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## The locket becomes a bullet: Nationalising the feminine in Palestinian literature

### Abstract

Palestinian Literature as War literature: a Sociopolitical Reality Inspiring Fiction Palestinian literature can be studied as a subgenre of war literature. War literature in this respect is categorised as any literary production, whose six pillars of writing, including characters, setting in time and place, plot, theme, climax and ending, directly or remotely, depict the context of war. War is defined as a state of conflict, fighting, or animosity, large- or small- scale between people, states or nations. War literature is set apart from other literary categories, as its very presence is governed by a state of war, actual or fictional, temporary or permanent, past or present, primitive or modern, which affects the configuration of the war story and its themes.

DIMA TAHBOUB

## The Locket Becomes a Bullet: Nationalising the Feminine in Palestinian Literature

‘What is it that you’re wearing Umm Sa’d?  
O, woman,  
You have definitely changed your jewellery these days!  
Umm Sa’d gave me a penetrating look,  
Around her neck was a bullet,  
Given to her by her son Sa’d, from one of his raids against the enemy.  
It hung down like a locket in a metal necklace’.  
(*Umm Sa’d* (Sa’d’s Mother), Ghassan Kanafani 1969)

### PALESTINIAN LITERATURE AS WAR LITERATURE: A SOCIOPOLITICAL REALITY INSPIRING FICTION

Palestinian literature can be studied as a subgenre of war literature. War literature in this respect is categorised as any literary production, whose six pillars of writing, including characters, setting in time and place, plot, theme, climax and ending, directly or remotely, depict the context of war. War is defined as a state of conflict, fighting, or animosity, large- or small- scale between people, states or nations. War literature is set apart from other literary categories, as its very presence is governed by a state of war, actual or fictional, temporary or permanent, past or present, primitive or modern, which affects the configuration of the war story and its themes. The canon of war literature records the adapting of the war story to a set of non-literary parameters incorporating views on nationalism, socialism and commitment, all of which affect the pattern and content of the stories, either by the adherence to, or rejection of, those views. These parameters transform war literature from being the single-handed production and individual vision of an author into a public statement and picture of collective identity at a certain point in time.

The concepts of nation and nationalism, although primarily socio-political, have an impact on writing the war story. War literature promotes a distinctive image of a nation united by a common history, language, social and religious heritage, a geographical area and political aspirations. The voice of war literature is mostly that of the collective we, the nation as a whole (Eagleton 27). In war literature, heroes and heroines are depicted as national icons embodying and working for the national causes, and continuing in the footsteps of their ancestors. In this sentimental sense, the nation is not only a group of people, ‘it is a soul, a spiritual

principle...the culmination of a long past of endeavours, sacrifice, and devotion...a heroic past, great men...the common will in the present' (Bhabha 19).

The key to opening the world of Palestinian literature is the understanding of the historical and political background of the Palestinian tragedy, starting with the proposed partition of Palestine by the UN in 1947 into two independent states: Israel and Palestine. The resolution sought to give partial satisfaction to two competing nationalist movements — Zionism (Jewish nationalism) and Arab nationalism — as well as to resolve the problem of Jews displaced as a result of the Holocaust. Zionists did not accept the UN Partition Plan. They seized areas beyond the proposed Jewish State and did not recognise the International Zone. The UN Plan was used as a pretence for taking over most of Palestine. The actual occupation of much of Palestine through the 1948 war was preceded by mass Jewish immigration to Palestine, and settlement on Palestinian lands, facilitated by the Jewish Emigration Agency and the British mandate. The 1948 war was accompanied by a massive exodus of Palestinians to the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, or outside Palestine to neighbouring Jordan, Lebanon, or Syria.<sup>1</sup>

Just as Palestinians were starting to recover from the 1948 war, Israel defeated the Arabs for the second time in 1967, confiscating the remnants of Palestinian land, and occupying parts of Egypt, Jordan, and the Golan Heights in Syria. These events left Palestinians and fellow Arabs in a state of shock. The catastrophe of the *nakba* (the war of 1948 and its repercussions) of the Palestinian people in 1948 took time to sink into the minds of the Palestinians. 'The Palestinian who lost his country and security was looking for something to explain the defeat and promise a near victory' (Darraj 51). A more mature literary treatment of the subjects of Palestinian literature surfaces in the periods of the two *Intifadas* (Uprisings) in 1987 and 2000. Here the mood is critically reflective, with the recognised need for political and social reform directing the discourse and diction of literary works in these periods.

Ahmad Abu Matar, in his book *al-Riwaya fi al-Adab al-Filastini 1950–1975* (*The Novel in Palestinian Literature 1950–1975*), stresses that the expression of Palestinian national concerns flooded all means of communication between Palestinians and Arabs — in particular, literature which represented in full, horrifying details the experience of deportation and exile, and preserved the memory and attachment to a lost safe haven. Literary effort was concentrated on serving the war effort at that turning point in the history of Palestine and the lives of Palestinians, just as socialist literature was used in the 1920s to advance Communism. Palestinian literature worked on 'engineering the souls', to use Stalin's expression,<sup>2</sup> of its audience to unremittingly serve their cause. The themes of literature were engulfed by a sense of patriotic nostalgia, extreme didacticism and an unrelenting determination to return. The rejection of the notion and practice of experimentation in arts by some writers emerged from the sensitivity of the Palestinian artist towards his/her national cause and people. Writers felt

responsible to provide an outlet for their physically and psychologically tormented readers; there was no waiting for Godot, no space for absurdity or obscurity, the message of work had to be clear and positive. This resulted sometimes in imprisoning Palestinian literature in traditional moulds and patterns of artistic expression that swing back and forth across the fine line separating reality and fiction. On the other hand, it could be argued that the literary writing of the Palestinian tragedy helped the targeted audience, particularly the Palestinians, to accept their suffering. When writers dismantled the horror and bleakness of the socio-political events into the emotionalism and sentimentality of literature, suffering became honourable sacrifice, death was martyrdom, casualties were heroes, and the return to Palestine was envisioned and possible.

It is this political reality that led Palestinian writers to adopt the school of Sartrean commitment. Commitment in Palestinian literature became a rule rather than an exception. Artistic creation was not an isolated activity and the intellectual had no privileged position above the social entity. In this school of commitment, literature is not an individual vision or production; it is a combination of a particular kind of aesthetics that are associated with a particular ideology. 'The word' of a writer, according to Sartre, 'is not a gentle breeze, which plays lightly over the surface of things, grazing them without alerting them. It is our shell and our antennae; it protects us against others and informs us about them' (Sartre 11–12). The school of commitment claims that words are like 'loaded pistols' and writers are professional snipers who do not shoot to kill, but write to change. Palestinian writers were, and still are, constrained by these discursive notions and writing is a premeditated undertaking that is conscious of social and political expectation. The overlap of reality and fiction is apparent and believed to be justified, for 'what is the credibility', asks Arab critic Shirin Abu al-Naja, 'of a text which ignores the massacres committed against Palestinians. How could a critic evaluate a Palestinian text without taking notice of real life situations?' (107). It is no wonder then that Palestinian writers choose realistic modes of representation in their literary works, and avoid as much as possible the sophisticated and ambiguous modes of symbolism.

This ideology from Ghassan Kanafani's perspective (a critic and writer recognised as the father of Palestinian commitment) shortened the period of infancy in Palestinian literature. The destruction and erasure of Palestinian culture pressured Palestinian literature to adopt the school of commitment. This was a move that transcended debate about the possible scope of creativity in the 'committed arts'. Kanafani wrote that 'Palestinian literature should be committed is a *sine qua non*. There was a pact between writers that aimless experimenting is an extravagance that Palestinian literature as a mirror of Palestine and Palestinian people is not ready to pay' (33).

Some critics exclude works from the Palestinian literary canon whose themes divert from the Palestinian war and resistance, viewing them as 'out of place'

productions by Palestinian intellectuals who secluded themselves from the concerns of their people, or who drew a line between their creative output and their political worries (Abu Matar 30). However, it could be argued that there is hardly a Palestinian literary work that totally disregards the state of war, resistance and occupation, even if the treatment varies in focus between emphasis on the subject or backgrounding it.

### PALESTINIAN WOMEN IN A MASCULINE TEXT AND CONTEXT

Palestinian literature can be classified as a *bildungsroman* (a story of growth and development) in relation to the portrayal of Palestinian women, as it reflects the chronological, all-encompassing changes women have undergone, starting from the 1948 catastrophe through to the 1967 setback and return to the life of refugee camps in Lebanon and Jordan, and reaching to the Uprising and the peace process period from 1987 onwards. The portrayal of women in early Palestinian literature starts with domestic woman whose sphere of influence is the home, and shifts to the image of the revolutionary comrade in contemporary literature. The bulk of early Palestinian literature focuses on themes of freedom and revolution; characters, whether male or female, are catalysts that help achieve the desired end. The flatness or roundedness of their character is event-based. Maternalism and paternalism were replaced by nationalism. In general, the feminine-masculine struggle for domination does not receive much focus. Gender issues, especially in early Palestinian literature are presented in the traditional pattern of female followers and male leaders, females weakened by their femininity and males empowered by their masculinity, housewives and battlefield soldiers. The concept of ideal womanhood is determined by male writers, who preceded women in writing the war story, setting national and mythical archetypes of women as emblems of the nation: Galateas carved and enlivened by the view of Pygmalions.

In early and modern Palestinian literature, Palestinian feminism can be seen to have escaped the Western division of the American ‘cult of true womanhood’ — a version of radical feminism emphasising the superiority of women and their distinctive nature — and the English ‘feminine ideal’, inspired by the teachings of bourgeois feminism (Showalter 25). Judith Tucker remarks that for some Palestinian women ‘the very existence of a European feminist movement was a problem, both in the imposing of its agenda on Arab feminists, and in the unfortunate association of feminism with the West and thus with everything the nationalist movement stands against’ (xiv). Miriam Cooke records how Arab women revolutionaries, reformers and writers — Palestinian included — rejected the feminist brand and tried to find alternative nationalist terms and practices in order to emphasise the uniqueness of the Palestinian female gender and femininity (viii, ix). The concept of ‘familialism’,<sup>3</sup> which honours and stresses the role of Palestinian women in nurturing and raising future warriors, best describes the trend adopted by most women in real life. This familial role of women, as

loyal, self sacrificing and obedient wives and mothers, was later highlighted and iconised in literature.

Palestinian feminism under war conditions erected its own models. A radical feminism that stressed the superiority of the female gender over the male, associated with the idea that men and women occupy different spheres in life, has not found much ground in Palestine, since the struggle requires the efforts of both sexes. If radicalism has appeared in any form, it was directed towards the oppressor of both males and females. Radical Palestinian feminism was modified into militarised feminism that was also sometimes associated with the *femme fatale*. This feminism depicts women engaging in mortal combat with the enemy, hijacking aeroplanes, planting bombs in enemy positions, and uses stereotypical femininity as a camouflage to distract or capture enemy soldiers. Bourgeois feminism and its fight for independence and equality required the stability of statehood which was (and still is) absent from the Palestinian context. But neither did Social or Marxist feminism succeed in the early years of the Palestinian struggle in gaining the full support of Palestinian women. The traditional conservative Palestinian society was not ready for the practices of Marxist factions and the mingling of men and women in their membership, or for the possibility that women might lead men.

Writers presented Palestinian feminism as a revolutionary rather than political theory and practice. They represented women practising a form of reconciliatory, feminism, where women worked with men in the war effort against occupation in order to achieve long-lasting gains for both sexes. Supporting this argument, Tamar Mayer in an essay entitled, 'Heightened Palestinian Nationalism: Military Occupation, Repression, Difference and Gender', mentions that 'Palestinian women have stopped short of issuing a direct challenge to the patriarchal structures ... they feel the need to struggle alongside men against this external threat ... Many feel that this is an inappropriate time to be alienating their male compatriots' (44). Palestinian feminism is depicted as 'mercurial feminism' in progression and regression, where women are attaining more acknowledgment of their importance and roles at the local and national levels, and are at the same time deprived of the basic rights of security, home and possession by the same emancipator and defeater: war and occupation.

As for writing the female image, there seems to be a subtle, unwritten 'literary contract', a 'communal language' of images and phrases, as described by the Arab critic Subhi Nabahani. According to Nabahani, a representative national literature should depict the partnership of women in life and war. Honouring fellow women is deemed to be a guiding principle in the code of ethics Palestinian writers hold. In his critical analysis of the human aspects in the novels of the *nakba*, Nabahani makes the unqualified claim that Palestinian novels give equal place and agency to women as to men. 'Women are no different to men. They are assigned the same roles on all levels of resistance as prisoners, martyrs and freedom fighters and are depicted exerting similar behaviours of heroism and steadfastness' (172–

74). Although Nabahani presents an ideal picture of the depiction of women in Palestinian literature, he nevertheless underscores that such depiction is essential to show that patriotism and national commitment are not exclusive to men, but extend to the other half of society, women.

Literature has celebrated these images after the 1948 war as the projection of the emancipated characteristics of the future Palestinian women, and as a form of wishful thinking about how women should become, not how they were at the time. This characterisation of women emanates from a strict code of didacticism that has no grey colours. It either elevates women to the status of motherland, sainthood, and martyrdom or casts them out as immoral traitors to the cause, the Palestinian people and the country. The pattern of literary didacticism commits the writer to what can be seen as a checklist of what and how women should be written, with the effect that the individual writers' words may be different but they represent more or less similar truths and messages. This literary template however does not entail redundancy or flatness of character despite the similar, exterior pattern of character sketching, because each period of war brings new dimensions, colours and themes to existing images. Yet during the three distinctive war periods — 1948, 1967, 1984–2000 — female characterisation varied between self-immolation and self determination, agency and lack of agency, depending on the gender of the writer. The most famous literary symbol of womanhood is the mother from which two connected images evolved: the image of the motherland and the mother of martyrs. In relation to female imagery, Palestinian literature either presents women as positive heroines engaging actively in the struggle or the oblivious catalyst contributing to the nurturing of male warriors.

#### **WOMEN AS HERO(IN)ES AND WORKS WITH A POSITIVE CONCLUSION**

Contrary to the shocking Arab defeats in the 1948 and 1967 wars, the literary production of the period distanced itself from the widespread mood of defeat and depression. Writers seem to have taken on the role of guardians of the national morale and memory. They tried to avoid lingering over the defeat itself by diagnosing and treating its causes. The literature of these periods led a campaign to uproot all the political, social and cultural flaws responsible for the defeat. The general strategy was to silence tragedy; literature became the redeemer, the salvation and the resurrection of all that had died. The talk of women's freedom and participation which had been confined behind the closed doors of bourgeois and intellectual salons, was expressed in the open and acquired a militant tone. Rather than accepting that a woman's place was in the home, after 1967 society started moving women to the heart of the struggle. With the spread of revolutionary movements and factions, literature expressed unreserved support for the resistance as the only way to free Palestine. Writers themselves became members of political movements and tried to translate their ideological agenda for women into their literary works. They tried to motivate women to serve the cause by drawing impressive images of women who did: this is the hero(ine) model. No

matter how ghastly the suffering pictured, most writers adopted Maxim Gorki's equation of a 'positive hero' and 'positive conclusion'.<sup>4</sup> The literary mission was to transform the aesthetic into the emblematic. Any image that did not conform to this code of positive heroism was cast in the negative in an indirect message from the writer to the audience to develop a similar dislike for characters at the centre of events who displayed anti-heroic qualities.

The symbolic importance of motherhood is largely uncontested in most Palestinian works of art. At the social level, the exploitation of the institution of motherhood is a must if any society at war is to reach its goals. Mothers are essential to war, producing, nurturing and educating the children who become its soldiers. The concept of nation itself derives etymologically from 'natio' meaning to be born, and as giving birth to humans is the role of mothers, giving birth to the nation might be said to follow. In literature, motherhood is iconised into many images, blessed with a spiritual drive to act not only as an individual mother of flesh and blood, but also as the mother of the nation, the symbolic motherland, and the mother of martyrs. The image of the Palestinian mother was elastic and writers stretched it to accommodate all the facets of self-denial, heroic service, and mobilisation according to the necessities of the war.

The icon of Palestinian womanhood, the mother, the motherland, the ideological warrior, the refugee, the all-in-one figure, is first presented by Kanafani in *Umm Sa'd (Sa'd's Mother)* written in 1969. *Umm Sa'd* is a novel that embodies Kanafani's Marxist doctrines in terms of the characteristics of Palestinian women, and adheres to social realism which celebrates the working class and glorifies their suffering. Paralleling Maxim Gorki's, *The Mother* (1906),<sup>5</sup> Kanafani in plain language signals the archetypal nature of *Umm Sa'd* in his introductory dedication to the novel in which he addresses her, not merely as an individual woman, but as a representative of people and an embodiment of the popular school of resistance. The novel consists of nine stories that are connected by interlocking images of *Umm Sa'd* and through which Kanafani paints to perfection the minute details that lead to the completion of the image of this epic-like heroine. Kanafani chooses the mother figure presumably because he is aware of her role in bringing up the future generations, and because he knows she will be acceptable to both men and women. She is also a member of the poor working class, the vast majority of Palestinian refugees, at whom the Marxist teachings for social reform are directed.

The character of *Umm Sa'd* transcends the limitations of the literary character and comes to represent all Palestinian women. This novel fits into the canon delineated by Kanafani, the ideological writer who prescribed the role of Palestinian manhood in various works. *Umm Sa'd* is his vision of what Palestinian womanhood should become. The Palestinian critic, Faruq Wadi in his book *Thalath 'Alamat Fariqa fi al-Riwaya al-Filastiniyya (Three Distinctive Marks in the Palestinian Novel)*, concludes that *Umm Sa'd* has become an example to

all succeeding writers. Women characters have subsequently been weighed in relation to Umm Sa'd on a scale of resemblance or dissimilarity.

In dynamic language, Umm Sa'd is described by the writer as the motherland: '[s]he rises from the womb of the earth, as an arrow held by mysterious destiny escalating endlessly... She walks high as a flag carried by unseen hands... She is solid as a rock, patient as a prophet. She has grown ten years older trying to win clean bread for her family' (Kanafani 15–16, 25). She is a member of the working proletariat who suffer the sordid conditions of refugee life. Rather than the laurels worn by the Roman warrior, Umm Sa'd ornaments her neck with a bullet fired by her son in one of his raids against the enemy.

The positive message the writer sent through Umm Sa'd was the role of women as the womb of the nation; the role of the mother who must overcome her biological instincts of maternal fear and protection for the sake of her national role and ideological beliefs; the role of begetting children and thereby increasing the Palestinian population in order to outnumber the Israelis. This, according to Kaplan, is the application of the perceived need to 'populate or perish' (Kaplan 15).

Umm Sa'd has a solid belief in her son's involvement in the resistance, but occasionally her heart is overtaken by motherly fear and worry. She unconsciously abstains from food until Sa'd's arrival from the front, but when she recovers from her fear, she regains her patriotic vigour in full force. These scenes showing the internal conflict Umm Sa'd experiences between her feelings as a mother and her commitment to the cause for which she sacrifices the most valuable thing she brought to life, her son. Through these scenes Kanafani creates a dialogue with all Palestinian mothers who may have the same worries, and equips them with the sublime conviction of sacrifice to overcome the biological power of motherly emotions in the same way that Umm Sa'd does. Such interaction between the writer and the reader, the fiction of the novel and real life, is not unique to Palestinian literature or the literature of commitment. The reader-response theory championed by Wolfgang Iser (*Wirkungsästhetik*) emphasises that reading literature is a dynamic contact between reader and text that serves to enliven and broaden the work of art. This dynamism is what critics name the 'politics of reading' (Schwab 16). Post-modern theorists from Adorno to Derrida insist that there is a dynamic relationship between a text and a receptive reader, whereby each reading of a text functions as a rewriting and rereading in an ongoing dialogue between writer and reader (Schwab 16).

In contrast to critics who argue that women's revolution is always motivated by a male catalyst,<sup>6</sup> Umm Sa'd is superior to all her male acquaintances, and more heroic. She is more hopeful than her educated relative, the journalist, and beholds a vision of victory. She has to put aside her womanly instincts and motherly passion to mould her revolutionary character in order to become a revolutionary, while her son, the male warrior, has only one task to fulfil, and that is to fight. It is not her relation to her son that distinguishes her; she stands with her own leadership

qualifications. She assumes the role of a military leader, aided by other women, to defend the camp. Throughout the novel, the reader can detect Kanafani's message which is perhaps best summarised by Syrian critic Buthayna Sha'ban who says that 'no nation could ever win a war without the help of its women' (151).

### HERO(INE)-LESS WORKS

Occupied with dramatising the suffering of the war as essential to the preservation of the national memory, some works of the period de-centre human heroism, especially that of women. The development of their characters is event-governed. In such works, women do not feature as main characters; the writers do not resort to psychoanalytical narration or employ stream of consciousness to reveal the inner thoughts and ideas of women in these traumatic periods. The suppression of the representation of feelings of fear and dislocation is intentional because, as some Palestinian writers believe, literature should aim to write a public image that women can identify with and emulate. It was thought that the task of literature was to create a belief in the state of womanly steadfastness, a state in which women's identity is totally absorbed by the event.

In hero(ine)less works, not only are women ornamental to the plot, but they also appear as desexualised which neutralises their femininity in favour of a more masculine appearance. In the novel, *Buhayra Wara' al-Rih (A Lake Beyond the Wind)* (1991) by the Palestinian Yahya Yakhlu'f about the 1948 war, one highly praised woman is Aunt Hafiza. Her praise is written in masculine terms. She is described as *ukht al-rijal* (the sister of men), an attribute standing positively for courage and bravery, although associated with negative connotations of manly behaviour and lost femininity. Generally, this term in Arabic culture is used to describe old women whose actions enable them to rise high in social esteem, equalling the importance of men. Aunt Hafiza attends the meetings of men to discuss war operations, smokes and orders some of her male relatives around. She is described as '*ukht al-rijal* ... a kind of woman who never gets angry...she is capable of doing anything, she is still powerful, dominant and opinionated. She is always in full command even in her husband's presence' (62–63). Praise as it may seem, this woman is not self-sufficient to stand on her own or in comparison to other women; she needs a catalyst, a man or masculine qualities, in order to be marked and noticed. 'Aunt Hafiza fights with the men, talks and argues confidently with them... Men used to call her a hero' (249–52). This depiction makes the reader wonder if Hafiza is grouped with men because of the rarity of her type among Palestinian women after the 1948 war, or if the author wishes to maintain the dominance of male stories about wartime. Thus a woman cannot appear as a hero in her own right as a woman with womanly characteristics, but can only appear heroic as a pseudo-male.

On the other hand, this image of 'manly women', women described in terms of manly characteristics of courage and heroism, might signal the semi-acceptance by the Palestinian patriarchal society of the presence of women in the public arena

of war. The process of desexualisation and endowment of women with manly qualities is necessary to overcome the social taboos that discourage interaction between women and men. This strategy relieves the social tension. For men, any woman who becomes 'one of the guys' is permitted to enter the cult of men and manhood which had been extremely exclusive and impenetrable before the 1948 war.

#### **TESTOSTERONE VS. PROGESTERONE WRITING**

The characterisation of women, especially in male-written works, revolves around extremes. Writers elevate them to represent homeland and nation or degrade them to a state of immorality and treachery. Even in contemporary works, women are used to embody a spiritual and emblematic stand. This virtue-vice paradigm is based on attributing all goodness to socially sanctioned images and all viciousness to controversial ones. When female writers took part in writing the war story the characterisation of women evolved from an infancy depicting dependency and adherence to social codes, to some form of maturity and confrontation. It is fair to claim that Palestinian women writers are more prone to take an oppositional stance in their presentation of the war story. This can be diagnosed as emanating from their sense of being the victimised party as a result of the war and the spread of the nationalist ideology, which they believe maintained fixed patriarchal social and gender structures. Although war and nationalism may be said to have accelerated the emancipation of women, bringing female rights and associated 'feminist' imagery to the fore, some Palestinian female writers argue that war, created and sustained by men, entraps women in mythical, motherly or maiden roles. In war literature, works by female writers are more critical than their male counterparts, because most women writers have taken to the scene of writing after the emergence of feminism. They maintain their right to have their own views of the events and to criticise the icons so strongly enshrined in the minds of their nation. They refuse to recreate the same female characters developed by male writers who succumb to the one nation, one story, one mode of writing. An example of the counter narrative produced by Palestinian female writers is provided by the works of Sahar Khalifa. In her novels there is always a focus on the internal battle with men and institutions of patriarchy more than the battle of the Palestinians against the occupation, and a call for the freedom of women prior to the freedom of Palestine. This form of writing the war story is assessed by some critics as 'a repeat performance of colonialism...merging...tradition and colonialism into some new...hybrid' (McClintock 260). Frantz Fanon describes such writers as 'neo-colonial' writers, carrying on where the colonial powers have left off in disfiguring society (7). In an unpublished M.A thesis that studies the literary works of Sahar Khalifa by Nisrin Shanabla, the researcher asserts that Khalifa's novels are only Palestinian in title. She is amazed by Khalifa's ability to distance herself from the Palestinian cause and produce novels unrelated to the 'Palestinian context of heroism, martyrdom, imprisonment...etc' (46). Khalifa holds to her own personal agenda. She herself confesses in her autobiography,

‘I never thought of myself as a part of community, but as an outsider’ (qtd in Shanabla). She admits that most of her female characters are an extension of herself, her own aspirations, and disappointments. Neither detached from her characters nor committed to her country’s cause, Khalifa manipulates a sort of confessional literature, in which she, like many women writers, inscribes her ‘own sickness, her madness...and her paralysis in her texts’ (Showalter 25).

For example, the *intifada* (Uprising), which is depicted by the majority of writers as being a positive and emancipatory transformation to the advantage of the Palestinian people and cause,<sup>7</sup> is presented in the negative in Khalifa’s novel *Bab al-Saha* (the name of a location in the old city of Nablus). Miriam Cooke expected this novel to ‘provide the transformed context. The conditions would seem to be ideal because the *intifada* is the most explicitly feminized of all post-modern wars’ (195), but Khalifa has chosen to differ. One expects of Khalifa, as a proclaimed feminist, to take sides with her female characters, but in Khalifa’s literary world there are no survivors, neither women nor men — all are destined to failure (‘Abd al-Qadir 263). The feminism of the author is not passed on to her characters. Most of Khalifa’s female characters emerge as unfulfilled characters and leave the course of events as psychological wrecks.

Some argue that women can identify with their sex as well as men can with theirs, and thus produce a clearer picture of femininity and feminism. Rethinking the women in *Umm Sa’d* and *Bab al-Saha* in these terms suggests that the sex of the author does not govern literary characterisation. In terms of benefit to the cause of Palestinian women, feminist rights, and social effect, *Umm Sa’d*, the novel and character, is more emancipatory and memorable than the women of *Bab al-Saha*, whose characterisation and lives are not adorned with any form of special achievement. *Umm Sa’d* stands as an iconic feminist figure, while the women of *Bab al-Saha*, by the feminist author, are no more than everyday women struggling for self-understanding. Other critics argue that biological differences enrich literary production with a variety of views. They insist that ‘physical apartheid should at the very least be countered with literary integration’ (Cooke 5) (a valid point in the context of war literature), so as not to divert attention away from the main stream of thought and characterisation thought fitting for the war effort. To write with a feminist or masculinist voice, to exclusively prioritise male or female characters, may affect the message and nature of the war story, and may present a partial rather than an overall view of the stake and status of women in war.

## CONCLUSION

In studying Palestinian literature and heroism, critics have to be aware of the politics of writing adopted by authors. Being a manifestation of war and influenced by a nationalistic rhetoric, cannot be a neutral, disheartened or individual depiction of life and characters; it must carry the message of resistance and employ a nationalist ideology that does not hesitate to encourage warriors and mobilisation for war. To preserve the national image, Palestinian literature

employs selective historical, political, and social discourse to achieve a degree of representation of actual events and images. In this task of image preservation, war literature adopts an eclectic approach to depict a state of uniformity, conformity, and sameness in themes and characters. Some war literature has the effect of psychological conditioning, bringing the people at war or under occupation to believe in their unity, uniqueness, and a common cause. Images like the mother and the motherland in Palestinian literature with their code of behaviour, actions and ceremonies did not appear suddenly out of the blue. It took the writing of a great number of literary works with subliminal pedagogical messages about how a mother is expected to act in war, supporting her children and rejoicing in their sacrifice. These images grew in the subconscious of Palestinians and their nobility and reverence were immense and unquestionable.

In Palestinian war literature, there seems to be an agreement on the definition of nationalism as a devotion to cause and people, and the depiction of female heroic characters endowed with bravery and commitment to the justness of their cause. It has been argued that the essence of the war story is expected to maintain a degree of credibility and authenticity regardless of the gender of the writer, and that gender differences might act to enrich to the war story by presenting a variety of literary treatments. In Palestinian literature, men writing the war story present women in a religious, mythical and sacrificial light — they are the symbol for which men fight. The female image written by men is either that of the saint or the Satan, praised endlessly for acting as mothers, wives and war supporters, or condemned limitlessly if they breach the social norms. Historical sources record that Palestinian women's agency and participation are much greater than represented in war literature (Zurairq 40), proving that male writers do not do justice to the imagery of their fellow female comrades. The picture is less predictable in the female story. Some Palestinian female writers do not defend the position of their female ancestors, but turn their back on all the heritage of war history and concentrate on writing the women's plight as war goes on. Early war literature in Palestine represented a collective entity by manipulating individual suffering, charisma and achievement to speak for the whole nation.

At the early stages of Palestinian literature, the traditional images were difficult to defy as writers produced their version of war literature more in compliance with the dominant views and less in opposition because such opposition was judged as unsuitable to the accepted state of solidarity and steadfastness that war literature was supposed to promote. Not only were women set in fixed gender moulds, but also men and ideal manhood were governed by the national frame of heroism and bravery. Palestinian men and women are depicted in this literature as positive heroes and heroines who have been created according to the principles of social realism to reflect a positive conclusion and message. Gender issues of equality, sexuality, and social reform receive only minor attention in Palestinian literature of this period. As Tucker has observed, 'the emphasis on the unity of men and

women in the struggle for decolonization postponed the critical questioning of the inequalities of power between men and women in these patriarchal cultures' (43). There is little difference between the representation of men and women in these early works, whether the author is male or female. Palestinian writers in contact with the socio-political conditions of women have however recorded the changes that occurred in women's status from 1948 to the present time. Recent stories of women in the *intifada* attribute agency and initiative to women, unlike the stories written about women immediately after the 1948 war, which portray them as a back stage chorus assisting male heroes.

Palestinian feminism in war and literature is pictured as mercurial, a form of 'accidental' feminism forced to the fore by war and grafted with Marxist, bourgeois, radical, extremist feminism, rather than developing as a discrete school. In contemporary Palestinian literature, Palestinian feminism is presented by Palestinian writers as a model in the making. While some writers such as Khalifa subscribe to the school of Western feminism, other nationalist writers such as Kanafani insist on the uniqueness of the Palestinian model, a model affected by the repercussions of war, the appreciation of some social values and the deconstruction of others (namely the restrictions on the presence, activity and mobility of Palestinian women), and the redefinition of issues pertaining to women's honour and reputation. This identity crisis and inapplicability of a fixed model is also apparent in the history of feminist criticism of Palestinian literature. Barbara Harlow suggests that the concept of feminism in the Arab world, Occupied Palestine included, has become loaded with negative political and social implications, because it is a product of the West. She points out the difficulty of applying these feminist theoretical models in any analysis of the 'literary output of geopolitical areas which stand in opposition to the very social and political organization within which the theories are located and to which they respond' (43), that of the colonial West.

In addition, some Palestinian works understate feminist developments, failing to dramatise the actual positive and growing roles of women in war. Most often, Palestinian women are depicted as dogmatic feminists or even active agents of the revolution, upholding an unchanging belief in war and the justness of their resistance. With the absence of state, nation and citizenship in the Palestinian context, literature is judged by some as unsuited to host feminist revisionism. Many still hold to the belief that this literature (the literature of war) should work to implant and disseminate a collective view and a consciousness of a common Palestinian identity — past, present and future.

Nonetheless, writers set out to enshrine the battles of everyday women, avoiding the canonisation of Palestinian literature as the literature of the privileged or the elite. Some believe that Palestinian literature should not only produce archetypes for public consumption, but that it should also be humanist in the sense that it can shed light on everyday women living under occupation; it appeals to the everyday emotions, depicting how humble human dreams cannot

materialise for Palestinian women in a war zone. Highlighting this particular suffering of women can be an end in itself to evoke sympathy on the part of the unaffected outsider audience (readers as readers only), and prepare the insider audience (readers as actors and inspirers) to transcend suffering and accept it as part and parcel of attaining freedom. It is the aim of literature adhering to the teachings of social realism according to the critic Rufus Mathewson to ensure that ‘the small acts of staying morally alive become heroic; the hero is spiritually unbreakable, successful in his or her stance of opposition, true to his mission, an example for others’ (xvi). Negative conditions are presented in proportion to positive ones to maintain the authenticity of these stories, but the writer of these stories endows women with the strength to overcome adversity. Scenes of loss, complaint and tears are abundant in literary works produced in times of war, but the traditional mode of Palestinian literature puts the woman at centre stage who pledges to fight on despite her losses and emits ululations of pride (*zagharid*), thereby recreating Gorki’s vision of the positive hero(ine).

Palestinian war literature remains a stage for change, with writers at situated polar opposites — those adhering to a traditional image of female heroism and nationalism and those who foil it. The continuation of the Palestinian war ensured the continuation of war literature, which has given way in contemporary times to a degree of variance and split opinions unimagined in early war literature. While it is true that Palestinian literature is constrained by ‘unliterary’ entanglements including nationalism, political commitment and social realism, these should not hinder the literary appraisal and appreciation of war literature as a ‘phasic’ literature to be judged in this light. Reader and critics need to adopt a contextual, historical, and comparative analysis of texts. This involves analysing texts in relation to the period they are written in to evaluate how progressive or regressive, emancipating or confining, the images and themes are at a specific point in time and in comparison with other national and international works on war. It is difficult to appraise a Palestinian work written in the 1970s expressing extreme nationalism, with the critical mentality of the late twentieth century, when people worldwide believed nationalism to be a phase of human infancy. It is this critical understanding of the process of writing the war story in continuing war conditions that enables the readers and critics to view the feminist issues and the representation of women in proportion to a greater adversary holding back its development. This appreciation may mitigate accusations that Palestinian literature is overwhelmingly patriarchal or anti-feminist.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The number of Palestinian refugees after the 1948 war is estimated to be between 750,000 and 914,221. The number of destroyed villages is 531. See Suleiman Abu-Sitta, *The Atlas of Palestine 1948*.
- <sup>2</sup> Quoted in Mathewson, *The Positive Hero in Russian Literature*, p. 3.

- <sup>3</sup> See Christine Bard, and Robert Jean-Louis, 'From Feminism to Familialism', p. 101. Familialism is a theory and practice that developed in socialist societies, entrusting the institution of the family with great responsibilities in maintaining the stability of life and society. Women and the concept of matriarchy received precedence since women were viewed as the guarantors of the social order. Familialism, nevertheless, is a collective framework that focuses on the family as a unit and not the individual identity and rights of its female and male members.
- <sup>4</sup> See Mathewson, pp. 161–68.
- <sup>5</sup> *The Mother* (1906) is the story of Pelageia Nilovna, the Russian mother who adopts the cause of socialism and joins the revolution after the arrest of her son Pavel. Pelageia has a strong Catholic belief, which helps her bear the ill treatment of her drunkard husband, and his subsequent death.
- <sup>6</sup> See Radwa Ashur, *al-Tariq ila al-Khayma al-Ukhra*, pp. 130–31; Joseph Zeidan, *Arab Women Novelists: The Formation Years and Beyond*, p. 170.
- <sup>7</sup> See Salma Jayyusi, pp. 3–4.

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