

Imaging Palestine as the Motherland

Tina Malhi-Sherwell

He fell passionately on his land, smelling the soil,
kissing the trees and grasping the precious pebbles.
Like an infant, he pressed cheek and mouth to the soil
shedding there the pain he had borne for years.
He listened to her heart whispering tender reproof:
You have come back?
I have, here is my hand.
Here I will remain, here I will die, so prepare my grave.¹

The quote, excerpted from the poem *Nida' al-Ard* (The Call of the Land) by Fadwa Tuqan, tells the story of a refugee who is determined to return to his homeland despite the attendant dangers and consequences. The land of Palestine has frequently been represented as a woman in the roles of lover, virgin, and mother. This essay explores the representation of women in Palestinian art in general, and the use of the archetype of the mother as a mode of imaging the homeland in particular. The depiction of women in Palestinian literature and art increased after the displacement of the Palestinians from their land. The art discussed here is, for the most part, selected from the work of artists who still reside in historic Palestine. The inhabitants of the West Bank, Gaza, Jerusalem, and the Arab villages and towns inside Israel are afforded a special position in the Palestinian community for they are considered to be inside Palestine having remained steadfast on the land, rather than exposed to a life in exile. Edward Said elaborates this point: "The people of the interior are cherished as Palestinians 'already there,' so to speak, Palestinians who live on the edge, under the gun, inside

the barriers and kasbahs, entitling them to a kind of grace denied to the rest of us."² A case in point is the spotlight aimed on the West Bank and Gaza Strip since the signing of the Oslo Accords rendering the plight of other Palestinian communities in the diaspora un-addressed.

Palestinians on the inside experience a particular form of displacement, not just in literal terms, but because they do not live in what they imagine and desire Palestine to be, as Palestine is still under foreign occupation. While those living in exile hold a more static memory of Palestine normally centered around the moment of their departure, those living under Israeli occupation witness the daily transformation and discrimination that have rendered them strangers in their own land. The inhabitants of Palestine, which has come under successive occupations, have never experienced sovereignty over the terrain. Thus, Palestine is simultaneously a space of imagining and the site of lived experience. The Israeli occupation of the West Bank, Gaza, and Jerusalem continues, even under the guise of the Peace Process.

During the tense years preceding the 1948 war, Palestinians began employing the female icon as a metaphor for the homeland. The homeland was represented as the bride of struggle, portrayed by Ajaj Nuwayhid thus: "We have asked to become engaged to a girl / Her bride price is very expensive / But she deserves it / Here is our answer / We will fight for the sake of her eyes."³ Nuwayhid was an essayist from Haifa and a founding member of the Istiqlal (Independence) Party. The imaging of Palestine as a woman in both literature and art gained popularity after the loss of the homeland. Before launching a full discussion of these representations, however, it is important to understand the context in which Palestinian art has been produced.

Previous versions of this essay were published in *Abwab* (issue 23, London/Beirut, Dar al-Saqi, 1999) and in *Displacement and Difference*, F. Lloyd (ed.) (London, Saffron Books, 2000).

•

“Western” art forms such as oil painting on canvas are not traditional to Palestine; they were imported from Europe as mediums of visual expression. Before oil painting and other European art forms took hold in Palestine, Palestinian art was integral to everyday life—murals, ceramics, glass, mother of pearl work, embroidery—what are known today as handicrafts. Before 1948, Palestinian artists, for the most part, painted either the portraits of prominent individuals or worked as icon painters for churches and the tourist trade. Much of the history of pre-1948 Palestinian art was erased as a result of the war that saw the establishment of the State of Israel. Therefore, anyone attempting to retrace this history must contend with the absence of information that could shed light on the development of Palestinian visual practices. Most paintings created before 1948 were commissioned for private interiors and religious establishments, and were lost when Palestinians were forced to flee their homes, businesses, and institutions which were then either pillaged, raised to the ground, or both.⁴

The conflict between Palestinians and Israelis centers around their competing claims to the same piece of land. Palestinians and Israelis, however, are not equal rivals, for the latter have a powerful state apparatus, which the former have never enjoyed. Together with Zionist settlement (a project that continues to this day), Jewish colonists “launched a massive project aimed at revealing an original historical inscription in the landscape. Their enterprise entailed such activities as using the bible as a guide for re-mapping and renaming the territory and organizing archaeological digs and hiking expeditions. The Zionist project of uncovering and displaying exclusive Jewish roots had the effect of denying any authentic Arab historicity in Palestine.”⁵ Thus, it is not surprising that the representation of the landscape dominates the artistic expression of Palestinians and Israelis alike. The cultural arenas of literature, theater, cinema, dance, and art have played a significant part in shaping the vision of the landscape, a vision mobilized by both communities for the formation and articulation of their respective national identities.

One of the darker sides of Israel’s revisionist project of identity construction has been the suppression of any and all expressions of Palestinian identity, which, as such, pose a direct challenge to Zionist mythology. The Israeli repression of Palestinians assumes countless forms, and has impacted the smallest details of Palestinian life from commodities, to movement, to the building of homes, to water use, to the consumption of literary materials.⁶ Nor has the arena of culture escaped intervention, for culture is the realm through which a nation images itself, its past and present experiences, as well as its future aspirations. Palestinians, as Julie Peteet notes, have not been “resurrecting traditional culture but rather consciously devising a blend of old and new to form a ‘culture of resistance.’”⁷

Palestinian art gained popularity with the Palestinian public from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, alarming the Israeli authorities.⁸ Paintings were confiscated and exhibitions were closed for containing political messages. Paintings were classified by military order as leaflets, subjecting them to the same censorship regulations as any other printed material.

Article 6 of Military Order No. 101 prohibits residents of the West Bank from printing “any publication, advertisement, proclamation, picture or any other document” which contains any “political significance” except after obtaining a license from the Military Commander. “Printing” is defined as “carving on stone, typing on a typewriter, copying, photographing or any other manner of representation or of communicating expressions, numbers, symbols, maps, paintings, decorations or any other similar material.”⁹

In this atmosphere, artwork was censored and in order to hold an exhibit, permission had to be obtained from the Israeli military governor who, in most cases, refused to grant it. Artists and their exhibits were also banned from travelling abroad and many artists were placed under arrest. Probably most telling among Israeli legal edicts was the prohibition on the combined use of the four colors of the Palestinian flag. Thus, red, green, black, and white could not be placed in close proximity within a given work of art.¹⁰

Not only was creative expression in the occupied territories restricted by the Israeli authorities, the

absence of an arts infrastructure hampered artistic production as well. To this day, there is not a single institution in the West Bank or Gaza devoted to the study of art. Artists wishing to pursue a career in this field are obliged to travel abroad for their training. Most Palestinian artists have studied in Egypt and Iraq. Some artists, like Suleiman Mansour, were educated within the Israeli system. Mansour, founder of the al-Wasiti Arts Center in East Jerusalem, graduated from the Bezalel Academy of Art and Design in Jerusalem, the first art institute established in the country almost a century ago. Others who have not had such opportunities are either self-taught or have apprenticed with more experienced local artists. Palestinian artists are also confronted with the absence of museums where they can encounter the visual traditions of other cultures first hand. Similarly, restrictions imposed on the mobility of Palestinian artists and the importation of art, have disconnected many Palestinian artists from artistic movements and developments around the world.

Until the early 1990s, there was no permanent gallery or art center in the West Bank, Gaza, or Jerusalem. Exhibitions were held in schools, universities, union halls, or other makeshift locations. The absence of galleries had economic repercussions for the artist community, as the lack of stable venues impeded the development of a purchasing public. As is often the case, artists struggled to support themselves financially. Although the public was unable, for the most part, to purchase original works of art, visual images circulated and were consumed by other means—mainly that of the poster. According to Mansour and Tamari “people rushed to purchase [posters] treating them with the same protectiveness as valuable museum pieces.”¹¹ Posters were affordable and could reach people in the villages and refugee camps.

•

Landscapes came to dominate Palestinian art, as they were conceived as the locus of Palestinian identity. Stephen Daniels has suggested that national identities utilize particular landscapes from within the nation as a way of symbolizing the terrain of the homeland.¹² In the case of the Palestinians, it was the Palestinian village,

its surrounding landscape, and the peasantry that achieved the status of national signifier. The focus on images of Palestinian villages coincided with a revival of Palestinian heritage and folklore beginning in the late 1970s. Since more explicit forms of national expression were denied, the village served as a suitable metaphor for Palestinian identity. By appropriating the village as a signifier for the nation, the Palestinian village was contoured into a general mold. The representations were not of specific villages so much as combined elements of different villages which, together, constituted an ideal type. Often these included a landscape in full spring bloom, several stone houses, and a woman wearing traditional Palestinian costume surrounded by children or engaged in domestic activities such as baking bread, grinding wheat, or harvesting crops.

Through images of the Palestinian village and peasantry, Palestinians articulated their identity as native inhabitants of the land with historical roots in its scape.¹³ Such imaging was not arbitrary. It drew on the fact that historically, Palestinians, for the most part, lived in agricultural communities.¹⁴ The peasant was imbued with the symbolism of steadfastness and patience, qualities that Palestinians in the occupied territories adopted strategically in the late 1970s and early 1980s in order to remain on the land despite Israeli attempts to remove them by making their daily lives strenuous and indeterminate. In many such paintings, the village appears harmonious and egalitarian. These rural utopias seem to be set in an atemporal frame or an ambiguous golden age. Glossed over are the radical social transformations experienced by the peasantry beginning with the Ottoman administrative reforms over 150 years ago, and through to the present day landlessness and proletarianization resultant from Israeli land confiscation policies.¹⁵ However, since one of the functions of national landscapes is to create a comforting image of the past, these images can be understood as discursive responses to the estrangement and alienation experienced by Palestinians living under occupation.

The village and the peasantry provided yet another angle for imaging Palestinian communities. Artists such

as Suleiman Mansour undertook the representation of labor as well. Mansour, in his 1990 painting, *The Village Awakens*, depicts a community wherein each member is engaged in a different activity: harvesting, fruit picking, stone carving, etc. Men and women march out from the village center—the body of a woman—eager to take up these tasks. The painting, created in the latter half of the Intifada, can be read in a number of ways. It relates to the spirit of self reliance fostered by the uprising—the Intifada—which literally means shaking off, or awakening, and marks a shift from the previous political strategy of steadfastness. In essence, though, both strategies drew on rural imagery to articulate their position; the Intifada leadership compared itself with the peasant rebellion of 1936-1939 in its leaflets. The notion of self-reliance was expressed through the boycott of Israeli products, the independent production of local foodstuffs, and the exclusive use of Palestinian services. Local committees in each village and town were responsible for the coordination of the community and its welfare.¹⁶ Mansour's painting is a national allegory. He depicts the village as a microcosm of society, an ideal community in which every person is designated a role that contributes to the life and productivity of the whole. Thus, the village provides both a model for the nation and the familiarity of an intimate social formation.

The focus on the Palestinian village and peasantry has contoured the representation of the Palestinian landscape as a distinctly domestic one. Rarely does one find paintings depicting panoramas. Instead, landscapes are usually populated and center around the village, the fields, or the home. Often those depicted are women and children. Thus, the viewer assumes a paternalist position, interpolated to care for these women, children, and their village and in so doing, to safeguard Palestine and its future.

Peasant women constitute the central subject of such paintings and are imaged in the landscape gathering olives, wheat, almonds, etc. or bearing such produce. Just as the woman's presence in the landscape marks the landscape as Palestinian, female peasants in traditional costume have become the foremost signifiers of Palestinian national identity. The peasant woman's

embroidered dress has, in the aftermath of the great loss of the land, come to function as a way of mapping that land. The style and pattern of each embroidered dress is unique by region, and indicates its wearer's village of origin. Palestinian women continue to sew the same distinctive dresses today, even if their original village is no longer standing. Likewise, artifacts from the peasant home in general, and the woman's sphere in particular—such as cooking utensils, baskets, and clay jugs—have been fetishized and marked as objects of Palestinian heritage to be displayed in museums and homes alike. Embroidery patterns are now reproduced on a host of objects such as waistcoats, slippers, headbands, purses, mirrors, and cushion covers, multiplying the signs of “peasantry” and enabling the consumption and display of these identity-markers in contemporary modern life.

In the process of articulating a national identity, women (including their surroundings and belongings) have been represented as the privileged emblems of cultural authenticity.¹⁷ By maintaining tradition through their clothing and cooking, they were perceived as somehow closer to the land. The peasant woman was marked as the site where the past was both alive and reproducible. The feminization of agricultural labor in the occupied territories (as women took over the responsibilities of farming since shrinking plots of land could no longer sustain households and men were forced to seek employment elsewhere) reinforced the metaphoric association of women with the landscape.¹⁸ Deniz Kandiyoti has noted that the valorization of women in nationalist imagery and their placement at the center of nationalist rhetoric, in turn informs the actual roles women take up in service of the nation.¹⁹

Artists, poets, and dance troops appropriated the figure of the Palestinian peasant woman to express and elaborate an ideal of the Palestinian homeland, and, in so doing, attributed a gender to the homeland. In the visual arts, the female figure tended to be a mother figure as well. Ghassan Hage suggests that the use of the mother to signify the nation distinguishes the qualities of the nation as caring, protective, and nurturing—a homeland of bodily comfort and security.²⁰ Thus, exile, estrangement, and loss of the homeland are

expressed as separation from the mother. An example of the peasant woman as mother/motherland can be found in Nabil Anani's 1979 painting **Motherhood**. In this painting, the landscape is reduced to an arch of vines. The peasant woman's embroidered dress has lost its regional specificity and has been replaced with the four colors of the Palestinian flag. The woman symbolizes and embodies the land of Palestine through her body and her maternal role. Another popular theme among artists was the image of a mother with babe in arms—the visual compliment of the nationalist discourses that posited women as responsible for reproducing the nation, thereby inscribing women's fertility with the political significance of patriotic obligation.²¹ In nationalist discourses not only were women perceived as giving birth to future generations, they were also held responsible for reproducing the boundaries of the nation.²² Thus, women's bodies are designated as the measure of a nation's purity. Since nationalist discourses are formulated upon ideas of exclusion and inclusion, safeguarding and controlling women's bodies becomes essential to maintaining the identity and genealogy of the nation.

Palestinian women have also been entrusted with the responsibility of engendering a love of the homeland in their children, thereby nurturing a generation of nation-builders. Suleiman Mansour depicts this division of labor in his painting *The Village Awakens*. The Palestinian peasant woman assumes giant proportions blending into the hillside and the village architecture. Her legs are spread, enabling the nation to march forth from her body, while she occupies a passive role in comparison to the other figures who engage in various forms of productive activity. It is illuminating to consider this painting in relation to Nahla Abdo's observation that the burden of reproducing the nation does not fall equally upon all women. The poorer sectors of the community, in the Palestinian case—villagers and refugees—tend to have larger families.²³ It is more often the sons of these families who comprise the fighters and casualties of the national struggle. Large families, however, did not emerge with nationalism, they are rooted in the social norms of the peasantry, for whom many children meant more hands to work the land.

Despite proletarianization, large families are still perceived as an economic resource by the older members of the family, whom the younger members support. Throughout the occupation, in the absence of a protective government, the extended family afforded Palestinians a sense of security.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has shaped the meaning of motherhood in the Palestinian context. During the Intifada, for example, women's domestic work extended into the public sphere as the division between private and public was blurred when all aspects of Palestinian life were targeted for disruption by Israeli soldiers. A woman's caring work was normally centered around her immediate family. However, with the advent of the Intifada, as Carol Bardenstein points out, the definition of the community she was expected to cater to expanded.²⁴ Women's visibility in the public realm increased as they undertook "supporting roles" in dangerous circumstances that frequently lead to injury and/or imprisonment. Women were seen carrying rocks to youths, shielding them from arrest, organizing the provision of food and health care for communities under curfew, and petitioning for the release of prisoners.²⁵ Such images of women's activity were represented by a number of artists, and were frequently captured by the media.

Individual mothers assumed the role of mothers-of-all-children, and women were interpolated as the caretakers of the nation. In many cases, the individual mother-son relationship was subsumed by the collective mother-son relationship which served to contain the personal grief of losing one's son to the national struggle.²⁶ The highest accolade was given to Umm al-Shahid (mother of the martyr), who was viewed as having made the ultimate sacrifice by relinquishing her son to the national cause. An Intifada communiqué read, "let the mother of the martyr rejoice that she has raised her voice twice: first on the day of her son's death and again on the day of the declaration of the State."²⁷

In the imagery of martyrdom, martyrs are bridegrooms and death their wedding. The land of Palestine is seen as a virgin, waiting to be inseminated, and it is the blood of the martyr that will bring about

Page 61

Page 63

Page 63

Page 62

the birth of the nation. In this rhetoric, women's role as reproducers is ambiguous. It is male agency that is represented as delivering the future, while the female land takes on a passive role. In a 1992 painting by Fayez al-Hassan, **The Martyr's Wedding**, the martyr, dressed in white, is sacrificed to a giant female figure, whose flowing headscarf makes up the lay of the land. In another work by Mohammed Abu Sittah, titled **Intifada Bride** (1989), the female body is covered with images of masked youth, while her veil is a combination of a black and white kafiyeh and a crown of stones. Thus, her body is inscribed with the emblems of the Intifada, suggesting, perhaps, that she who wears the images of the young martyrs on her body, is also the virgin land for whom they die. Martyrdom, however, is presented in a different light in Jawad al-Malhi's 1990 painting titled **The Bride**. Once again, a giant female figure dominates the canvas, however she is not in traditional dress but a dark dress and a headscarf. The refugee camp shrinks into the background as she marches toward the spectator holding a dead female child in her arms. Her trance like expression and the dark sockets of her eyes express a mother's grief. The bride, in this case, is not a metaphor but a human being, a casualty of the conflict.

Following a two decade trend that saw the representation of monumental female figures, Palestinian art has witnessed the disappearance of the female figure in general, and the mother figure in particular. The homeland is no longer envisioned as a site of bodily reunification with the mother, or as a place of comfort and security, as evident in the work, **Womb** (1995) by Khalil Rabah. In this work, the female organ has taken the shape of an everyday object—a suitcase. The space of nurturing is void of personal artifacts with which to assemble an identity. A chair to rest upon does not even fit into the suitcase, creating an awkward tension. The emptiness of this interior stands in contrast to commonly held notions about the womb as a place of sustenance and support. The spectator is confronted with a void, disrupting conventional representations of the motherland and implying, instead, a dystopia and a state of disillusionment.

Notes

- 1 Fadwa Tuqan in Khalid A. Suleiman, *Palestine and Modern Arab Poetry* (London, Zed Books, 1984, p. 125).
- 2 Edward Said, *After the Last Sky* (London, Faber and Faber, 1986, p. 51).
- 3 Ajaj Nuwayhid in Sheila Katz, "Shahada and Haganah: Politicizing Masculinities in Early Palestinian and Jewish Nationalisms" in *Arab Studies Journal* (Fall 1996, p. 83).
- 4 Joel Beinin, Lisa Hajjar, & Mou'in Rabbani, "Palestine and the Arab Israeli Conflict for Beginners" in *Intifada: The Palestinian Uprising Against Israeli Occupation*. J. Beinin and Z. Lockman (ed.) (London, I.B. Tauris, 1990).
- 5 Ted Swedenberg, "The Palestinian Peasant as National Signifier" in *Anthropological Quarterly* (Vol. 63, January 1990, p. 19).
- 6 Raja Shehadeh, *Occupier's Law: Israel and the West Bank* (Washington DC, Institute of Palestine Studies, 1985).
- 7 Julie Peteet, "Authenticity and Gender: The Presentation of Culture" in *Arab Women, Old Boundaries, New Frontiers*. J. Tucker (ed.) (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1993, p. 50).
- 8 Suleiman Mansour & Vera Tamari, *Art Under Occupation* (1990, p. 2).
- 9 Raja Shehadeh, p. 157.
- 10 Wilhelm Geist, "The Growing Pains of an Art Movement Under Occupation" in *Al-Fajr* (September 6-12, 1981, p. 13).
- 11 Suleiman Mansour & Vera Tamari, p. 2.
- 12 Stephen Daniels, *Fields of Vision: Landscape, Imagery and National Identity in England and the United States* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993, p. 5).
- 13 Ted Swedenberg, p. 24.
- 14 John Ruedy, "Dynamics of Land Alienation" in *The Transformation of Palestine: Essays on the Origin and Development of the Arab Israeli Conflict*. I. Abu-Lughod (ed.) (Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1971, p. 120).
- 15 Talal Assad, "Class Transformation Under the Mandate," *MERIP* (no. 53, 1976).
- 16 Don Peretz, *The Intifada Uprising* (London, Westview Press, 1990, pp. 55-57).
- 17 Deniz Kandiyoti, "Identity and its Discontents: Women and the Nation" in *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* (20:3, 1991, p. 431).
- 18 Ted Swedenberg, p. 23.
- 19 Deniz Kandiyoti, p. 433.
- 20 Ghassan Hage, "The Spatial Imaginary of National Practices: Dwelling-Domesticating/Being-Exterminating" in *Environment and*

- Planning: Space and Society* (vol. 14, 1996, p. 473).
- 21 Floya Anthias, and Nira Yuval-Davis, *Woman-Nation-State* (London, Macmillan, 1989, p. 7).
 - 22 Ibid.
 - 23 Nahla Abdo, "Women of the Intifada: Gender, Class and National Liberation" in *Race and Class* (no. 32, 1991, p. 28).
 - 24 Carol Bardenstein, "Raped Brides and Steadfast Mothers: Appropriations of Palestinian Motherhood" in *The Politics of Motherhood: Activist Voices from Left to Right*. Jetter (ed. et al) (Hanover and London, University Press of New England, 1997, p. 175).
 - 25 Rita Giacaman & Penny Johnson, "Palestinian Women: Building Barricades and Breaking Barriers" in *Intifada: The Palestinian Uprising Against Israeli Occupation* (London, I.B. Tauris, 1989, p. 9).
 - 26 Carol Bardenstein, p. 177.
 - 27 Reuben Aharoni & Shaul Mishal, *Speaking Stones: Communiqués from the Intifada Underground* (New York, Syracuse University Press, 1994, Communiqué 21).

Born in London (1972), **Tina Malhi-Sherwell** is an artist and academic presently living in Jerusalem. She completed a Ph.D. on Palestinian art and popular culture, and has published numerous articles on the subject in journals including the British Council's *Visiting Arts Journal*, *What's Up*, *Palestinian Ministry of Culture Monthly*, *Levant*, and *Journal of Gender Studies*; books including *Textile Transitions: Gender Body and Identity* (2000), *Displacement and Difference* (2000), *Contemporary Arab Women's Art: Dialogues of the Present* (1999), and *Palestinian Spring* (1997); and catalogs including Suleiman Mansour's *Ten Years in Mud*; Jawad Malhi's *From Here to There*, and Khalil Rabah's *Terrains of Identity*. She is the founding director of the Archive of Palestinian Art in Jerusalem and has curated several exhibitions of Palestinian art at al-Wasiti Gallery, Bir Zeit University, and in the Nazareth Municipality.