-root what has been uprooted, and reconstruct home despite dispossession. The authors argue that by writing, remembering and telling their stories, Palestinians actively reject their erasure. Storytelling becomes an act of building a sense of home and self even over the physical ruins of displacement.

Throughout the season, many scenes subtly express the creators' messages on different topics. They shed light on real political and structural problems, such as the metaphorical

deportation of stateless people who have no affiliation with any country. These individuals often encounter even harsher restrictions and negligence.

To begin with, the first two episodes depict the harsh realities refugees and displaced people face when seeking refuge in a host country. Many people who are forced to leave their homelands due to fear of persecution or danger, and who seek to join the U.S., are detained before deportation. Amer notes that he deliberately wanted to depict the harsh journey of refugees seeking refuge in the U.S. and the time it takes to become an American citizen (The Daily Show, 2025).

Furthermore, referencing American propaganda, in episode 05, Mo discusses with Hamid's father-in-law, Ron, who admits that he realised Americans have wasted trillions on the war on terror after Hamid reported him to Al Jazeera, the Qatari international news network. Ron then says, "I'm awake now" (Amer & Yussef, 2025, 00:20:50). This scene emphasises the increasing international recognition of Western misinformation concerning Arabs and the Middle East. Additionally, the series extends beyond the Palestinian struggle to include the Native American tribe, the Karankawa, who were indigenous to Texas. During a Thanksgiving celebration on the farm, Bob, Nadia's Canadian husband, acknowledges the Karankawa people and their right to the land they stand on.

Moreover, Hamid's frequent praise of the United States as the greatest country on Earth is ironic, considering the series shows the struggles of a stateless family in that very America. The 22-year rejection, the bureaucratic nightmare, and the rejection of Mo's asylum claim because of his involuntary trip to Mexico and his illegal border crossing out of desperation highlight what a great country can do. In episode 07, during a Thanksgiving discussion about America's greatness, Hamid notes that the country granted asylum to Mo's family—yet only after more than twenty years. Nadia mentions the \$200 million America provided to the IDF, prompting Toya, Nick's girlfriend, to argue that the country misallocates citizens' money to foreign issues rather than prioritising health care. Maria then argues that America is sometimes great and sometimes awful.

The series functions as a platform to challenge misinformation and misconceptions. It highlights the truth about the historical theft impacting both Palestinians and non-Palestinians. Throughout both seasons, the series offers a dramatized representation of the persecution and violence experienced not only by Mo but also by refugees in the United States. Far from a dramatic exaggeration, the series reflects a well-documented systemic vulnerability shared by stateless individuals navigating the domestic immigration system. According to data in legal resources compiled by the UNHCR, individuals who are potentially stateless or at risk of statelessness within the U.S. routinely face severe legal hardships. These are prolonged and indefinite periods of administrative immigration detention in mandatory restrictive supervision requirements due to their lack of recognised nationality (UNHCR, 2017; UNHCR, 2026) and severe detention conditions once they enter these facilities (Gassama, 2025). The series moves beyond mere entertainment, translating complex, geopolitical, and institutional failures into visceral human portraits. The narrative highlights the dispossession and displacement experienced by the Najjars, in particular, as well as by stateless displaced individuals, in general. It serves as a record that enriches the Palestinian collective memory and as a form of representation that challenges stereotypes, misrepresentation, misappropriation, theft and erasure. The series offers a space to explore the Najjars' statelessness without reducing them to mere numbers. It uncovers overlooked aspects of Mo and his family's memories, identities, and cultural heritage that the state often neglects. Likewise, Mo and his family are depicted as active agents rather than passive, voiceless victims.

2.3.2. Tracing Homeland in the Unconscious

While in Mexico, Mo's internal longing for a stable and defining homeland becomes overwhelming. Being Palestinian, born in Kuwait, having fled to the U.S., lived there for 22 years, and eventually kidnapped to Mexico, without obtaining citizenship, intensified Mo's feeling of mapping a lost territory that is willing and always ready to welcome him. He begins dreaming of a key, a defining motif associated with Palestinians who were forced to leave their homes.

Palestinians, although physically separated from the land, often retain the key to their homes, a symbol of hope for eventual return (Al Jazeera, 2024). In the first episode, after losing hope of obtaining a laissez-passer from the embassy and awaiting the meeting with the ambassador, Mo has a dream in which his mother tells him to “take the key and go home” (Amer & Youssef, 2025, 00:10:57). Since then, Mo has begun tracing his ancestral connection to Palestine.

The key recurs in another dream that haunts Mo in episode 02 when he is in the smaller cell of the detention centre. While this experience may initially appear hallucinatory, due to Mo’s prolonged sleep deprivation, it becomes evident that Mo’s longing for Palestine is intensifying. In this second dream, the previously crowded cell now contains only Mo and his friend Nick. During their brief exchange, Nick signals, “Mohammed Najjar, a man with no right to return.” Mo’s response: “I didn’t choose to be stateless” (Amer & Youssef, 2025, 00:11:15), reveals his profound understanding of the historical forces underlying Palestinian statelessness. Palestinians did not voluntarily abandon their homes, property, and villages; rather, they were driven out, either by force or by fear (Said, 2000b). As the conversation continues, Nick gives Mo his grandfather’s passport and observes, “Even if we get out, there will always be a wall, bro.” This statement underlines that returning to Palestine is no longer a viable option; rather, it has become a right that is either granted or withheld by the substitute state, which grants this right exclusively to Jewish people.

As the dream progresses, Mo’s grandfather gives him a key and, in Arabic, recommends him to “take care of the key” (Amer & Youssef, 2025, 00:11:57). Mo uses the key to dig a hole in the cell wall and ultimately escapes through a sewer pipe. At the end of the dream, Mo repeatedly utters the word “free, free” while holding the key. This sequence suggests that Mo recognises that adherence to his native heritage is the means to overcome his sense of uprooting and exclusion.

When Mo stays at Hamid’s residence in episode 05 for a few days, he notices it is stocked with weapons, which sparks a new dream about the key. In the dream, Hamid wakes Mo

and says, “They’re here.” Confused, Mo walks around the house, saying, “I’m not afraid” (Amer & Youssef, 2025, 00:12:50). Suddenly, he sees his grandmother sitting with little Mo at a table, teaching him how to eat hummus as a Palestinian and asking in Arabic if he misses her. Watching her talk to his younger self, Mo begins to cry, barely uttering in Arabic that he misses her greatly. She then looks up and asks him where the key is. Surprised, he pulls a key from his throat as she asks if he understands. The key reappears at a crucial moment in Mo’s life, symbolising his deep adherence and longing for Palestine. His memories of family come to mind whenever he faces hardships, pushing him to keep going and not give up. As noted in the first chapter, cultural memory keeps displaced people anchored when they feel out of place.

The dreams of the key, his grandparents, and their belongings symbolise Mo’s internal longing and mental image of Palestine. As Bose (2000) suggests, this process shows how past memories persist as an active, unfinished aspect of his life. This active aspect shapes his identity, fuels his subjectivity, and nurtures his claim to his Homeland. Therefore, the Homeland becomes more than a fixed physical location for Mo and his family; it is an idea they experience and remember vividly. As Gandhi & Nguyen (2023) describe, Home is a fragment of identity placed in an open suitcase, carried by forcibly displaced people on the continuous journey of exile.

2.4. Reclaiming a Stolen History

The conversation at Ambassador Louis’s residence, in the first episode, is a pivotal moment in Mo’s pursuit of the laissez-passer required for his legal return home. Despite being promised the document, he remains committed to defending the reality of his homeland. When the ambassador proposes a toast for Mo’s safe return and “a peaceful end to the conflict” (Amer & Youssef, 2025, 00:21:09), Mo could have remained silent and accepted the word conflict to secure his passage back home. Instead, he refuses to compromise his people’s cause by accepting the term conflict to describe the situation in Palestine. He asserts to the ambassador that what happens in Palestine does not constitute a conflict, as the term suggests two equal parties in opposition, but rather it represents an occupation. The dispute over terms has cost Mo his ticket to reunite with his

family, yet he was too proud not to sell his people. In this scene, Mohammed demonstrates a nuanced understanding of the rhetorical strategies politicians use to obscure and distort historical realities. He displays intransigence and inviolability in the face of his people's historical distortion and suffering.

Throughout the season, Mo aims to correct misconceptions about Palestinian and non-Palestinian culinary traditions that have been stolen. The Israeli chef, known as Guy, enters Mo's life, possessing privileges that Mo does not. He is white, legal, successful, and now he is dating Maria, which makes Mo consider him a rival. Mo feels that Guy has not only taken his girlfriend but also usurped his cultural heritage. The chef is advertising hummus—originally Palestinian—as Israeli hummus, which irritates Mo.

At Kaan Ya Makaan, the restaurant where Mo and his friends play Tarnib—a traditional Middle Eastern card game popular in the Levant: Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan—Aba, his Jewish friend, asks, “What’s the big deal? So, he [Guy] makes hummus?” Mo responds firmly, “He’s pillaging my heritage. You can’t call hummus Israeli. Israel’s been around, what, like 75 years or so? Hummus has been around for thousands of years.” Aba counterpoints, “So have the Jewish people.” Mohammed adds, “But Jews in Russia weren’t just sitting around like: hey, pass the hummus and knafeh while they’re doing zips of vodka” (Amer & Youssef, 2025, 00:04:38). This brief exchange from episode 04 clearly demonstrates not only Mo's objection to the historical misappropriation of his people's heritage but also his knowledge of Jewish history. He perceives the act of usurping his heritage as a form of cultural dispossession. By presenting the ancestral Palestinian legacy of hummus as Israeli, the chef, Aba, and the state they represent are not merely appropriating hummus but rewriting the history of its origin. As Said (2000a) notes, whoever controls the narrative controls history.

When Mo confronts Guy at the world championship barbecue contest in episode 05, Guy asks him to return a lighter Mo had taken from him earlier, unaware that Guy is Maria's new boyfriend and Israeli. Mo, having thrown the lighter away once he learned this, responds that he

is happy to give it back once the Israeli settlers return his land. Guy then comments that what Mo is saying is a funny joke. Mo responds, “My family and I have been laughing at it for 80 years” (Amer & Youssef, 2025, 00:22:43). Additionally, in episode 02, after trying a new restaurant, Aba praises the Israeli couscous served there. Mo affirms, “Stop with the Israeli couscous nonsense, there is no such thing” (Amer & Youssef, 2025, 00:03:27). Aba looks it up on Wikipedia and explains, “Israeli couscous is a toasted pasta in tiny balls, developed in Israel in the 1950s when rice was scarce.” Mo concludes, “Congratulations, you took it from the Italians, rolled it into little balls, and called it Israeli couscous” (Amer & Youssef, 2025, 00:04:15), highlighting his attitude toward the importance of transparency regarding traditional heritage. He consistently opposes the theft of cultural legacies.

2.5. The Poetics of Persistence: Reclaiming Identity Through Lived Heritage

Facing deracination and the struggle over identity in a setting that constantly pressures individuals to give up who they are and fade into the mass, Mohammed learns to reclaim his agency and selfhood in various ways. He does not cease to defend his right to his material and historical heritage. Whether in front of the ambassador, the Israeli chef, or his Jewish friend Aba, Mo never stops defending the stolen heritage of people. Whenever Aba mentions a stolen Israeli tradition, Mo quickly sets the record straight, even if it means sacrificing something valuable.

Furthermore, Mo is highly attached to his family. His living with his mother and brother contrasts with typical American culture. This reflects his adherence to his cultural lifestyle, which feels out of place in a society that promotes independence and individualism. When Maria praises Guy for living alone and not with his mother, in episode 04, Mo responds, “You know this is a cultural thing” (Amer & Youssef, 2025, 00:22:00). Mo is unafraid of criticism, feels safe with his family, and does not envision life without them. In episode 05, he affirms to Nick and Hamid, “We’re in America. 18 years old, move out of the house. What happened to the family, being close together?” (Amer & Youssef, 2025, 00:02:08). As noted in the first chapter, family and social networks reinforce refugees' resilience, by providing emotional support, fostering a sense of

belonging, and preserving identity. Often, these indigenous communities facilitate the intergenerational transmission of language and the maintenance of religion.

Therefore, Mo remains true to his native language due to his strong bond with his family. He primarily speaks Arabic with his mother and aunts during video calls and by incorporating specific Arabic words throughout the series rather than their English equivalents. He refers to his mother as ‘Mama,’ or ‘Habibtī,’ and frequently uses the term ‘Habibi’ when speaking to his older brother, Sameer, and his nephew, Ossama. He even employs vulgar Arabic terms and gestures when insulting. Unlike his friends Hamid, an Arab, and Nick, a Nigerian, who speak only English and neglect their native languages, Mo is fluent in Palestinian Arabic and frequently uses it, especially in the domestic context. After their fathers’ deaths, Mo and Nick decided to have a tattoo of their fathers’ names. Unlike Nick, who tattooed his father’s name in English, Mo chose to tattoo his father’s name, Mustafa, in Arabic. This symbolises that for Mo, the concept of the father is deeply connected to his native identity and linguistic heritage. His native language symbolises the ongoing connection to his father and homeland, both of which are no longer physically reachable. Native language weaves continuity, reinforces pride, and maintains links to ancestral tradition and cultural legacy.

Additionally, the family maintains their cultural identity through their olive oil business. After Mo returns from Mexico, he starts planning to grow the business. Despite being deported and having an uncertain legal status, he is determined to expand the family project. He visits supermarkets and restaurants to promote his ‘1947’ Palestinian olive oil. When Mo and Yusra meet the new farm owner in episode 06, Yusra confidently states:

The oil is about more than money. This oil is our identity. Our family planted olive trees in Palestine for generations; it’s in our blood. Houston is our home, and Palestine is our homeland. But the oil we make here is what ties them together. You see, it’s beyond than just a business. (Amer & Youssef, 2025, 00:10:30).

Olive oil for the family extends beyond being a simple cultural artefact. It is a fragment of their identity and a testament to their existence. Throughout the series, particularly in season two, olive oil bears the significance of Palestinian history and is valued as a traditional remedy for ailments and injuries. Its virtues are handed down from one generation to the next, reinforcing its value. When Mo cannot sleep, his mother rubs a few drops of olive oil on his forehead to help him sleep. When the ICE agent removes the ankle monitor, they discover it has caused severe irritation. Mo reassuringly tells Lizzie, who is very concerned, that rubbing olive oil on the injury will make it fine. In the last episode, Mo is pepper-sprayed by settlers who aimed to destroy the olive trees on Mo's family's land, and his eyes swell. Still, he feels relief when his mother rubs olive oil on them, saying, "That's good" (Amer & Youssef, 2025, 00:17:09). This emphasises that the comforting ritual of applying olive oil to injuries is valued more for its psychological reassurance than for any tangible medical benefit. Olive oil transcends its role as a culinary ingredient, serving instead as a cultural symbol of ancestral heritage and of the unique Palestinian identity. Its production and consumption are deeply woven into inherited social and historical legacies. As will be explored in the subsequent section, olive trees and olive oil sustain Palestinian continuity and reinforce resilience both within and beyond Palestine.

Yusra also continues to uphold her connection to her identity in her own way. She constantly follows news about settlers in her homeland and, even during private moments with family, she mourns her people's losses. Despite Mo and Nadia advising her to reduce her news consumption for her well-being, she remains concerned. She refuses to stop caring about not only her sisters but also everyone in Palestine. Across different occasions, we hear about settlers attacking homes in Ramallah, the IDF killing a 17-year-old, over 100 settler attacks in just 10 days, and another school being destroyed in Yatta. When Nadia requests her mother in episode 07 to stop constantly watching the news and instead watch something uplifting, like a bakery show, Yusra becomes emotional and responds, "How can I watch anything, when there are kids watching their

homes, their schools being destroyed in Yatta? Not only in Yatta, in Jenin, Ramallah, Nablus, Al Khalil... We owe it to them by watching at least” (Amer & Youssef, 2025, 00:21:16).

Despite living on the opposite side of the world, Yusra considers herself a part of the Palestinian community, frequently using “us” to speak about it. When she refers to them, she proudly states, “us Palestinians,” “we,” or “our.” This act symbolises identity reclamation and her refusal to allow physical uprooting to obliterate her cultural and social affiliation. Shalhoub-Kevorkian and Ihmoud (2014) argue that Palestinians, because of ongoing displacement and dispossession, re-root themselves in a home carried within them. The home is redefined as a resilient, embodied space of survival, identity reconstruction, and continuous return. By using first-person plural pronouns, Yusra illustrates that community is not only within a specific geographical space, but a shared consciousness that cannot be severed by displacement. Building upon the concept of indigeneity as explored in Miranda’s *Memoir* (2013) in the first chapter, when displaced individuals refer to their community as “us,” they establish transnational bridges, thereby illustrating that Homeland remains within them. Yusra’s connection to her homeland is not about physical proximity; rather, her very being is her link to Palestine. This linguistic resistance functions as a defence against the fracturing of the self and as a healing response to the rift of exile grounded in a unified, enduring cultural identity.

Nadia’s response is just as compelling as that of her mother. Nadia, brimming with emotion, states:

We owe it to them to live too. It’s on us [displaced] to pass who we are to our kids, to Ossama’s kids, Insha’Allah. This is how they’re not gonna erase us, no matter how hard they try. We’re more than pain and suffering (Amer & Youssef, 2025, 00:21:43).

This statement illustrates how exiled natives bear the burden of a long ancestral history that includes traditions, cultural heritage, language, colonisation, violence, and displacement, and aim to pass it down to their descendants through the generations.

Ultimately, Yusra proudly declares, looking at her grandson Ossama and teaching him how to eat hummus, “Countries and borders are all made up, the real thing is the land, and the land accepts us wherever we die” (Amer & Youssef, 2025, 00:26:06), emphasising that homeland is a conceptual geography that people trace through the journey of exile. They may be driven to leave their homeland, but their homeland never leaves them.

2.6. The Architecture of Absence: Revisiting the Ghost of a Former Homeland

In the preface to the second edition of his book *After the Last Sky* (1999), Said recounts his trip to Palestine with his wife and two children in 1992, forty-five years after leaving with his family in 1947. He returned to Palestine with his wife and children for the first time, marking a meaningful journey. Said showed them his birthplace, the house he grew up in, the school he and his father attended, and the towns and villages where his relatives had lived for so long. Travelling through the areas now part of Israel, he was struck by the realisation that no one from his past remained, despite remembering the houses, schoolrooms, beaches, gardens, and many of the people from his youth, who are now no longer alive.

Said (1999) notes that signs of Palestinian resistance and resilience were evident as he and his family travelled through Israel and the occupied territories. Despite efforts to erase their presence, Palestinians continued to resist and thrive. He observes that Palestinian institutions are active, organised, and responsive to local needs, demonstrating the Palestinian people’s resilience, social strength, and cultural endurance under occupation. Even with these signs of survival, Said felt a sense of alienation and could not fully belong in a “forcibly transformed landscape” (Said, 1999, p.viii), where the new state dominates Palestinian territories with its ugly and unattractive architecture that has colonised towns like Safad and Tiberias by displacing their residents. Hebrew has become the official language, also spoken by many Palestinians, and road signs are often in Hebrew and English, not Arabic. In the preface, Said expresses admiration for his homeland's resilience and survival, which he witnessed firsthand, alongside a sense of melancholy over his displacement, reflecting the tension between belonging and estrangement.

The Najjars' visit mirrors the Saids' nostalgic, bittersweet visit to Palestine. In episode 08, the season's finale, Mo, who has married Maria and regularised his legal situation, Yusra, and Sameer embark on a journey to their homeland, Palestine. They are overjoyed and thrilled to reunite with their family after many years apart. On the plane, Mo dreams of a future where Zionist settlers are returning stolen homes by handing over keys to Palestinians. In this vision, Zionist soldiers, Jews, and Palestinians are working together to remove weapons used to kill Palestinian civilians, symbolising hope and aspiration for a free Palestine. As Ghanayem (2023) notes, refugee narratives are about the hope of restoring indigenous populations to their homelands.

Before landing, the three review their answers to the Customs and Border Protection (CBP) questions. They delete WhatsApp from their phones; they are expected to be polite, smile, and avoid drawing attention. This scene highlights the Palestinians' panic when visiting their homeland, where they are often viewed as outsiders and sometimes labelled as terrorists, emphasising their deep sense of dispossession. Similarly, Said (1999) recounts that his arrival at Tel Aviv's airport "was a very tense and anxious time for the four of us [him, his wife and two children]; we had expected to be interrogated and perhaps even detained" (p.viii). By the same token, the Najjars face a tough moment during their interrogation by a CBP officer at the airport, who repeatedly asks provocative questions about their grandfathers and great-grandfathers, their employment, and why they came to Israel immediately after obtaining their passports. Yusra responds with a simple yet meaningful question: "Where did your grandfathers come from?" (Amer & Youssef, 2025, 00:04:46), revealing that the officer, originally from Spain, is questioning why deep-rooted Palestinian individuals visit Palestine. Indigeneity in this scene is confronted and threatened by settler colonialism.

The mother and her two children, full of longing and melancholy, witness the state of their homeland. The apartheid wall, which goes for miles, separates the Palestinian residences and colonisers' settlements. The Palestinian side of the wall is adorned with artistic drawings depicting Palestinian resistance. These images, along with olive trees, remind them of the beauty of their

homeland. The family, travelling in a taxi with an Israeli license plate, witnesses the injustice faced by Palestinian cars at checkpoints. Soldiers often make them wait for extended periods and seize their food and belongings, tossing them onto the ground. This persecution underscores the vulnerability of indigeneity in a settler-colonial context, generating collective suffering. As Barghouti notes in his memoir (2009), the land is scarred and wounded by occupation, which diminishes the land's indigenous essence and legitimises the settler colony.

Yusra, Mohammed, and Sameer have finally come back home. Their family eagerly awaits their arrival. The moment is deeply emotional and overwhelming, showcasing family members who were forcibly separated and have not seen each other for decades. They sit together at the table, enjoying Palestinian dishes crafted from Mo's grandmother's handwritten recipes, which symbolise the resistance of their cultural culinary heritage.

During their stay, Mo learns the horrible dispossession his people endure. They are forbidden to plant their land except for two days each year. They are unable to go to Jerusalem to pray. Their houses have been taken by settlers. Mo's uncle shows him the homes that once belonged to his two sisters, but are now occupied by settlers. Mo's family owns a large amount of land, but it remains unused because they, along with all Palestinians, cannot develop it without permissions, of which 95% are denied. As Ghanayem (2023) suggests, by narrating the pain of place, the series offers a geographical testimony to the wounds, fissures, and barriers that the land and her people have endured. Colonial Zionism fragmented the land, society, and families, dispersing the Palestinian people within and beyond occupied Palestine. They claim the land as their own, thereby reinforcing Palestinians' landlessness and statelessness.

Nonetheless, steadfastness and invincibility are defining traits of the Palestinian people. They resist discriminatory, oppressive erasure through their physical presence on the land. Their presence serves as a bridge between loss and tenacity. Despite being permitted to cultivate their land for only two days a year during the olive harvest, they never miss those days. Mo, along with his mother and brother, joins these days, participating in the olive harvest and enjoying the

family activity, singing Palestinian songs and dancing. This agricultural ritual sustains their tangible connection to the ancestors. Not only do olive trees represent longevity and endurance, but they also symbolise Palestinian determination and the will to remain on the land, reflected in their deep-seated roots. This ritual maintains continuity not only within Palestine but also in shaping the family's identity and Palestinian Indigeneity in exile, as demonstrated throughout the series.

Meanwhile, Mo experiences significant moments of discovery, uncovering historical remnants, including the mosque where his family has prayed for generations. The mosque stands as a symbol of immovability and continuity. His father, a telecommunications engineer, was the first to install the sound system there. He finds his grandfather's British-Palestinian red passport at his grandparents' house, which he had seen in an earlier dream, and the key he had been dreaming of in previous episodes of the season.

The visit is characterised by a series of tense moments that display the injustice and persecution to which Palestinians are subjected. Mo is subjected to pepper spray when he confronts settlers attempting to destroy olive trees on his family's land. This scene highlights how settlers sabotage and distort the indigenous aspect of the land, and provoke Palestinians. Additionally, Mo narrowly escapes being shot when he returns a young autistic settler child—who had been following Sameer while observing birds—to his family's settlement. The family experiences terror upon witnessing the boy following Sameer, fearing that they could be charged with kidnapping a Zionist boy and consequently face the death penalty. This demonstrates that the words of Palestinians carry no significance compared with those of oppressive settlers, who at any moment may falsely accuse innocent Palestinians of crimes they have not committed.

Perhaps the most heartrending moment for the family occurs when it is time to depart. Yusra and her sisters weep as if they have never cried before, embracing one another tightly as they sing traditional farewell songs. Mo's uncle gives him a bottle of authentic Palestinian olive

oil, the persistent and unalterable symbol of Palestinian existence. This poignant scene powerfully depicts the themes of displacement and separation at their most profound.

Ultimately, Mo's uncle gives him his father's camera, filled with nostalgic moments of his dead father, which he has long missed. They spend their last night watching videos of joyful past times, filled with emotion and longing. Yusra reassures Mo, who feels depressed after discovering that his father's degree was useless upon arriving in the U.S. and struggles to adapt. She tells him that their value does not stem from a degree or a passport, but from Allah. She emphasises that the world will always perceive them as vulnerable and dispossessed, and will constantly try to bring them down. However, they must stand tall and smile in its face because Palestinians recognise their worth. When CBP officers humiliate and mistreat Mo and his family at the airport on their way back to Houston, stripping them of their clothes and breaking his father's VHS tape, Mo, for the first time, remains calm, stands quietly, and smiles, signifying the full formation of the resilient, unwavering Palestinian identity.

Conclusion

While many things remain unchanged, Palestine is no longer a viable option for return. It becomes clear that Palestine has become everything and its opposite: love and resentment, longing and contentment, presence and absence, stubbornness and vulnerability, homeland and exile. The series illustrates the ongoing dispossession and alienation experienced by Palestinians, both within and outside their homeland. Their statelessness is rooted not just in displacement but also in their very existence. In exile, they face denial, refusal to acknowledge them, and significant structural hardships. In their homeland, they are not recognised as full people, suppressed by the settlers, and face restrictions even in their most personal spaces. *Mo*—season 02—vividly demonstrates the Palestinian catastrophe, where people are stripped of their homeland and the right to reclaim it.

Through a close reading of the narrative and key cultural artefacts, this chapter demonstrates that statelessness is not merely a social phenomenon and that displacement is not

merely a background setting. Instead, both serve as battlegrounds for reclaiming identity and tracing history. By analysing the structural injustice perpetrated by the state alongside the family's efforts to restore ancestral heritage, this chapter illustrates that systemic exclusion coexists with personal and collective resilience.

A critical content analysis of the second season of the *Mo* TV series exposes the highly precarious circumstances faced by stateless people, who navigate hardships that compel them towards the edge of society in exile. The persistent erasure, the absence of official recognition, and the continual shifts between side hustles serve as structural manifestations of political and economic exclusion. These constraints deprive stateless individuals of legal agency and underscore state-sanctioned marginalisation. Despite these challenges, the series portrays the Najjar family as resilient, aligning with broader scholarly research on stateless populations who demonstrate resilience and regularly overcome obstacles. Additionally, the analysis highlights how cultural and historical elements, including the frequent use of olive oil, memories of the key and grandparents, news consumption, and linguistic preservation, act as anchors, connecting these individuals to their Homeland. Ultimately, the analysis reveals that when a tangible connection is severed and physical return becomes impossible, stateless individuals reconnect with their homeland through the landscape of their memories. The homeland thus becomes an interior geography, composed of nostalgic moments and painted memories that no border control can seize.

General Conclusion

In essence, this research aimed to examine the concept of statelessness from legal, cultural, and human perspectives. Throughout its two chapters, the study endeavoured to highlight the characteristics of stateless individuals, the roots of their statelessness, and the ways in which they assert their presence in a world that aims to erase their identity and to eradicate their humanity. The research analysed the *Mo* TV series, season two, thereby revealing how displaced stateless people make sense of their statelessness, navigate disenfranchisement and exclusion, while striving to reclaim identity and trace the history of their homeland.

The initial chapter established the theoretical foundation by defining the fundamental concepts of statelessness and refugees. It then analysed and characterised the intersection of these two populations, leading to the emergence of a third, more vulnerable condition of displaced statelessness. The chapter also aimed to examine the role of the modern political system in engineering statelessness, identifying the factors underlying this perilous phenomenon. Furthermore, the overlap of statelessness and refugeehood creates not only a legal void, but more often an existential crisis, where people are seen as foreigners everywhere, with no home to return to, no protection, and no legal recognition. The first chapter, hence, explored how these invisible individuals reclaim their agency and maintain their identity and history in exile.

Through narratives, family relations, personal qualities, linguistic preservation, cultural memory, dermal manipulation, and claims of indigeneity, displaced stateless persons continue to resist political and legal persecution. Ultimately, the chapter concludes by exploring the hidden dimensions of statelessness in the United States, emphasising how the American judicial system addresses this precarious demographic. Stateless refugees face political discrimination not only in their country of supposed origin but also in the United States, where the law still orders their deportation despite the fact that no country will accept them, leaving them in a more invisible, fragile condition.

Chapter Two analysed the second season of the *Mo* TV series, exploring the intricacies of statelessness in exile. A critical content analysis uncovers numerous hidden aspects of statelessness that are frequently overlooked by political and legal discourses. The series functions as a reflection of the social and human dimensions of statelessness, illustrating how legal persecution and exclusion are inscribed upon the bodies of stateless individuals, who possess no distinguishing features other than their humanity. Yet humanity alone remains insufficient to secure rights, for it is invisible to the law. The series shows how this structural and legal injustice has never diminished or eradicated the resolve of stateless people to reclaim identity and preserve their sense of belonging to their native people.

The series functions as a narrative that humanises the experience of statelessness for people who are often reduced to statistical data in extensive lists of refugees and asylum seekers in exile. Stateless individuals exhibit strong resilience and resistance by maintaining family unity and cultural affiliation, sticking to their native language and faith, and preserving cultural and historical heritage. The series illustrates several images of Palestinian identity reclamation and history tracing, such as olive oil pride and the Palestinian key, a defining symbol of hope for eventual return. These images represent individuals' acts of remembrance, assertion of existence, and a source of hope. Moreover, through memory, displaced communities can reimagine their homeland beyond official maps, creating emotional geographies that resist erasure and reclaim indigeneity. Indeed, cultural and indigenous memory functions as both an archive and an aesthetic, shaping how people narrate their past, preserve their cultural heritage, and reclaim their identity against historical corruption and political denial. Therefore, refugee narratives and storytelling serve as both personal memories and historical records that document the violence of displacement and the resilience of uprooted communities.

The analysis of the series in chapter two deepens and complicates the abstract frameworks of chapter one by demonstrating how a contemporary media text dynamically amplifies theoretical concepts like counter-archive, biopolitics, and indigenous mapping. Rather

than treating the stateless individual as a passive victim of state exclusion, the analysis shows how *Mo*, season two, shifts the traditional solemn register of Edward Said's counter-archive into a dramedy that deploys dark humour, satire, and economic side hustles to strip the state's bureaucratic immigration system of its legitimacy and render its policies absurd. Furthermore, chapter two significantly updates Agamben's concept of bare life and the bodily archive for the 21st-century digital surveillance state. This illustrates how an electronic ankle monitor physically degrades the body while translating the migrant's physical presence into a trackable digital dot and an acoustic trigger for public racial profiling. Finally, whereas chapter one centres on conscious literary mapping, chapter two moves this dynamic into the psychological realm of the unconscious depicted in the second season of the series. It tracks Mo's recurring dreams of an ancestral key to prove that when physical return is barred by state architecture, indigenous belonging is preserved as an interior geography deeply embedded outside the boundaries of official documentation.

It is crucial, however, to delimit the scope of these conclusions by noting that the findings of this study primarily illuminate how one specific, semi-autobiographical narrative series, *Mo* season 2, constructs and articulates the Palestinian displaced stateless experience. Consequently, while these insights offer a profound window into institutional and structural vulnerabilities, any broader applicability to other stateless populations globally remains hypothetical and would require further comparative analysis across additional cases and distinct creative texts.

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ملخص

لطالما تحمل البشر عبر التاريخ تبعات الدمار والفوضى الناجمة عن الأنظمة السياسية. ويُعدّ انعدام الجنسية أحد أسوأ نتائج النظام السياسي الحديث، إذ يترك الأفراد في حالة من التهميش خارج نطاق الاعتراف القانوني والحماية. يحلّل هذا البحث الموسم الثاني من مسلسل "مو" كسرد يُجسّد الفراغ القانوني والوجودي الذي تعيشه المجتمعات المشردة المحرومة من الجنسية. يصور المسلسل رحلة عائلة فلسطينية عديمة الجنسية تقيم في الولايات المتحدة، وتواجه تعقيدات نظام الهجرة الأمريكي وعبثيته، بينما تحافظ على روابطها الثقافية بوطنها في فلسطين. غالباً ما تُصوّر البحوث القانونية والسياسية انعدام الجنسية من منظور النقص والشعور بالضحية، بما في ذلك أوجه نقص التوثيق والحماية والحرمان من الحقوق. يستخدم هذا البحث المسلسل كدراسة حالة لإضفاء الطابع الإنساني على تجربة عديمي الجنسية، واستكشاف العمليات المستمرة والمبادرة لاستعادة الهوية وتتبع تاريخ الأجداد الأصليين. من خلال تحليل نقدي للمحتوى، تستكشف الدراسة السرد، موضحةً كيف تتجاوز الشخصيات الحواجز البيروقراطية والسياسية والهيكلية، ليس فقط كضحايا صامتين للإقصاء الحكومي، بل كفاعلين مؤثرين في تاريخهم. وبالتالي، يُظهر البحث أن الأفراد النازحين يؤكّدون على حقهم العميق في الوجود، وهو حق يتجاوز وجود أو غياب الوثائق القانونية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الذاكرة الثقافية، النزوح، استعادة الهوية، السكانية الأصلية، الشتات الفلسطيني، انعدام الجنسية، دراسات التلفزيون والإعلام