

National Self in the Work of Palestinian Female Artists

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This article cites select works by Palestinian female artists, with a focus on the works of female artists from the 1948 Palestinians territories¹ who were born there after the *Nakba*. These works revolve around the search for Palestinian selfhood and the feminist identity of woman, with emphasis on the former. I chose to concentrate on this group in particular because while they are Palestinian, in being forcibly made Israeli citizens, they were cut off and barred from communication with the rest of the Arab world. Since 1948, despite the proximity of Haifa to Beirut, it has been impossible for the Palestinians of 1948 to visit Beirut due to the existence of the state of Israel. As a result of this geographic, political, and historic rupture, their plight under Israeli domination and Zionist policies is less known to the Arab world than that of other Palestinians. This is not to overlook the many creative accomplishments by Palestinian artists, women as well as men, who are in the Diaspora and in territories occupied in 1967, including the West Bank and Gaza Strip, where Palestinian history has known great works that have centered on the Palestinian cause.

This article begins with the notion that to understand and know the agendas of 1948 Palestinian women, whether individual or communal, as well as the issues that preoccupy them, requires an understanding of the realities that they experience as Palestinian people generally, and as members of this particular group of Palestinians. One must understand the effects of the creation of the state of Israel and of the *Nakba* on them. In addition, the fact is that what Palestinian women have achieved historically and continue to achieve, is directly related to the colonial history of the region, which Palestine and its

people have endured throughout the Ottoman rule, the Mandate, and the fall of Palestine at the hands of the Zionists, and the proclamation of the state of Israel on Palestinian land. Of equal importance is the fact that, despite Israel's attempts to eradicate Palestinian identity and narrative, it has not succeeded. Indeed, Palestinians on the inside, as well as in the Diaspora, are as attached to their identity and narrative as they are to their land and homes. This has been reflected in all fields of struggle, the most prominent of which are art and literature, in addition to active participation in party politics, populist grassroots and student efforts, work in civil organizations and national groups, as well as other forms of struggle.

1948–Palestine since the *Nakba*

Since its coercive establishment in 1948, the Israeli state has not just displaced Palestinians and prevented the natural flow of communication between them, it has also uprooted and occupied land and homes, and refused the implementation of the Right of Return, barring the natural spread of Arab identity. It has occupied what remained of Palestinian land and identity, and Judaified them through its establishments and under the cover of legislation which it drafted for this explicit purpose. It has prohibited the sale of land to the Palestinians of 1948, and barred those who migrated internally from returning to their homes which the Israelis had occupied. Meanwhile, it obliterated 531 villages, planting in their place pine forests to disguise any traces of its crimes and erase Palestinian presence there entirely.

Israel has imposed citizenship on this group of Palestinians although they have, to this day, not

acquired full citizenship rights. Rather, they are discriminated against in numerous ways and domains. The state even identifies itself as Jewish. Over the past 18 years, it has imposed military rule on them, practicing all forms of oppression and constraint on them that go against all notions of democracy, human rights and citizenship, and imposing on them all forms of terrorism. Israel has granted itself the right to utilize emergency rule on Palestinians. Its official policies and practices impinge on Palestinians' rights under the pretext that they are a "ticking bomb", a "security threat", and a "demographic threat".

Israel has attempted to eradicate the Palestinian sense of identity among the Palestinians of 1948 and to sow in its place a distorted Israeli identity. In order to dominate upcoming generations, it has laid claim to Palestinian schools, controlling their curricula and what is taught, among other things. Palestinians have been aware of and resistant to this issue, becoming all the more attached to land, identity and memory, and insistent on remaining present as Palestinians. This has been reflected in politically engaged art and literature.

The Language of Art and Literature Resists the Policy of Muting

Autobiography and Writing the Unwritten

This genre constitutes an expression of resistance against Zionist policies of eradicating Palestinian identity and suppressing Palestinians, thereby reviving the memory and preserving history. The contemporary history of Palestinian art has known many art works that focus on the Palestinian cause and the effects of the *Nakba* and displacement on Palestinians' lives, documenting their existence and modes of struggle. Women have taken part in the struggle through the arts, as well as literature, politics, and history, even though their role has not always received due attention or documentation, as a result of the patriarchal hegemony that characterizes some societies. This is the case in the various domains of knowledge-production and publication, and in the spaces available for women's writing.

Feminist movements in the Arab world have

experienced a resurgence in awareness of the multi-dimensional policies of muting and oppression of women's voices, and they have begun resisting them. "As women begin to resort more to resistance", the autobiography becomes for women, according to Kamal (2001), "a form of resistance that belongs to 'resistance literature' since it constitutes an expression of a conflict between the forces of patriarchal society on the one hand, and the practices of feminist resistance on the other" (p. 213). Bayoumi (1998) points to the strong link between the notion of exclusion, relations of power and knowledge, and the role of writing in creating more open spaces that encourage women to bring forth what is suppressed in written literature.

The *Nakba* in the Eyes of Female Palestinian Writers

Historic texts about the Arab woman, her situation and experiences, and some of her issues, such as her involvement in armed struggle, remain relatively limited. This fact requires us to learn about women's realities, experiences and works, and to search for additional sources, such as feminist texts. It also requires of us a critical reading of texts which have been written as well as those that have not been written (Abdu, 2008). Within this framework are those works which resist the occupier, as with the Palestinian case, including those that focus on more than one aspect of a personal trajectory or story. Wadiha Qaddoura Khartabil (1995) and Anbara Salam al-Khalidi (1976) two Lebanese women writers who married Palestinians, wrote about their personal experiences in resisting mandate rule on Palestinian territory and the spread of Zionism through documentation of their activities and those of colleagues in associations and in the Palestinian Women's Union. These works talk about the effects of the occupation, and the struggle against it, on these women's personal lives, at both the individual and family levels. Asma Toubi and Sadjij Nasr have published numerous articles which address this experience in Palestinian magazines, such as the *Al-Karmel Magazine* for which Nassar was editor from 1944 to 1948, and in local newspapers, such as *Sahifat Falasteen* (Palestine Bulletin). The Palestinian poet and journalist, Kalthoum Maalik Arabi, named her first poetry book, *Musharrada* (i.e. displaced), after the displacement which she experienced from

Haifa to Akka to adjacent villages before ending up in Lebanon (cited in Toubi, 1966). Her personal story recounts the narrative of communal displacement: "I was not disgraced by the black barren poverty in my tent, I was not disgraced by my tattered gown and rug for a seat, I was disgraced only by the passing of years without any change" (cited in Toubi, 1966, p. 244). Elsewhere, she elucidates her nostalgia for the land and reveals its importance for the Palestinian: "The land is like my grandmother ... its wasteland to the Lord appeals ... and the people in its depth ... flutter like the yellow weeds". She adds: "The field is in my city ... by autumn fed the morsel of extinction ... and water runs dry. And the sky is cloudless ..." (cited in Toubi, 1966, p. 244).

Asma Toubi (1966) writes in her introduction: "This book is dedicated to a dear nation ... to my country whose soil constitutes every atom in my body ... and whose every atom is constituted by my body. The clay mountain from which remnants fell" (p. 7). Elsewhere she adds: "This book is written so that people will know much about her ... so that the external world does not continue to believe that Palestine was empty but for a few camps, bedouins, and a desert. Yes, all this ... and for the truth and for history this book is written" (p. 9). The history of Palestinian literature has witnessed committed writers in poetry and prose, such as Salma al-Khadra al-Jayyusi, Fadwa Touqan, Najwa Qaawar Farah, and Samira Azzam, to name a few.

Challenging the Policy of Muting and Uncovering the Suppressed and Silenced

Aysha Odeh (2007) writes of her detention in the jails of the Israeli occupation, thereby documenting one of the important aspects of resisting the occupation. She also uncovers through her writing the methods that the jailers and occupation authorities utilize to oppress Palestinians, men and women alike. The author waited over 30 years to recount her narrative in a literary novel, knowing that only she is capable of narrating it, thus confirming her presence and being. She says: "I realize profoundly that I am the one who should write it, for if written by someone else, it will not be as it was" (Odeh, 2007, p. 194). A similar incentive for narrating an autobiographical experience seems to have driven Soad Ghneim from

al-Faridis, a village within the 1948 region, to speak about her detention in 1991, about the violence, torture, and rape, in her book titled *Memories of a Cell* (cited in Khadir, 2007). These are among the few books in Arabic literature that have the boldness and courage to speak about an experience which society usually tries to mute thereby serving the interest of the occupier by silencing its victim. In this case, writing takes on a special status since it reveals and challenges the duality of suppression and silencing.

These writings demonstrate a feminist political self-awareness and reveal the importance of autobiography, which becomes an act of resistance. These texts are similar to other feminist texts by individuals and groups who have suffered oppression and injustice, such as the African American activist and thinker bell hooks, who writes about her struggle in resisting class discrimination based on origins (hooks, 2000). Likewise, Patricia Collins speaks about the public selfhood that she lives out in a 'white' society, and how she attempts to mute her as a 'black' [sic] woman reached the point of complete silence until she revolted against her situation and dominant paradigms (Collins, 1991).

The rejection of social policies of silence is taking center stage in Arabic women's literature, poetry, as well as prose. In describing resistance against the social policies of muting against women, Rita Abdu-Odeh² (1999) writes in her book, *Thawra 'ala al-Samt* (i.e. revolt against silence), "I try to provoke, if only for one moment, the silent calmness of a woman, the deadly silence of a woman, her (towering) mountains of capitulations ... I believe that silence is deadly" (pp. 9-10). She adds, "I don't object to being female, I object to your position towards me as a female!" (Abdu-Odeh, 1999, p. 15). Ghada al-Samman (n.d.) writes in *I'tirafat*: "From the start, writing has not been for me an act of female vengeance against a world that has forsaken me, but a rejection of a world that forsakes the humanity of man and woman alike" (p. 79). Souad al-Sabbah (1992) writes, "It would have been possible for me not to reject, not to be angry, not to shout in the face of misery; it would have been possible for me to swallow my tears, to swallow the oppression, and to adapt like all the

other prisoners. It would have been possible for me to avoid history's interrogation and escape self-torment ... but I betrayed the rules of the female and chose a confrontation with words" (pp. 15-23). These writings reveal a social revolution against socially regressive and oppressive paradigms. When Abdu-Odeh (1999) writes, "I am writing in order to be" (p. 29), she confirms that the notion of writing the self for her, springs from the desire to affirm her identity and resist the policy of extermination.

A Long History of Resistance Art

Artistic work is political work. Palestinian art abounds with prominent names in this field, including those of women. Below is a list of some of these artists' works:

Milestones in Palestinian Women's Art

Painting, Photography, and Three Dimensional Works/Sculptures

Zalfa al-Sa'di (1905-1988). Originally from Jerusalem, she concentrated on drawing icons and portraits of Arab and Islamic heroic figures. She has exhibited her paintings in the Arab Institute that was established in the Islamic Council in Jerusalem in 1932. She was expelled from her house in 1948. In Damascus, she taught art to refugee children in UNRWA schools.³ She is considered one of the first pioneers who significantly marked Palestinian plastic arts before 1948 (Al-Manasra, 2003).

Tammam al-Akhal (1935). During the *Nakba* in 1948, she was displaced with her family from Jaffa to Beirut. She and her husband, Isma'il Shammout, earned the title of *Nakba* artists, having been pioneers in contemporary plastic arts. As Zaki al-'Ayla says, "They took part, along with other Palestinian artists, in painting identity artistically... such that their works acquired an identity of its own through their particular creativity ..." (al-'Ayla, n.d., ¶ 13).

Karima Abboud (1896-1955). A Nasserite, she was considered among the first Palestinian female photographers. She photographed various landmarks in Palestine, including cities, mosques and churches, as well as women in their homes and female



A photograph by Karima Abboud of Ain al-Athra' Square, Nasra.

university students. "Her photographs resembled paintings immortalizing time, history and memory" (Zubaydaat, 2009, ¶ 2).

Juliana Saroufim (1934 -). Moving from Jaffa to Lebanon, she apprenticed with the Lebanese artist, Jean Khalifeh. Shifting from painting to professional photography, she combines in her panels more than one artistic approach. "Saroufim paints for the discovery of the self, haunted by the memory of the country of origin, making her way in an expressionist artistic language that reveals nostalgia for Jaffa's coast and the orange groves ... Saroufim paints Jaffa to paint herself, and she paints herself to show us Jaffa inside her" (Muslimani, 2007, p. 10).

Mona Hatoum (1952 -). She is a Palestinian born in Lebanon. "In the 1990s, she began by creating large-scale installations and sculptures which turn the familiar into uncanny situations that capture the experience of permanent exile" (Mona Hatoum, n.d., ¶ 1). Ohlin (n.d.) says of her, "There's no place like home, ... the art of Mona Hatoum sets out to prove this point in a distinctly unsettling fashion. Home in her work is a mythical location: a place charged with loss and violence, from which we are permanently exiled, yet to which we are always drawn (¶ 1)". "... [Hatoum's] recent work gathers its force from the indirect, mysterious ways in which it probes the fractured dream of home" (Ohlin, n.d., ¶ 2). Said (2000) has called the use of Hatoum's body in her works "defiant memory ... which confronts the self without clemency, with the selfsame tenacity that she faces others, who expel and oppress her" (pp. 7-17).



Mona Hatoum, *Round and Round*, 2007, bronze, 61 x 33 x 33 cm.



Mona Hatoum, *Still Life*, 2008, ceramics, wood, 83.5 x 200 x 100 cm.

From 1948 Palestine after the *Nakba*

Rana Bshara (1971 -). Born in Tarshisha in the northern Galilee, she uses traditional materials, such as dried cactus leaves, spices, and various plants in her art.

In her exhibition, *Blindfolded History*, she displays 60 glass paintings on which she prints photographs depicting Palestinian suffering using melted dark chocolate. Among these paintings are those of the first catastrophe of migration and refugee camps, and the two uprisings, including photographs of violence and torture against Palestinians, and of victims, especially children. “Her manner of printing and exhibiting reproduces the photographs, multiplying



One of the glass paintings of Rana Bshara that was part of her exhibition *Blindfolded History*.

the scenes of violence and exposing deeper layers beneath the surface, in protest against their ‘common’ occurrence in the press ... The issue at hand is fragile and poignant to the last degree ... precisely like reality” (*Al-Akhbar*, 2007, ¶ 3).

Bshara considers that the use of chocolate in her compositions enables her to freeze moments in history. She began this work in 2003, adding a new piece each year in commemoration of the *Nakba*, as an expression of an ongoing *Nakba*.

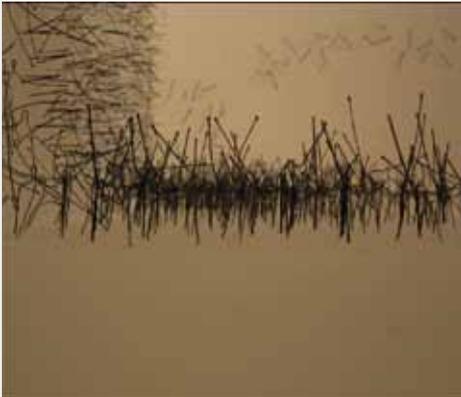
Mirvat Issa (no date found). Displaced first from the village of Jish, she was then expelled with her family from the village of Baraam. She made the art piece, *al-Tabout* (i.e. the coffin), which is a statue in the shape of a mass grave. In this work, she mocks the state’s promises, year after year, to return the original residents of Baraam to their village, as per a supreme court ruling. The artist introduced into the grave official letters between people from Baraam and the state that address their rights to their land. On the letters, she has attached planks of olive trees in the shape of adobe bricks and hung a cross on the monument. Of all the promises it made, the state only permitted the villagers to make prayers in the church, which is the last ruin left standing in the village. It also allowed them to use the olive grove adjacent to the graveyard. “We’re not allowed to live there but we’re allowed to die there”, the artist says to the cactus in disapproval (Bin Samhoun, 2007, ¶ 3).



The Coffin by Mirvat Issa.

Manar Zu’bi (1964 -). She is from Nazareth. In the year 2000, she presented a work in which she used thousands of black pins to produce abstract maps of various areas of the city of Haifa. This

work deals with the occupation of Haifa and with the urban and demographic changes that have beset it. Utilizing feminine materials in her works, the artist criticizes the demands of women who occupy positions in the national struggle to postpone their issues as women for the sake of national causes. She says about her own work, “The maps that I draw are illusory; they have never been and will never be. The maps emerged while I was looking through the pictures in my family album, which had become part of a memory from the past that I could never go through again” (personal communication, September 14, 2009).



Maps by Manar Zu'bi.

Ruba Hamdan (1986 -). She is from al-Led. Regarding her work, Hamdan says, “We search for our roots everywhere ... in them, we find all our humanity and the bulk of our status in this life ... in them, there is something of joy to the point of sadness” (Bedeya, 2007, ¶ 2). Hamdan did not study art at an art institute; rather she studied journalism



A painting by Ruba Hamdan that was also included in *Al-Siwar* Magazine, issue 35, p. 22.

and media in order to merge art and media to illustrate the struggle of women in Palestinian society as she puts it. In her paintings, there's boldness in the use of colors and materials, which gives a noticeable diversity to her works. Her first exhibition was a collaborative show for many artists held at the Peace Center in Bethlehem in 2005. In March 2007, she held her first solo exhibition, entitled *Beginning*, at the Gallery Fattoush Café in Haifa.

Isis Rizk (1979 -). She is a painter born in Nazareth. She studied art and philosophy at Haifa University. Rizk currently resides in Rome, where she is completing her studies in art and cultural media. She participated in several exhibitions in Haifa, Nazareth, and Rome.



A painting by Isis Rizk that was also included *Al-Siwar* Magazine, issue 35, p. 1.

In her works, Rizk focuses on the image of the woman and her body. Her paintings and drawings also depict the Palestinian catastrophe: the *Nakba*, bodies covered with blood, remnants and traces of houses and streets that once existed, pictures hanging on the walls belonging to families that once lived in the neighborhood.

Nardin Srouji (1980 -). She is a painter born in Nazareth. She graduated in art and English Language from Haifa University in 2004. She teaches art at a school for people with learning disabilities, and at the art academy in Nazareth. Srouji has participated in several exhibitions in Haifa, Florence, and Bethlehem. Her paintings focus

on the image of the woman, her body, and the Palestinian identity as well as symbols that depict the Palestinian presence.



One of Nardin Srouji's paintings that was also included *Al-Siwar* Magazine, issue 16, p. 35.

Ahlam Shibli (1970 -). She is a photographer. Amongst her works is an exhibition of photographs entitled *Goter*, which deals with the issue of dwelling and home in the Arab towns and villages in al-Naqab, South Palestine. Of that exhibition, Shibli says, "I have told a story from the point of view of the residents ... and not from the point of view of the institution or the state ... For wherever there is a (legal) dwelling, there is no home, and wherever there is home, there is no (legal) dwelling. It is believed that the term *Goter* was borrowed and adapted by the Bedouins from the English soldiers who ruled the land and would often order them to "Go there". This expression is a trace of the history of domination, surveillance, and displacement that locals were subjected to" (cited in al-'Aqbi, n.d., ¶ 3). Other works of hers include *Wadi Saleib in Nine Volumes*, which tells the story of an abandoned neighborhood in Haifa.



One of the photographs of Ahlam Shibli that was part of her exhibition *Goter*.

Maqboula Nassar (1974 -). She was born in Arabat al-Battouf in Galilee. She is an activist in the field of local national and populist work, and in women's rights. She is an amateur photographer interested in documenting forcibly-evacuated villages, and extant and destroyed Palestinian cities, such as Jaffa, Haifa, villages in the governorate (qaza) of Safad and Tabariya, among others. A large collection of these photographs are posted on the website "Falasteen al-Zhakira", and also in the *Al-Itihad* newspaper. She was awarded the Edward Said medal from the American University in Jenine. She is currently photographing indigenous plants for a children's book. She works as a presenter at the local radio station, al-Shams.⁴



The Oldest Olive Tree in the Village of al-Rama, Palestine, photograph by Maqboula Nassar.

Janan Abdu (1966 -). She was born in Nazareth and now lives in Haifa. She is an activist and researcher interested in Palestinian historiography, particularly women's oral history, women's issues as well as populist, political, and educational work. She has published in these fields. Over and above her work as a researcher, Abdu works as



Two paintings by Janan Abdu.

an art therapist with children in need. She is also interested in painting and photography. She has contributed to establishing and managing some civil feminist Palestinian organizations, such as the Arab Hotline for Assisting Victims of Sexual Assault in Haifa, the Alternative Coalition to Combat Honor Crimes, Kayan – Feminist Organization for Women

in Arab Society, and Hiwar: For Alternative-Democratic Education in Haifa.

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ENDNOTES

1. The term "1948 Palestinian" refers to Palestinians who stayed within Palestinian national borders, either remaining in their home villages or migrating to other locations in what was later proclaimed as the Hebrew state, and which subsequently imposed on them Israeli citizenship.
2. A Palestinian poet from the city of Nazareth in the Palestinian Galilee. For more information visit <http://ritaodeh.blogspot.com/2.html>.
3. For more information check the following website http://virtualgallery.birzeit.edu/tour/cv?mart_id=71629.
4. For more information on Maqboula Nassar visit <http://www.ahewar.org/m.asp?i=265>.

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