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# An 'Invented People': Palestinian Refugee Women and Meanings of Home

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## Introduction

In December 2011, US Republican presidential hopeful Newt Gingrich declared that the Palestinians are an 'invented people'. The head of editorial standards at the BBC appears to be of the same opinion, suggesting in early 2012, that 'Palestine does not exist' (Saleem 2012). The persistent negation of Palestinian identity has deep roots. In a speech in Haifa in 1969, Moshe Dayan remarked: 'Jewish villages were built in the place of Arab villages. You do not even know the names of these Arab villages, and I do not blame you because geography books no longer exist; not only do the books not exist, the villages are not there either' (*Ha'aretz* 1969; see also Benvenisti 2000, Pappé 2006). His words highlight the centrality of 'home' in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and its relationship to identity formation. They help to 'destabilize a sense of home as a stable origin and unsettle the fixity and singularity of a place called home' (Blunt and Dowling 2006:198). In order to erase the Palestinian landscape, the early Zionist movement and, later, the Israelis went to great lengths to construct a 'mythic narrative of entitlement' (Aouragh 2011:376) which, to succeed, has to incorporate a denial of Palestinian identity. In the 64 years since the uprooting from their homeland, Palestinians have struggled to keep alive their integrity as a nation.

Far from disappearing, as the 'Arab villages' had disappeared, Palestinians have preserved not only a strong sense of identity but also an image of 'a place



called home'. The recollection of home and homeland remains powerful for Palestinian refugees and, out of this rooted identity, has emerged a resistance movement determined to make real again the Palestine that has been lost. Inspired by memories of their homeland, successive generations have enacted forms of resistance, from militant activism to resilience and survival. As refugee camps have been invaded, homes destroyed and lives fragmented, they have responded with steadfastness and the abundant fruits of memory and imagination. Their efforts embody the 'tension between identity and territory' (Doumani 2007:47).

'Home', as Kassem remarks, is 'an especially complex construction' (2011:18). It is 'one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind' (Bachelard 1969). But home is also loss and pain and insecurity and, as a connection is often made between home and women, I will refer to the experiences of Palestinian refugee women in Lebanon and the West Bank. In 2006-08, I conducted two ethnographic research projects,<sup>2</sup> which involved interviews with a wide range of camp women in these areas. In total, I interviewed 58 women in the West Bank and 62 in Lebanon; the interviews were based on questionnaires but also permitted more open-ended exchanges. My research explored women's memories of home and exile, the effects of memory on identity, and the ways in which women make use of these attributes to construct and enact resistance.<sup>3</sup> I realized that the geographies of home and place offered the prospect of better understanding processes of change and identity-formation for Palestinian refugee women in Lebanon and the Israeli-occupied West Bank. Although 'home', in the sense it is used by most refugees, refers to 'Palestine', the lost homeland, other place-bound expressions of identity have developed in the camps. Palestine is 'imagined', both by those who have real memories of life before 1948 and those who have heard the stories of parents and grandparents.

This article focuses on several key aspects of Palestinian identity: the recollection of life before 1948; how women live now, in the inadequate camps of Lebanon and the West Bank, where many of the refugees have spent their entire lives; and the imagining of a future return to the homeland. Their existence is now circumscribed by what Aouragh calls 'occupied immobility', in the case of women in the Palestinian territories, and 'exiled immobility', for those in Lebanon. I will explore refugee women's experiences of 'immobility', their memories, coping mechanisms and dreams, and will argue that, while imagination is a necessary source of comfort, there needs to be real progress, at local and international levels, to address the needs of Palestinians 'as a collectivity whose members assume a natural and neat fit between identity and territory' (Doumani 2007:50).

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<sup>2</sup>The first research project was funded in 2006-07 as part of the UK Arts & Humanities Research Council's Diasporas, Migration and Identities Small Grants Programme; the second, funded by the United States Institute of Peace, took place in 2007-08.

<sup>3</sup>For more information about my fieldwork in Lebanon, please see Maria Holt, 2014, *Women and Conflict in the Middle East: Palestinian Refugees and the Response to Violence*, London: I B Tauris.

My research project refers to literature on collective memory and storytelling (Naguib 2008, Sayigh 1998, Kassem 2011), gender, nationalism and national belonging (Yuval-Davis 1997, Blumen and Halevi 2005, Bhabha 1990, Sand 2009, Swenenburg 1991), and notions of identity (Hall 1966, Sayigh 2002, Sen 2006). I am interested in how Palestinian spaces have been turned into 'unsafe, dangerous places' (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2005:135) and how women, through their refusal to forget and their determination to rebuild, have transformed attempts to negate their identity and destroy their homes into a tool of resistance.

### **Bitter memories of home**

Umm Walid<sup>4</sup> is not sure of her exact age; her family believes she is well over 90. She was born in a village near Jerusalem and is unschooled. In 1948, when Zionist forces attacked her village and started shooting, she recalled, 'most people left'. She and her family ran away to the village of Beit Jala, taking nothing from their home except the clothes they were wearing. Umm Walid has visited her old home, she said, and 'it is just the same'. After the Israelis took her house, Jews from Iraq moved into it. They spoke to her in Arabic and invited her inside for coffee. Umm Walid and her family now live in the Al-Am'ari refugee camp in Ramallah and, when I interviewed her in June 2007, several generations of her family were also present. Her daughter, Asma, who was two months old when her parents fled in 1948, expressed anger. In her view, her mother and the other Palestinians who ran away should have stayed, and even died, defending their villages. Umm Walid argued that 'we had no choice; we heard about the Deir Yasin massacre and how the Jews had slaughtered women, young men, old men and children'. There was no possibility of fighting, she insisted. But Asma was insistent, demanding to know how they could have left and allowed strangers to take their homes. Now, she concluded, 'we are living like animals'. Asma has ten children and all of them have been affected by the Israeli occupation; several have been injured and at least one has spent time in an Israel prison.<sup>5</sup>

I am citing the story of this West Bank refugee family to argue that, in some ways, memory for Palestinians has become an antagonistic process, an arena of contestation. Asma's bitter observation that 'now we are living like animals' encapsulates the rage felt by the refugees. Umm Walid and her family illustrate some of the questions afflicting Palestinian identity in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Their story highlights issues relating to memory, belonging, violent and unresolved dispossession and the cruel injustices of occupation. Asma also alluded to several negative aspects of identity, such as lack of home and choice, but she balanced these with references to positive indicators of dignity, such as faith and survival. Her observations and those of her mother caused me to reflect on the gendered nature of identity and to ask whether women's narratives represent an

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<sup>4</sup>The identities of all women interviewed for this article have been disguised.

<sup>5</sup>Personal interview, al-Am'ari camp, Ramallah, West Bank, 18 June 2007.

understanding of the Palestinian nation and its experience of homelessness that does not rely only on the sort of formal historical accounts often conveyed by men's narratives of heroic struggle. To gain a more nuanced insight into this experience, I will compare stories told by refugee women in the West Bank with those in Lebanon.

Huda is also a Palestinian refugee but, unlike Umm Walid and Asma, she resides outside the borders of her homeland. Aged 46, a midwife with one son, Huda has spent all her life in Lebanon and now lives in Bourj el-Barajne camp in Beirut. When I interviewed her in June 2006, much like Umm Walid and Asma had done, she talked about 'a place called home'. She told me that her parents were young when they left Palestine in 1948. They took the keys of their house, she added, 'and subsequently told us, their children, about the happy life they had in Palestine'. Huda said that Lebanon is only a country where she has to live while she waits to return to her own land. 'A person without a homeland', she added, 'is exposed to suffering and poverty. If any hostilities break out, we have to hide our Palestinian identity'. She has visited the Lebanese-Israeli border, she told me; her son tried to reach through the fence 'to touch Palestinian land'.<sup>6</sup>

As a result of continuing enforced powerlessness and the reactions it provokes, Palestinian identity is perceived by many as being in crisis and, listening to the stories of Umm Walid, Asma and Huda, I speculated that women may possess particular skills and insights that could enable damaged national identity to begin to heal. Since Palestinians can no longer depend on an outmoded model of national identity based on heroic struggle, they need to access more nuanced ways of defining and asserting their identity. Huda, for example, referred to the importance of the camp where she lives; 'it is important to be with my people', she observed, 'we stay together and can support each other...this way, we stay strong'. The notion of unity as a source of strength was reiterated by my interviewees on many occasions. Lamia, a resident of Ain el-Hilweh camp, recalled that, during the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, women had to clean and rebuild the destroyed camp 'as all the young men were in prison'; their hard work was remembered with pride.<sup>7</sup> Their stories of steadfastness echo the words of a West Bank woman quoted by Shalhoub-Kevorkian who declared: 'When they [the Israelis] see us, the whole camp community, helping each other, restoring the place and the damage, they go crazy' (2005:138). I argue that refugee women, wherever they live, have evolved a complex narrative of homeland that sustains them and, at the same time, highlights the urgency of a just resolution to the problem. Confronted by refusal and oppression, 'these women create new spaces of belonging that are remarkably not solely about individual restoration, but also about healing the community' (Shalhoub-Kevorkian 2005:134).

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<sup>6</sup>Personal interview, Bourj el-Barajne camp, Beirut, 2 June 2006.

<sup>7</sup>Personal interview, Ain el-Hilweh camp, Sidon, 7 June 2003.

What do the stories of Umm Walid, Asma and Huda tell us about their relationship with home and how this has shaped their identity? For Palestinians, the meaning of 'home' is complex and multi-layered. It refers to what they have lost but also where they exist in the present. Umm Walid lived a settled life in her own village until 1948 when she was forced to flee; she remembers Palestine but has been living as a refugee for over 60 years; Asma has been a refugee all her life; she is a widow, a mother and a grandmother; she is a resident of Ramallah but identifies Jerusalem as her home; Huda has also been a refugee her whole life; she is a wife and mother; she resides in Lebanon but refers to her parents' village in Palestine as 'home'. Whatever their differing circumstances, all of them would describe their identities, first and foremost, as 'Palestinian'. This raises the question of what is meant by Palestinian identity. How do Palestinians refute the claim that they are an 'invented people' or do not exist at all? Identity, for these women, is linked to place. Today, what we think of as being Palestinian is circumscribed by camps, walls, borders and identity cards. It is defined by impermanence and violence and also by a lack of power over their own lives. While Asma shares some attributes of identity with Huda, their life experiences have been very different. Palestinian refugees in Lebanon have developed subject positions in relation to long-term violence, living outside the borders of their homeland and exclusion from the 1993 'peace process'; they have little expectation of return. Those in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, in contrast, have some hope of an eventual settlement with Israel and the creation of an independent Palestinian state, but they too do not expect to return to their homeland in pre-1948 Palestine.

Notions of 'national identity', clearly, have undergone significant changes since 1948. In the process, Palestinians have developed new ways of envisaging themselves as a nation. They live as diasporic communities and share a longing to 'return'. By contrasting what Swedenburg describes as 'official Palestinian nationalism' (1991: 175) with women's subtle subversion of nationalist discourse and a recognition of multiple layers of identity, I suggest that the shape of Palestinian identity is changing to accommodate more fluid elements of belonging. I do this with reference to Sen's argument that 'many of the conflicts and barbarities in the world are sustained through the illusion of a unique and choiceless identity' (2006: xv). In recent years, Palestinian identity has been demonized as violent and terrorist and this perception inevitably has an effect on how Palestinians practice resistance. To challenge the 'illusion' of 'choiceless identity', the Palestinian nation could heed the diverse voices of women, and I argue that women have strongly influenced the evolution of a transnational, diasporic identity, rooted both in the memory of place and the reality of placelessness.

## Meanings of identity for Palestinian refugee women

For Palestinians, 'identity' developed partly as a reaction to traumatic events. 'Along with memories of the homeland left behind was often rekindled a desire to remake the abandoned way of life...an attempt to construct a meaningful identity in the context of life in alien...circumstances' (Buijs 1993: 18). This linkage of 'memories of the homeland' with 'a meaningful identity' highlights Doumani's 'tension between identity and territory' (2007:49). It is something that is conveyed frequently in refugee women's narratives. However, since identity is an attribute both of the individual and the community or nation, there is also a conflict between women's complex subjectivities and the official narrative of the Palestinian people as a collectivity or scattered community. What exactly is meant by 'identity' in this context? I would agree with Siddiq that the experience of becoming 'a refugee nation' after 1948 'has served as a major catalyst for the consolidation and development of Palestinian...national identity' (1995: 87). Today, Palestinian national identity has been fragmented by separation and a resistance that has been defined, by Israel and some western countries, as 'terrorist'. In addition, memories and experiences have developed along different lines depending on location. While day-to-day reality for Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip is defined by the Israeli occupation and the violence of everyday life, for Palestinians in the camps of Lebanon, it is characterized by violence and continuing instability, the betrayal of the Oslo peace process and feelings of exclusion from future arrangements.

While the Palestinian leadership attempted to sustain a unifying ideology based on memory and heroic struggle, individual Palestinians, especially women, have frequently dissented from the official narrative. They do not do this because they are opposed to the notion of an inclusive Palestinian nation but, rather, because it fails to represent the complex reality or the 'inescapably plural identities' (Sen 2006) of Palestinians. 'Real' events, for example, the 2008-09 Israeli war against Gaza, have had a unifying effect on disparate Palestinian communities. From the start of the attack, 'Palestinians living in the cities and refugee camps across the West Bank and the Arab world took to the streets in their tens of thousands in a fierce demand for national unity' (Nabulsi 2009). This incident, like the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon before it, unites individual women such as Asma in Ramallah and Huda in Beirut, and confirms their identity as Palestinians.

Place 'is space to which meaning has been ascribed' (Carter, James and Squires 1993: xii) but, while the refugees may not choose to ascribe meaning to the spaces they occupy, the fact that successive generations have been forced to inhabit these spaces indicates that a degree of 'meaning' is inevitable. However, while memories of Palestine evoke nostalgia and a 'longing for stability and coherence' (Massey 1994: 168), the present reality of the refugee camps is rejected. It is an uncomfortable position. On the one hand, women's traditional role of homemaker has placed them at the centre of the project of place-making and yet, as it is not something they have chosen, they must find other meanings. Thus, their

contribution to recreating a sense of place 'is far from being restricted to the domestic arena'; their 'place-making practices are integral to the cultural and political struggles against displacement'. Women 'weave personal and collective struggles – from home to camp and beyond – into a collective historical process of place making' (Harcourt and Escobar 2005: 12-13).

### **Conclusion: 'Palestinians deserve to dream'**

In this article, I have sought to show how Palestinian national identity has been fragmented and demonized in the decades since the 1948 *nakba*, and how Palestinians have been re-cast as an 'invented people'. Their dislocation from the homeland has transformed their identity into one of contestation and unreliability. Yet, as Aouragh observes, 'Palestinians deserve to dream even when these dreams sometime transcend the possible' (2011:393). In an attempt to realize their dream of return, Palestinians have fought a guerilla war against Israel and, in this endeavour, men have been the main protagonists. But efforts to regain their territory have been unsuccessful and, after 65 years, most Palestinians recognize that they need to find new ways to end their state of homelessness. Some of these, as I have argued in this article, challenge traditional constructions of gender.

Although I in no way wish to disparage the efforts of Palestinian men, women are making substantial, and I would suggest, ground-breaking, contributions. In terms of the national past, their memories represent an important inheritance for future generations; women's understandings of conquest and dispossession are valuable tools in terms of conflict resolution; and their involvement in daily survival, both in the occupied territories and the diaspora, are of significance. Modes of survival articulated by women fall into three main categories. First, the Palestinian woman is an activist, working side by side with men in the liberation struggle and national resistance; second, she is a mother, struggling to protect her children from harm, responsible for the production of the next generation who will continue the struggle; and, third, she contributes to the preservation of memory and the protection of identity. However, some observers argue that Palestinian national identity is currently facing a crisis, assaulted by fragmentation from within and demonization from outside. It is increasingly difficult to speak of a unified 'national identity' when personal experiences, in the diaspora and the occupied territories, have been so diverse and expectations continue to diverge.

It is possible that a new narrative is emerging. In the words of one commentator: 'Since 1948 the Palestinian narrative was *al-nakba*...[a] narrative...[of] loss and suffering, of exile and refuge'. However, the narrative being shaped in recent years is one 'of struggle for freedom, liberation and independence'; it is a narrative 'of resistance and determination' (Baskin 2005). Every year on 15 May, Palestinians commemorate Nakba Day, to mourn the loss of their homeland. In 2013 in the Gaza Strip, an 80-year old woman called Ghatheyya Mifleh al-Khawalda recalled her home village of al-Qastina, which she left in



1948; in her words: ‘Of course I am not allowed to go there anymore, but I still think about my village after all these years. Al-Qastina crosses my mind very often. It doesn’t make sense that I cannot be in my home, on my land, in the place where I grew up. I still dream of the days of the land’ (Palestinian Centre for Human Rights 2013). However much the lives of refugee women improve or a new ‘narrative of heroism’ develops, there cannot be satisfaction, in terms of justice and morality, until this core issue of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict has been satisfactorily resolved. Then, at last, women such as Umm Walid and Asma in the West Bank, Huda in Lebanon and Ghatheyya in Gaza will no longer have to suffer the pain of being dismissed as an ‘invented people’.

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