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Ruination

Eutopia bevordert de inbreng van migranten-intellectuelen en kunstenaars in het nationale en Europese debat over migratie, globalisering en culturele diversiteit. Dit gebeurt sinds 2002 door het uitgeven van Eutopia Magazine, door het organiseren van debatten, publieke lezingen en culturele evenementen, en via netwerkvorming tussen migranten-intellectuelen in diaspora. Eutopia richt zich met name – maar niet uitsluitend - op culturele dialoog tussen Europa en de islamitische wereld.

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CONTENTS

Editorial

Is there any-body out there

Welcome to the first English edition of Eutopia. We would like to use this opportunity to discover new ways of interconnecting with other international networks and institutions.

The political and cultural situation in The Netherlands has not been good in recent years. Conservatives and anti-Islamic populist movements have received an increasing amount of attention in the media's political discourse, and even more so in the Dutch parliament.

In this confusing political situation, we must try to find new ways of thinking and dealing with this matter. Until now, the involvement of policy-makers has not been able to properly influence the social climate. Dangerous politicians, angry civilians, intellectual disappointment and certain off-the-mark policies can lead to very dangerous choices.

Islam-phobics and anti-immigration populists seem to have the upper hand at the moment. Simplistic ways of arguing have given them more public space, while the more progressive and liberal part of society has only come up with temporary solutions. Psychological warfare has almost become a daily scene played out in the media. It is interesting to note that, between the lines, Islamic norms and knowledge have risen in importance. Many educated, middle-class Moslems are in the process of experimenting with the formation of Islamic ideas. All this while on the other side of the societal spectrum many Dutch people, also middle-class and educated, are busy rediscovering the roots of their traditions and values. These two extreme developments could lead to further populist clashes.

Eutopia, in the forms of public events, print and web magazines, is unique in The Netherlands. It provides a forum for influential migrant intellectuals -- many not very well-known to the general Dutch public -- who are used to looking beyond their own linguistic and national boundaries. The links these thinkers make with debates occurring elsewhere in the world offer an important counterweight for the mainstream interpretations of cultural and political themes. Eutopia authors use less conventional sources of information, and offer fresh, innovative views on subjects such as migration, multiculturalism, international politics, art and culture.

If we were to continue with an English edition of Eutopia, both in print and online, we need to expand our network of international contacts. Thus, we are looking for international soul mates. Any serious, adult and professional handshake is welcome!

Farhad Golyardi
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In memory of Tanya Reinhart, who lived in Amsterdam and died in 2007, and was an inspiring teacher, author and tireless anti-ocupation advocate.

Ruination

Identity and Exile in Israel/Palestine

Hilla Dayan

To ruin, to inflict disaster upon, is not usually what we associate with the nation. The nation and national identity is rather a constructive and integral part of life, which makes our collective existence meaningful. However, when the political community to which we belong is engaged in self-ruination and/or in the ruination of others, our identity, a real and a metaphorical home, becomes an uninhabitable place. At least two forms of exile from this home then come to mind. These are self-exile from a political community through rejection and critique of its basic assumptions, and actual exile from a place of origin. This special Eutopia *Magazine issue is devoted to Israel/Palestine, and it features contributions by Israelis and Palestinians. The authors reflect on the complex and tenuous relations between various identities shaped in Israel/Palestine, on the virtues and the oppressive dimensions of these identities, on real and metaphorical exile, and finally on political exile and the realities of exile. We thus mark the sixtieth anniversary of the State of Israel, and the Palestinian catastrophe, al-nakba. Not all the contributions have a somber tone, but they have all been conceived in the shadow of political catastrophes – in the past, in the present, and in the making. Hence, they are brought to you here under the heading of ruination.*

In 2002, in the midst of one of the most ferocious military campaigns of the Israeli government in the occupied Palestinian territories that went by the offensive name "operation defensive shield," the Israeli poet Aharon Shabtai wrote the following lines (in my free and literal translation):

Hilla Dayan studied at Tel Aviv University, the University of Chicago, and the New School for Social Research, New York, USA, where she earned her Ph.D. in political sociology. Her dissertation *Regimes of Separation, Israel/Palestine and the Shadow of Apartheid* analyzes the hegemonic socio-political order in Israel/Palestine and the evolution of the Israeli occupation since the first intifada. Dayan has lived in Amsterdam since 2003.

My lips mumble: Palestine, do not die! . . .
Our land. A new nativity unravels in Bethlehem
the blood placenta will be thrown into the bucket, and from the womb
there will come to the light the offspring of our people's love, listen carefully
his heart throbs from my heart. I am a Palestinian Jew.[1]

The birth of the Palestinian Jew is thus conceived at the hour of horrific bloodshed. A midwife in the form of Christian imagery performs the delivery of this offspring, who emerges from the dark conflict into the light. And his coming symbolizes the possibility of hope and redemption for both people, most significantly, through the re-birth of the Israeli as a Palestinian Jew. This striking image is as far removed from the story of a national identity, the story of a singular and predetermined identity to which we are born, as it is removed from the realities of Israel/Palestine in the wake of the second intifada. Yet, exactly the huge distance between vision and reality makes the poem, in my view, an inspiring act of critical reflection on the Israeli identity and the conflict. It is comparable to 2000 years of exile from Israeliness in the metaphorical sense.

In her essay *The Erotics of the Occupation*, Yael Berda draws an intimate portrait of the perverse relationship that the Israeli occupation embodies. Berda interrogates the occupation's economy of desire, and in her razor-sharp prose style provides a snapshot of contemporary Israeli culture in its addiction to state of the art technologies of war, violence and domination. Berda depicts a Palestinian-less Arabism boom flourishing in the vibrant urban environment of Tel Aviv as an offshoot of the mainstreaming of Mizrahi culture in Israel [*Mizrah* means Orient in Hebrew]. Her contribution invites a further examination of the Mizrahi identity. Mizrahim, Jews from Arab lands and the Maghreb, who arrived en mass in Israel after its establishment, and their descendents, are the main addressees of the lecture *Reflections on Identity.* In this lecture, the late Dudi Mahleb, an admired Mizrahi intellectual and activist, founding member of the Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow Coalition, explores the critical role identity plays in struggles for justice and freedom, and relates an inspiring personal narrative of a life long commitment to these struggles.

The immediate intellectual context of this contribution was the debate about the relevance of a Mizrahi identity for progressive Left politics in Israel. Mahleb was engaged in dialogue and debate with at least two distinct positions, the position of those who dismiss the relevance of a Mizrahi identity altogether, and the position of his friends and fellow leftie Mizrahi intellectuals. In his progressive Mizrahi milieu, there is an ongoing discussion over an old-new identity category, the Arab-Jew. This identity category was adopted by some, who sought a return to Arab roots that were lost in the process of the socialization of the Mizrahi as Israeli. This impetus of a return to an idealized Arab past was to Mahleb a misguided cause, because it cut the Mizrahi subject off from the only context within which his struggles for justice and freedom are waged, and make

sense, and that is, the identity of the Mizrahi as an Israeli and as a member of the Israeli society.

Anat Rimon-Or takes the bull of the Mizrahi question by its horns in her daring and original analysis of the stereotypical Beitar Yerushalayim soccer fan, typically a Mizrahi man, who shouts racist slurs, and "death to Arabs." Rimon-Or examines the position of the Mizrahi underclass in the dominant discourse as one determined by the colonial encounter with the new (Western) modern Jew, as Zionism construes it. The Mizrahi speech threatens the normal functioning of the social order and discourse. The "death to Arabs" call, she maintains, is in effect a rational speech act, which carves out for the Mizrahi a position of power and visibility, neither in complete agreement with nor in complete defiance of dominant discourse. Rimon-Or pierces through the fundamental hypocrisy of Israeli society: while the verbal violence of the Mizrahi is normally denounced in the name of universal values of human dignity, the actual killing of the Arab is sanctioned as a normative, prestigious even activity, which secures the privileges of the Israeli Ashkenazi elite (Ashkenazim are Jews of European origine).

Contemporary Palestinian identity, argues Ihab Saloul, is experienced as an exilic (in exile, but also defined by exile) identity. Saloul's intricate analysis of the film *1948* by Mohammad Bakri weaves thread-by-thread the multiple ways by which this film conveys a strong political message about contemporary Palestinian identity. The Palestinian exilic identity emerges through unconventional aesthetic strategies, various modes of storytelling, and the performance of remembrance. Saloul shows that the film *1948* does not primarily unveils the catastrophic past so much as it transmits its present. The underlying message is that catastrophe and exile are destined to continue in the future, so long as regimes of denial and dehumanization remain unchallenged. The interview, which concludes this issue with Ghada Zeidan, director of the Dutch organization United Civilians for Peace, provides a concrete illustration of how the personal and the political is intimately tied to the past and to the realities of a Palestinian exile lived in the present. Saloul and Zeidan unravel in different but parallel ways the layered and inextricably linked dimensions of Palestinian exile and identity. Zeidan's account of her experiences resisting the Israeli occupation, her active role in the thriving Palestinian civil society of the 1980s and 1990s, and continuing engagement with the region through her current work, is an eye opener. Her reflections are a lesson in the so often untold and heroic story of the non-violent Palestinian struggle.

In the process of working on this issue I came to realize that the idea developed by Ihab Saloul of identity construction through the constant movement between past and present, and Dudi Mahleb's notion, that identity is a process of interpretation of the conditions imposed by a concrete present in relation to a concrete past, echo one another in a surprising and moving way. This suggests to me an unconscious cultural transmission and an intellectual affinity, the unlikely affinity, under the

historical circumstances, between a Palestinian from a refugee camp in Gaza, whose family is originally from Ashkelon, a coastal town in Israel, and the son of Iraqi Jews, who grew up in the small and poor Mizrahi town Migdal HaEmek in the north of Israel. The seething magma of the political volcano Israel/Palestine often leaves Israelis and Palestinians in a state of despair as for prospects for a sane political horizon that will open up possibilities for a better future. Despite that, there is always hope, that the process of ruination may eventually reach its inevitable limit, and society in Israel/Palestine will find ways of re-instituting itself in a new, less objectionable order. If, as the Palestinian author Ghasan Kanafani wrote in the novella *Return to Haifa* the homeland is the future, then the contributions brought to you here certainly point in the right direction, towards our home and a common future.

Finally, the idea for this issue came about as part of a new initiative called Gate48, a platform established by Israeli women, who live in the Netherlands and are determined to continue voicing an objection to the destructive war and occupation policies of the Israeli government. It aims at helping Israelis organize activities and initiatives in the Netherlands, which advance the causes of justice and peace in the region. The issue comes out in conjuncture with a Gate48 initiative *Witnessed from Within*, a program of critical documentary films from Israel, which are going to be screened by de Balie, Amsterdam, this May. I wish to thank all the individuals and organizations, who aided and contributed to the making of the film program and this issue.

Hilla Dayan
Amsterdam, May 2008

Notes

1 The poem was written on April 11, 2002, the poet's birthday, and was included in a collection of poetry, Aharon Shabtai, *Our Land, Poems 1987-2002*, Hakibbutz Hameuchad publishing house, 2002. For translations to English see Peter Cole, translator, *Love and Other Poems*, The Sheep Meadow Press, 1997 and *J'accuse*, New Directions, 2003.

The erotics of the occupation

Yael Berda

The perverse relationship between Israelis and Palestinians is a depressing B movie that the entire world watches daily. Many actors, spectators, and producers take part in the Mis-en-Scene: soldiers, civilians, international observers, humanitarian organizations, to name a few. Despite the attraction to the action, not many realize that the Israeli occupation is all about the body: sweat, heavy breathing, desire. There are several principles to the erotics of the occupation, such as stripping and searching. The Israeli authorities look for war in your handbag. They ask for your identification papers. They strip and search you with a metal detector, and put you through a screening machine. If they say hello to you, at the entrance to a bus station, for instance, they are just checking your accent. Airport interrogations may take hours and they are all about intimate knowledge. The Israeli authorities want to know who did you come to visit, and where do you work, and where do you sleep, and with whom, and what are you looking for in wherever it is you are going to. National security is obsessed with inspecting, identifying, examining, searching and stripping the body.

Searching and Stripping

The Israeli Ministry of Defense has a unit called the Passages Administration. This is the authority responsible for "fabric of life," and "life" stands for the life of the residents of the occupied Palestinian territories.

Yael Berda studied law at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, and sociology at Tel Aviv University, and is currently a Ph.D. candidate at Princeton University, USA. Berda is a writer, human rights lawyer, and activist. The essay *The Erotics of the Occupation* is published online by the art and culture magazine Ma'arav, see maarav.org.il.

The Passages Administration recently began to import a machine that is going to improve its stripping capacity. The new apparatus produces a three-dimensional hologram picture of the body, and is officially called the Three Dimensional Holographic Body Scanning. Long transmission signals produce a naked image of the body. Safeview, the American company that developed this stripping technology, had to seriously deal with the issue of privacy. Indeed, it is hard to imagine how a naked image produced in real time at the airport or in the mall can be reconciled with the right to privacy Americans so cherish. To avoid constitutional problems, the machines were made to create a hologram image of inorganic parts of a "normal" body. Israel is an enthusiastic client.[1]

The extent to which technology advances erotics is not well appreciated. Something about the sterility of technology goes against this notion. With the Three-Dimensional Holographic Body Scanning, however, the Israeli Passages Administration has found a new sex toy that will help it stimulate the erotics of the occupation. The gallery show of still-life pictures of Palestinians passing checkpoints is going to transform into a giant media installation. Of course, authorities convince most Israelis that they make use of stripping and searching technologies only to enhance their security, rather than to enhance the erotics of the occupation. But the new machine is clearly an erotic device. After all, for the Passages Administration "the fabric of life" has nothing to do with life itself. They are not interested in the life of human beings with aspirations and dreams. Life is, rather, the fabric of the Palestinian body, stripped and frozen into a three-dimensional hologram picture.

The Senses

Arabness or Arabism is booming in Israel. You notice it everywhere on the street. You hear it in the music, you eat it in restaurants, you smoke it with a nargileh [oriental tobacco pipe]. The Israeli Arabism is Palestinian-less, a principle of the erotics of the occupation. Especially since intifada 2000 Tel Aviv rediscovered the humus, the knafe [a sweet desert], and Arabic music. Suddenly there was a craving for the authentic humus and knafe. The more impossible it became to travel to places like Bidia or Bethlehem in the West Bank, the more their tastes became desirable. This is the nature of the asymmetrical affair, the relationship of attraction and revulsion between Israelis and Palestinians. Israelis have to know, to touch and to smell everything that the other has – the land, the coffee, the music – but without knowing the other. They desire the senses and the tastes, without knowing the people and their language, and for Israelis not to know the Arabic language is rather like insisting not to know. It is not a coincidental ignorance, but an active ignorance. Israelis basically know nothing about Palestinians or Palestinian culture, but the other side suffers from ignorance as well: many believe that Israelis live, think, and breath only in uniforms.

Arabism was actually a gradual process, which started in the 1990s. A search for lost Mizrahi roots was in full swing. Popular music bands like Sheva and Hasmakhot made the country a darboukkah [drum] land, and Mizrahi-Arabic music became mainstream. The battalions of post military service India-crazed Israelis have been recruited for the mission. They began celebrating the Orient in hippie festivals, like the Shantipi festival, where ethnic music was played, suddenly becoming part of the hegemonic Israeli culture. For the sake of clarification, this music is not influenced by Arabic music at all, Fairuz or Marcel Khalife, for instance. Only the sound of typical Arabic music instruments, the ud and the daff, is heard everywhere. This cultural transformation came about just as Palestinians became trapped in the occupied territories, and daily interface was completely obstructed. Now, with an official ban on the possibility of knowing, with border patrol jeeps cruising Salame street in Jaffa and Shlomtzion Hamalka street in West Jerusalem, and with a nine-meters-tall separation wall, Arabism flourishes within the 1948 borders. More Arabic coffee is poured in Tel Aviv now that the Palestinians have completely disappeared from its streets.

In New York after 9/11, new Afghan restaurants were all the rage, just like belly dancing classes in the East Village. Every bombing campaign on the Taliban carved cultural spaces of mystery, and generated yet another photo exhibition showing veiled Muslim women. And likewise, for every so-called targeted killing operation of the IDF (Israeli Defense Forces), you could buy more *Hayona Tahinah* from Nablus in Tel Aviv. In 2005, a popular song titled "the middle of the night in the village" hit the radio charts in Israel. The lyrics sung by Harel Moyal, a former border patrol soldier from the settlement Ma'ale Edomim, depict an imaginary place, somewhere between the Palestinian village al-Hader and Beit Jala in the West Bank. He is on duty, listening to the voice of the Muezzin in the mosque, lighting one last cigarette before going on an arrest operation. Moyal sensually pronounces the names of Palestinian villages, and the melody of the Muezzin is incorporated into the music. This song is a simple lesson in Orientalism: the desire for the exotic other and his appropriation. Racism becomes more pronounced the greater the desire for appropriation is. In the delirious colonial encounter, the colonizer wants to separate, enclose and protect himself, yet is attracted to the other through the senses as to entertainment or to a cooking spice. Meanwhile, Tali Fahima, resisting the occupation with her mind and body, is thrown into administrative detention just as authentic Arabic humus joints multiply in Tel Aviv.[2] Israel is like an obsessed lover, who wants to separate forever and by all means from his loved one, but equally desires to wake up each morning beside him, smell his clothes and spray his perfume all over a house that they share.

The Eye

The occupation is experienced visually. Another principle of the erotics of the occupation is the desire cultivated by the eye to witness the occupation and the war. The eye has gotten accustomed to the excitement, to the orange and red flashes on the television screen, to the blood-red smeared headlines of the daily newspapers, to the illustrations and maps of the bombing campaigns that graphically depict the event, the incident, the attack, the war zone. The eye, aided by a dramatic soundtrack announcing the special news edition, cultivates a desire for the aesthetics of violence.

Israel has a film industry, which exports violence and suffering, and benefits the makers and the spectators. It rips awards for the makers, and expands for the spectators the possibilities for witnessing disasters. The subjects of the films, the victim, the terrorist, the refugee, the prisoner or the soldier, are usually figures, who trigger national and international catharsis. Already in 1991 the Israeli filmmaker and critic Jad Neeman observed that the Israeli film industry produces war movies comparable to soft porn movies, and argued that it is difficult to make the distinction between the war movies industry and the war industry itself. It is indeed not easy to establish what gives to what: do wars inspire the images, or images produce wars? Today, the aesthetics of the occupation has become a big industry. Many documentary films on the occupation find a comfortable place on the programs and catalogues of prestigious film festivals all over the world. The industry and its consumers seem to believe that watching documentary films is a political act, and this gives them a sense of relief from responsibility to what they are witnessing.

The war campaign Israel launched in Lebanon in the summer of 2007 signaled a return to the pyrotechnics of a good-old war movie: smoke over Beirut, mass destruction, debris, and scores of anonymous corpses. This was not the skillful and engineered aesthetics of documentary films on the occupation. No beautiful visuals of the separation wall and the checkpoints, these were messy images of a full-blown campaign of doom, Gog and Magog, a nightmare projected on the conscience screens of culture.[3] And we as spectators accept this as part of our normal visual experience of life. The futurist artists in the early twentieth century thought that war was a good thing, a stage in the development of mankind. Mussolini had said that peace is decadence, and that war makes the human being stronger. And we indeed become stronger, more pronouncedly fascist as we experience war on the screen. The image feeds our eyes and souls with erotic violence that we have become addicted to. Without this visual feed we do not exist. If the flames stop burning there is no desire left in our lives. The short answer to the question of what gives to what, images or war, is that although not always and not in every case, usually it is the image that is in the service of violence. The aesthetics of violence make us believe that this is simply how the world is and another world is not possible. If we wish for another world or at least

for the possibility of imagining it, we need to start thinking of inventing a new body, and we must begin with the eye.

Mystery and Uncertainty

In every erotic relationship there is an element of uncertainty: secrets, words whispered in bedrooms, intimate situations, delicate games of closeness and distance. The Israeli authorities specialize in intimate games of intrigue. They create a radical uncertainty as for the present and the future of the relationship, and the uncertainty is a central principle of the erotics of the occupation. To begin with, uncertainty is generated by the law, which is normally boring, because it is public and accessible, and appears in the official books. Like the identity number of your partner, the law is not a very interesting detail. But for Palestinians in the occupied territories the law is determined ad hoc by the military commander of "the area," and is thus mysterious, flexible, changing all the time. It is very difficult to obtain information about it in Hebrew, let alone in Arabic. I once tried, as a human rights lawyer, to get a hold of a new warrant regulating passages in the occupied territories. I called the "fabric of life" office at the Ministry of Defense, and was told that all military orders are kept in public libraries in Israel. Indeed, at the library of Tel Aviv University I found some military orders updated only up to 1994. Criteria for authorizations or bans, procedures for permits or applications, administrative decrees, the protocols of appeal committees of IDF military tribunals are all secret materials. These secrets time and again ignite the passion in this crazy relationship.

Obtaining and maintaining secret information used to be the purview of the General Security Services (Shin Bet). Today they have serious competitors. Secret information is no longer the property of the Israeli intelligence services alone, but is gathered by many mistresses, such as the Israeli police, and specifically its "prohibited from entry" unit. The boring protocols of the Inter-Office Committee for Special Affairs at the Ministry of the Interior also contain juicy secrets. This is a practice of desire. The most trivial information about a person becomes an object of official whispering and yearning.

The Israeli High Court of Justice in its ruling on targeted killings established that the function of secret materials is not to determine the security danger a certain person poses in advance.[4] Supreme Court Judge Aharon Barak wrote in this ruling, that you cannot know and make a decision in advance as to whether the assassination operation is legal or not according to international law. Only in retrospect, after the execution, the court will review secret materials in order to determine that. But the true function of secrets is to sustain the erotics of the occupation. The intimate language whispered in the bedroom of the occupation, includes such terms, as security needs, investigation needs, the defense of sources and methods of action, indications, insinuations, allegations, and saves the

occupation from becoming boring. It sustains an exceptional, out of the ordinary, relationship. Secrets are the aphrodisiac, an addictive love potion. Something has to keep a forty-year-old relationship going.

Polygamy

Poster boards in Jerusalem are filled with tempting calls for Defensive Shield 2 operation in Gaza.[5] The mailboxes of Israeli leftists meanwhile explode with invitations to take part in the celebrations of the fortieth anniversary of the occupation. But, the general feeling is that the occupation is no longer as exciting as it used to be. It is becoming redundant, like a "slight bang on the wings of the airplane" as Dan Halutz famously put it (when he was IDF Chief of Staff), referring to what Israeli air force pilots felt when they dropped a one-ton bomb on a residential building in Gaza. Even the excitement of targeted killings, having gone through the laundromat of the High Court of Justice, is winding down. The assassination operations used to infuse new blood to the dying romance, but now barely get four-and-a-half lines in the newspapers. This is the dry season of academic conferences and human rights reports. When passion is over, when a routine of violence makes everyone yawn, you have to look for excitement somewhere else. And so we look for Iranian Shihab missiles with nuclear heads, and gaze at the Syrian landscape.

Up to now, the relationship was mostly restricted to Gaza and the West Bank, but how much longer can one mess around with this domestic triviality of the Palestinian "fabric of life"? We need new names, new places, new infrared desires. And so the romance is turning into polygamy. Emmanuel Wallerstein conceives international relations as one whole system, which reflects the power of capital to shape the world.[6] Not only capitalism, but erotic violence as well, always seeks bigger, more serious partners. It is likewise in a polygamous relationship with the world. This violence is real, strong, divine, wrath of God violence, not like the checkpoints, and the wall, and bypass roads, and the ban on family unification, and the ritualistic invasions of Jewish settlers to houses in the Muslim quarter of the old city in Jerusalem. The search for a polygamous relationship is not just prompted by boredom, but also by an imperial passion, the passion to expand, to make the arena of conflict bigger and bigger, and the rules of the game more complicated. James Ron compared the repertoires of state violence in Israel and Serbia.[7] Violence deployed in what he calls ghettos tends to be less pernicious than in frontiers, where violence is directed against populations that are not under the direct control of the state. We witnessed this dynamic on the northern frontier in the 2007 Lebanon campaign. Exiting the ghetto of the occupation, Israel unleashed hellish violence against populations not under its control. The erotics of the occupation may go global, or turn into nostalgia. It is likely, in any case, when it reaches its full-blown imperial proportions, to make old objects of desire increasingly irrelevant. As Bertolt Brecht said, "the public is dead,"

and for that matter all publics are dead and irrelevant in this global war. We live in an era of polygamous violence, and there is no telling what is yet to come.

Translated by Hilla Dayan

Notes

1 Safeview is a company, which develops "innovative security technology for full-body security screening," see safeviewinc.com/frontend/index.aspx

2 Tali Fahima, a young Israeli woman, established contacts with Zacaria Zbeidi, head of the Al Aqsa brigade at the Jenin refugee camp, and declared she would be prepared to serve as a human shield to protect him. Fahima served a three-year sentence in the Israeli Jail for her actions.

3 Gog and Magog are a Biblical pair associated with apocalyptic prophecy, and are also mentioned in the Quran as Yajooj (Gog) and Majooj (Magog).

4 HCJ 765/02, Public Committee against Torture in Israel and Law v. Government of Israel (2002).

5 Defensive Shield was a large-scale IDF operation to re-occupy major Palestinian cities, which took place between March and May 2002. During this massive military campaign 497 Palestinians were killed and 1447 were wounded according to UN statistics.

6 Wallerstain, Immanuel. *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction*. Duke University Press, 2004.

7 James Ron, *Frontiers and Ghettos: State Violence in Serbia and Israel*, University of California Press, 2003.

Reflections on identity

David (Dudi) Mahleb

The debate on identity is warped and slippery. Although this topic seems to have been totally exhausted I find myself time and again at its starting point. It is my conviction that identity is a primary condition for personal and social change and for political struggles generally speaking. This applies of course to the case of the Mizrahi identity in Israel, which has preoccupied me over the years. My concern in the following is what lies between the personal aspect of identity and the collective aspect of identity, and I shall pay particular attention to the dialectical relationship between these two poles.

The debate on Mizrahi identity as it enfolded in this conference has had various emotional and intellectual undertones. Sami Michael [famous author in Israel] had said something along the following lines. He said that he does not want to deal with identity, and that he is only interested in dealing with injustice. Others have also expressed their exasperation, that they are tired of debating identity. I don't think what they meant was that they heard too many lectures on Mizrahi identity. These kinds of responses to the topic rather reflect the difficulty to pin it down. The frustration with the question of identity is a frustration with the difficulty to endow the concept with substantive content, especially in the Mizrahi case. I would like to stress, however, that our need to come to grips with identity is not an option, not a matter of choice. As I see it, identity is a founding experience that defines what it means to be human. Identity is characteristically about freedom. As it is played out, identity gives us the freedom to interpret all human situations, and through this process of interpretation it is itself defined and shaped, being vested with meaning that

David (Dudi) Mahleb was an admired intellectual, teacher and activist, founding member of the Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow Coalition [Hakeshet Hademocratit Hamizrahit]. The lecture *Reflections On Identity,* became after his untimely death in 2006 a token of his oral legacy. Mahleb gave this lecture at the conference "Mizrahi Points ofView on the Israeli Society and Culture" held at the Van Leer Jerusalem Institute in 1999. An article by him was published in Guy Abutbul, Lev Greenberg, Pnina Mutzaphi-Haler (eds.) Mizrahi Voices, Masada publications, 2005 [In Hebrew]. This adaptation is based on the text of the lecture posted on the blog Haokets.org.

provides further justification for its existence. I cannot absolve myself from dealing with the question of identity for I cannot simply take a distance from questions raised by the search for personal and social meaning and freedom.

The very definition of identity holds a key for liberation from oppression. This reminds me of something that the poet Aharon Shabati once said to his daughter, when she told him she has no interest in the political: "you may not have interest in the political," he replied, "but the political is interested in you." This is my response to Sami Michael and to those who are tired of dealing with the question of identity. Identity is a primary and concrete expression of our personal and political freedom, since through its assumptions we are able to interpret our daily experiences. Socio historical research examines the ways by which subjugated nations and social groups struggle to liberate themselves. Identities have been central: they provided the foundation for just struggles.

I am deeply aware of, and fear, of course, the underside: obsessive over-determination of national identity. Some dimensions of identity building can lead to nationalistic, over-essentialist ideas, and sometimes also to fundamentalization. But I personally did not exhaust all the complex dimensions of this problem, and did not figure out all the places that a definition of identity may lead to. The point is that in any case I cannot dismiss it. I cannot simply expel this problem from my consciousness so to speak, because the question of identity is part of the reality that surrounds me, as it is deeply ingrained in me.

Identity must be qualified by the notion that it is not an end in itself, but rather serves core moral values, such as freedom, justice, and equality. The basic human loyalty is to values, and identity is the place from which a realization of human values becomes possible. The process of establishing core values in turn is in and of itself an interpretive and identitarian activity. To give a concrete example, my political home, the place where I started thinking about questions of identity was when I joined a group of Jewish and Arab students at the Hebrew University Jerusalem. To be sure, the question of the Mizrahi identity was on my mind from the moment I became mindful. When I attended high school in my hometown Migdal HaEmek I saw for the first time the Black Panthers on stage [the Mizrahi protest movement active in the 1970s]. The Black Panthers left a deep imprint on my consciousness. They were heroes. But when I began my political activity at the Hebrew University I did it first of all out of commitment to certain values, not as a Mizrahi. From a very young age I aligned myself with the so-called "forces of peace" or "forces of liberation," but it was with this Arab-Jewish group (and I am very nostalgic about this kind of partnership, which seems to be lost) that my Mizrahi identity sharpened. I belonged to the Israeli left and the left is Ashkenazi, and so the question of my Mizrahi identity started bothering me.

I believe we construct our identity as we go along interpreting our reality, in light of an image we have of the future, and of the kind of values

we wish to embody. When I define my identity as a proletarian to use the Marxist terminology, I define it by contrasting it to the other in terms of class. This is precisely the moment in which the struggle against injustice begins, when values come into the picture. A struggle for social and political change is not possible, in short, without defining the conditions for it and defining the identity of those who struggle and those they struggle against. In its essence, the Mizrahi experience in Israel clearly points at the inextricable link between identity and a struggle for changing the conditions of a specific group vis-à-vis the other.

And still, identity is not a given, but an acquired notion. It is shaped through a dialectical process. It is not part of existence, but a construction of human existence. It is understandable why Mizrahim have rejected the dominant "development theories" dating back to the 1950s. These theories fixed the Mizrahi as essentially an inferior and sub-modern subject, who the state must educate and elevate to an adequate level of human progress. The Mizrahi rebellion against such definitions, as they were conceived and implemented by the education system early on, was a protest against the repression of a human being, who is never a fixed entity, but ever dynamic and evolving. It is not enough to say that this was simply an expression of racism. The main point is that it was an attempt by the state to rob the Mizrahim of their freedom, the most fundamental human quality. The Mizrahi identity was not shaped outside this particular historical, political, economic and cultural experience.

Sometimes when I talk about Mizrahi identity I come across the following argument: "I do not need to flag any concrete identity, Mizrahi or otherwise, because I have an individual identity." An attempt to ponder the nature of this claim reveals its basic assumption, which is that the "I" exists as an ideal entity not only beyond identity, but also through constructing single-handedly a world of its own. Yet, clearly, no individual is capable of determining the realities within which he or she exists. We live within given contexts. Identity can therefore be thought of as shaped between two poles. One pole refers to the past, including all the relevant historical, geographic, social and cultural coordinates of an individual. The other pole is the future. This pole symbolizes the possibility of the imagination. It opens up a space of possibilities. The future is about choice, in contradistinction to the pole of the past, which pulls us towards the circumstances that are already given and transmitted to us from the past. The pole of the past imposes itself on me, but my subjugation to it is not purely passive, since I am always also capable of revisiting my past, interpreting it and reconstructing it. The shaping of identity is therefore a dialectical process that is essentially the dynamic relationship between the dimension of the past and the dimension of the future.

The Mizrahi identity is shaped within the particular Israeli context and is in permanent danger of becoming a neurotic identity. Frantz Fanon spoke of the neurosis of the black man, who is trapped inside his own skin.[1] There are two contradictory ways by which this type of neurosis

manifests itself. First, through adopting a total Mizrahi identity, which is enclosed and sealed, not open to any competing definitions. Second, and by contrast, through delegitimization of those who call themselves Mizrahim, and through the instinctive adoption of a pre-made Israeli identity, which requires an active suppression and negation of everything Mizrahi. As I now speak and interpret these two Mizrahi responses to the question of identity, I liberate myself from both in the most intimate sense, but also in terms of a collective Mizrahi liberation.

Sociologically speaking, the Mizrahi identity has elements of disability, because it has been deprived of its past, and has been subjected to the histories of others. My knowledge of my own history, the history of Mizrahi Jews, is not what one can find in the nine pages out of 400 of the Israeli school textbook "The History of the People of Israel in the Modern Era." This gap in the textbook reflects the huge gap in our personality. My friend, professor Yossi Yona refers to it as "a perverse existence," or in other words not a full existence. History is not merely a series of events, but the way these events are narrated, and the nature of our personal relationship to these narratives. Once the Mizrahi is robbed of history, he or she is robbed of freedom. This insight was the main ideological motivations for me to take part in establishing the first schools in Israel that have set the Mizrahi agenda and history on the curriculum – Kedma.[2] Identity is shaped through a dialectical process, which is also a reflective practice. This practice of reflection, on our past and on our future, makes an identity dynamic, and negates objectification. In other words, it negates the transformation of a human being into a static object of history.

In conclusion, I would like to touch upon two of the main characteristics of the Mizrahi identity, first, the fact that its land of origin is Israel. The Mizrahi identity is a blue-and-white product. When Sami Michael told his story I found another evidence to this assertion. When Sami arrived to Israel he was asked whether he was Iranian, and he said no, I am Iraqi. He was then asked whether he is Mizrahi, but the East as far as he is concerned is Russia, so he answers again that he is Iraqi. Ah! so you are Sefaradi than! . . . In the hegemonic Zionist narrative it is as if all Moroccan, Iraqi, Tunisian, Egyptian Jews got together to conspire: "lets become Mizrahim!" Of course this is false, but what is important to understand is that people have indeed become enmeshed as Mizrahim as a result of the nation-state building process. In the State of Israel they came to share certain socio-economic characteristics, which were also suffused with cultural commonalities.

Another quality of the Mizrahi identity in Israel is what I call the "sandwich mentality." I refer here to the class and cultural location of the Mizrahi in between the Ashkenazi and the Arab population. The Ashkenazi is my other and so is the Arab. The Arab is the other of the Ashkenazi from both the national and the cultural perspective, but for me he is only other in one respect, that of national identity. The Mizrahi identity has Arab ingredients. These are very dear to me, really bursting in song inside of me.

As the son of Iraqi Jews, I am infatuated with the Arabic language, which I love as intimately as a passionate lover. But unfortunately, I am a product of the Israeli education system and do not speak Arabic fluently. I am therefore deprived of the possibility of dipping in and experiencing in a full and meaningful way the ocean of Arabic culture and civilization. I love many kinds of music, but there is no music that clings to the roots of my soul like the Arabic music. I am emphasizing this to make a critical point about the new idea of the Arab Jew identity of Mizrahim in Israel. Despite all I have just said, I am not an Arab Jew but the son of Arab Jews. I am Israeli, born in Israel, fiercely critical of Israeliness, but Israeli nonetheless. The concept of Arab Jew that in certain circles of the Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow Coalition came to replace the problematic Mizrahi identity is as far as I am concerned a wrong depiction of our reality.[3] I cannot define myself as an Arab Jew since I exist and act within the national sphere of the State of Israel. Being critical of nationalism does not mean that you belong to a space located somewhere else, outside this normative space. We will not be liberated from this space by calling ourselves Arab Jews, but only through struggling to change its rules from our vantage point. And in this spirit, I would like to propose that for the time being we keep the Arab Jewish identity as a possibility for the future, as an option that is an imaginary horizon for us all.

Translated by Hilla Dayan

Notes

1 Mahleb probably refers here to Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*, Grove Press, 1967.

2 Kedma schools were established in poor neighborhoods and development towns in the mid 1990s. This initiative of parents, educators and social justice activists aimed at providing an alternative to public and technical schools, from which Mizrahi pupils dropped out in high rates. The Israeli educational system oriented Mizrahi pupils from low socio-economic background to study low skill professions. Kedma schools offered an alternative. They were humanities oriented and had the goal of significantly improving the level of education of pupils so that they could reach high achievements in their final exams and graduate. The only active Kedma school to date is in Jerusalem. For more information see kedma-school.org.il.

3 On the concept of the Arab Jew see Shenhav, Yehuda. *The Arab Jews, A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion, and Ethnicity*, Stanford University Press, 2006.

ARTICLE

Al-Nakba and the Palestinian identity

An analysis of Mohammad Bakri's film 1948[1]

Ihab Saloul

We became an intoxicated people who go to sleep and wake up in the love of their homeland. Oh. . . you, my body that is torn into two halves; a living one and another that lived, and the living half is left for pain and suffering.

A Palestinian melody (Mawaal)

The Palestinian melody quoted above is sung at weddings and other festive occasions. It resonates beyond the boundaries set by history and geography with its emphatic sighing for the lost homeland, "oh . . .," and it is a testimony for a remembrance, which reclaims the experience of another time and another place. The loss of the homeland agonizes the soul and splits the body into two halves. One half exists in a loved but dead past and the other lives in a tormented present. The personal remembrance of events and experiences from the past liberates stories about pain and suffering from both official histories, and from institutionalized regimes of denial. The distance in space and time between the remembered past and the subject remembering in the present is a metaphor for the more unsettling distance between the subject and him or herself. This distance from one's self is typically the way Palestinians remember *al-nakba*, the 1948 catastrophe.

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This dynamic of remembrance is at work in *1948*, a documentary film made by Mohammad Bakri. My analysis of the film examines its various modes of storytelling, and processes of Palestinian identity construction through performance and performativity.[2] I use the term performativity as in Judith Butler, who examines the way identity is discursively constituted through the repetition of certain speech acts and cultural practices. Identity, she argues, is constituted by and through the very expressions that are said to be its results. The storytelling of *al-nakba* in the film *1948* unfolds through the performance of remembrance. The modes and strategies of remembrance in the film are tied to a particular cultural setting, and reflect a specific conception of political heritage and cultural memory. Performance should be understood not only as what happens in a theatrical setting. It is also a device, used for what Mieke Bal calls "focalization."[3] Everyday stories about the experience of the Palestinian exile from the historical homeland are focalized, that is, perceived and conveyed through performative narrativity by particular subjects.

Exposing the Betrayal of Time

The original storyteller of the film is the late Emile Habibi (1921-1996) to whom the film is dedicated. Habibi was one of the most accomplished Palestinian intellectuals. A writer and a politician who served as a member of the Israeli Parliament for nineteen years, Habibi's writing style combines activism, politics, fine letters, history and storytelling, weaving thread by thread the rich fabric of the identity of the Palestinian minority in Israel. Bakri incorporates in the film footage from his stage performance of Habibi's satirical novel, *al-Mutasha'il: al-waq'I al-ghariba fi ikhtifaa' Said abi al-nahs al-Mutasha'il,* The Secret Life of Saeed: The Ill-Fated Pessoptimist.[4] What is remarkable about *1948* as a film is that it relates the story of *al-nakba* through this tragic-comic theater play, which was performed in Arabic and Hebrew to packed audiences over a number of years. Bakri plays the main character in the novel, Saeed Abu al-Nahs, the unfortunate fool who after 1948 becomes a citizen of Israel.

The story of Saeed, the pessoptimist, is first presented as a folk tale. In the opening shot of the film, as we see images of Palestinian families from the *al-nakba* period, Saeed on the theater stage recounts:

> *Every folk tale begins: "once upon a time, long time ago . . ." Shall I tell the story, or go to sleep? I am Saeed Abu al-Nahs, the pessoptimist [al-mutasha'il], ID card no. 2222222. I was born during the days of the British. In other words, my father and Churchill were very close friends. But [when] Papa knew that Churchill did not intend to stay here [in Palestine] very long, he befriended Yaakove Safsarchik. Before he died, Papa told me: " If life is bad, Saeed, Safsarchik will fix things up". So he fixed me up.*

There are many contradictions conveyed by Saeed, his character and story. Already the Arabic meaning of his name is a contradiction in terms. The name conjoins happiness "Saeed" and misfortune "Nahs." Saeed identifies himself through this name and the number of his identity card. We see archival footage of Ben Gurion and his wife on the occasion of the transfer of power from the British mandatory forces to the Zionist movement in Palestine. This scene ends with the British flag being lowered, and the Israeli flag being hoisted on the same pole. The man representing the Zionist establishment, "Yaakove Safsarchik," a name deriving from the Hebrew word "safsar," a peddler, has betrayed Saeed by fixing him up with the insignificant identity number. The number 2222222 in its senseless repetition alludes to the second-class status of the Palestinian minority in Israel.

As this story is recounted, the archival footage from the *al-nakba* period is shown, but it does not provide any concrete information about the historical event or the impact it had on Palestinians. The film constantly shifts back and forth between the stage performance (in the present) and the archival fragments. In the following scene, the viewer is drawn back to the stage performance. The moment the flag of Israel is hoisted on a pole Saeed's voice returns:

> *My life in Israel began with a miracle. During the incidents . . . of 1947 I traveled to Acre with my father, by donkey. That is our national Mercedes. When we reached the railroad tracks, boom! We heard shots. Papa was hit and killed. I got off the donkey and hid behind it. The donkey was shot dead and I was saved. I owe my life in Israel to a donkey.*

Saeed refers to *al-nakba* as "the incidents… of 1947." For Saeed *al-nakba* is not so much a singular event or the mythical 1948, but rather a series of fragmented incidents taking place at different moments in time. Saeed's personal catastrophe, the death of his father, happens while on a journey taken in 1947. This suggests that there are personal nakbas, many variations of the event, which cannot be limited to an official date and cannot be reduced to the symbolic act of hoisting a flag on a pole. This may seem like a minor point, but it is relevant to the dynamic of cultural enactments of traumatic events. The collective date for the commemoration of *al-nakba* is vaguely May 15, 1948, the day the State of Israel was founded. But this, of course, is a very problematic date, subservient to the Zionist timeline and narrative. Saeed's performance therefore not only repudiates the singularity and coherence of the catastrophic event, but virtually reflects the way various Palestinian sub-collectives commemorate *al-nakba* at different points in time. Palestinian refugees, for instance, have different dates for commemoration, depending on the specific day in which they experienced the fall of their village or town. The catastrophe does not have any official, singular, Palestinian date.

While the archival footage represents *al-nakba* as the historical moment of the transfer of power in Palestine to the Zionists, on stage, Saeed

attributes his existence and survival in the State of Israel to a miracle. Normally, a miracle signifies an event that is inexplicable by the laws of nature, the result of a supernatural act that generates wonder. In Saeed's case the miracle of surviving *al-nakba* and living in Israel is ironically attributed to a donkey. Saeed attributes his survival to the intervention of an insignificant power, and thus re-enacts his inferior position in the state. His existence is as significant as his savior, the donkey.

The miracle of Saeed's existence thanks to the donkey generates not wonder, but amusement. The tragicomic composition of the film is such that humor is employed, but it is not always accompanied by the affirming laughter of the audience of the stage performance. We hear the audience laughing when Saeed describes the donkey as a national Mercedes, but not when he describes the donkey as his savior. Bakri conveys this way both humor and the impossibility of humor, which is part of the Palestinian identity. Like the figure of Saeed Abu al-Nahs himself, the viewer is constantly caught up in an impossible situation. When confronted with impossible laughter, the viewer is perplexed. Freud, for example, believed that laughter and jokes are "fundamentally cathartic: a release, not a stimulant." Henri Bergson maintained a different notion, that "laughter is, above all, a corrective, and a means of correction."[5] Beyond its effect of relaxation and amusement, laughter, according to Bergson, carries with it a need to correct a missed situation. The impossible laughter in *1948* is corrective in the Bergsonian sense. Laughter is no longer a signifier of humor, and does not provide a cathartic release. The absence of the sound of laughter in the film rather generates a sense of alienation, which is disturbing and triggers reflection. As a result of the impossibility of laughter, the viewer is confronted with the fact that one is dealing here with a serious affair.

At the moment Saeed utters "I owe my life to a donkey" the title of the film "1948" pops up on the screen in the shape of a burning flame, and archive images of the war are again shown. This connects Saeed's narrative, through the impossibility of laughter, to the seriousness of the historical event. The viewer of 1948 is constantly teased into laughter, only to realize that laughter is a shield, behind which lurks a tragedy. What is enacted in the film is not the event itself, but the subjective experience of Palestinians. This approach lures the viewers into the very historicity of *al-nakba* by putting them in the position of the exilic subject. As viewers, confronted with the impossibility of our laughter, we experience the same alienation from ourselves as Saeed the pessoptimist experiences it. This mode of narrative produces what Inge Boer calls "ontological vertigo," the affect created when the distinction between the real and the imaginative or the subjective is constantly blurred.[6] The viewer then becomes conscious not only of what was and is no more, but also of what is, and lives on. 1948 does not primarily aim at unveiling the catastrophic past for the viewer, but rather at transmitting to the viewer its immediacy and ongoing present.

Saeed's reference to *al-nakba* as a folktale is telling in this respect. It implies the inevitability of narrativization. More than half a century after the historical event, *al-nakba* has become a story. But the film itself warns against turning the catastrophe into something as irrelevant and a-temporal as a fable. The struggle waged in the film *1948* is rather to prevent the political history of the Palestinian exile from becoming a fable or an irrelevant myth. Saeed's performance, especially the progression of the theater play through several repetitive acts, conveys the story of *al-nakba* decidedly not as a folktale, but as a contemporary story about the Palestinian identity. It is contemporary in that it concerns the "becoming" of a Palestinian subject. It is a story, in other words, about a desire of becoming that had gone wrong in the past, and must find its cure in the present.

Catastrophe and Exile in the Present

Bakri interviewed several Palestinian individuals, whose testimonies are featured in the film. Story after story unfold, interrupted periodically by his performance on stage. The stories in the film are arranged in a temporal sequence that takes the viewer on a long journey covering the period between 1948 and 1998. The dominant themes in all the stories are the loss of the homeland, and the trauma of massacre and expulsion. The story of Deir Yassin, where irregular Jewish militias committed a massacre in April 1948 is one of the central events recounted in the film.[7] As the archival images of the war fade away, the camera zooms on an elderly woman, who is shown crying. She is Um Saleh from Deir Yassin. Together with her grandson, she stands on a hill overlooking a house where the flag of Israel is hanging. Looking at the house she tells:

> *I kept calling . . . Oh papa, until my head was spinning. There was no sound, no response. They were deaf and couldn't hear me. One of the tiles of the floor answered me: "Go, light of my life. Destiny is thy bridegroom and absence will be long."*

There is a theatrical feel in the way Um Saleh recounts the loss of thirty members of her family in the Deir Yassin massacre. The flag of Israel hanging in the background is a concrete emblem of her dispossession. Um Saleh tells Bakri:

> *This child [her grandson] starts pampering me when he sees me crying . . . Thirty of my relatives fell in Deir Yassin. Thirty people! My grandfather . . . was the Mukhtar [head of the village]. When he saw them killing his children, he slapped a Jew who was saying: "We are not slaughtering you. The British are." We Arabs, masters of our fate, became subservient to the Jews. After the injustice of Deir Yassin 400 villages were erased. Had ten people come to our aid Deir Yassin would have been saved.*

The personal experience of Um Saleh is historical and political as it is personal. Um Saleh performs an inter-generational transmission of the narrative of the catastrophe. Her grandson inherits her grief with his emphatic identification. The story also expresses an enduring state of loss. Um Saleh's conception of *al-nakba* like Saeed's is focalized: the catastrophe is the specific loss of her home and her family in the Deir Yassin massacre. She also conveys a longing for solidarity that was absent in the past ("I kept calling," "they were deaf"), and a tormented experience of exile in the present. Her figure invites an interpretation of the absence of, and absence from home as a total, lived experience that grips the individual at all times. The presence of the grandson in the scene makes the connection between the past and the present tangible. His presence not only symbolizes the traumatic repetition of the event through the cultural transmission of oral history, but also conveys the gap between Um Saleh's actual experience of a personal catastrophe, and her act of telling. The grandmother and the grandchild both take part in the story, assuming mutual roles: the grandmother tells and cries, and the grandson responds with empathy and agreement. Through Um Saleh we experience the intensity of the expulsion from home – geographical, historical, and personal – as it is on going.

Another personal narrative is the story of the poet Taha Mohammad Ali. Taha tells Bakri about his village Saffuriya:

> *Saffuriya is a mysterious symbol. My longing for it is not a yearning for stone and paths alone, but for a mysterious blend of feeling, relatives, people, animals, birds, brooks, stories and deeds… When I visit Saffuriya I become excited and burst out crying, but when I think about Saffuriya the picture that forms in my mind is virtually imaginary, mysterious, hard to explain . . .*

Taha's longing for what has been lost is nostalgic, but it does not represent a desire to return to an idealized past: "my longing is not a yearning for stone," he says. For Taha, what was lost is not just stones, the metonymy of a home, but a whole way of life: the country, the people, and their entire existence. The visit to the site of the loss, the village Saffuriya, evokes an emotional flux and brings him to tears. But Taha also has a "mysterious picture" in his mind. Taha's cultural identification and belonging is grounded in the way in which he interiorized the past as a mental picture. He transforms the materiality of the lost home into something inexplicable, something, which is "hard to explain." The failure to articulate the mental picture may suggest that the collective tragedy of loss is too overwhelming to have a concrete expression. Yet, through the inexplicability of the mental image, Taha communicates his absolute and intimate belonging to the lost place. His longing is not a matter of "have and have not" in the material sense. Rather, belongingness is an enigma, like an exotic and unnamable scent. The Palestinian right of return is thus construed as a right to a whole way of life, not just as a material claim on places and properties. Indeed, later on, when Bakri asks Taha whether in

an imaginary scenario he would accept compensations and return to his lost village, Taha answers: "No. Who told you I want to return to Saffuriya? Saffuriya is a symbol for me."

The modes of storytelling in the film constantly shift from the subjective to the historical and back. This is a movement, which suggests a process of becoming, of identity formation. Cultural memory and identity are constituted through the inter-temporality of memory. The process of becoming, in other words, is an interaction between the memory of an individual subject and the cultural memory of a collective. The movement in and out of personal narratives told in the film through such figures as Um Saleh and Taha Mohammad Ali suggests that cultural construction of memory and identity of Palestinian subjects takes place in the context of their present experience of exile, or of their exilic subjectivity. The Palestinian identity in *1948* is a topographical position well captured by the proverb "there is no travel without a return."

1948 weaves together different visions and voices that play off against each other without ever reconciling. The film, for instance, makes a point about the fact that the Palestinian subject and the Israeli Jewish other are each answerable to each other. This answerability emerges from the shift from the realm of Palestinian testimony to the theatrical scene where self and other are brought not into opposition, but into dialogue. Saeed Abu al-Nahs enters the theater stage as if from afar to complete his story towards the end of the film:

> *I swear, when this great misfortune befell us in 1948 my family was scattered throughout Arab countries . . . When my father and the donkey were shot dead . . . I set sail to Acre by sea; the great sea, whose foamy waves are like mountains. Its shores are bullets and treachery, filled with refugee boats to the end of the horizon. The sea is great and treacherous and our cousins too, including infants, are drowning, drowning.*

Al-nakba here becomes the "great misfortune" of 1948. This, as we recall, is in contrast to Saeed's earlier account, in which the catastrophe is remembered as "the incidents of 1947." Now, the larger historical and collective event is at stake: the scattering of a people in exile. Saeed assumes a responsibility for telling the meta-narrative of exile. He describes the "great and treacherous" sea. In the sea both the exiled victims and their perpetrators perish. Palestinians and their Israeli Jewish "cousins" are drowning together in the sea of conflict. They share a catastrophic past and a catastrophic destiny. This particular presentation of *al-nakba* undermines the hegemonic narratives about 1948 of both Jewish Israelis and Palestinians. The film appeals to the audience to acknowledge the catastrophe of the conflict and its catastrophic future. What animates this appeal is not the well-known disagreement between Israelis and Palestinians about what had happened in 1948, but the sense that the catastrophe is shared and is destined to continue in the future.

Self, Other and Exile

In another scene we meet Abu Adel, who leads Bakri to the place where his lost village Dawaima once stood. There, the two wander around in the ruins, and they come across a Jewish house where they meet a man and his son. The son is carrying a gun on his waist. Bakri confronts the father, a resident of the Jewish village Zecharia: "are you comfortable living in a house that was once not yours?" he asks, and the father hesitatingly answers: "what can I say, yes or no?" Speechless, he is unable to answer the question. Bakri presses on: "that means you understand the pain of a person who . . ." and before the sentence is complete the father replies, "I understand it very well." Then the son interferes:

> *Son: I was born here and this is my place. I don't look back at whoever was here before me. Nothing. This land was given to the Jews thousands of years ago and it is ours. Father: We were also hurt when they threw us out of our homes in Iraq. They did not use force to throw us out and they did not say: "get out of here!" I know that the State of Israel made a deal with the Iraqis and got us out of there. So we came here.*

While the son denies the Palestinian story, the father echoes it with his story of exile, but both in the end do not relinquish the Zionist claim that the land was given to the Jews in ancient times and therefore Palestinians have no right to it. Both take the normative position of the Israeli Jew who neither acknowledges the injustice done to Palestinians, nor takes responsibility for it. They are simply there, living on the ruins of the Palestinian village "whether we're comfortable with it or not."

The normative figure of the Israeli Jewish other, the denier of the *1948* catastrophe, poses a challenge to the Palestinian subject. If they are there, in the homeland, where is the Palestinian subject located, and what is his relation to these others? To answer this question, the film resorts once again to the theatrical performance. On stage, with a metal plate on his head like a soldier's helmet, hiding behind the broomstick as a defensive shield, and with his hand pointing an imaginary gun, Saeed performs both self and other. Speaking Arabic with an Israeli accent, he yells: "where did you come from? Tell me or I'll shoot you!" Changing both his accent and posture, he then comes out from behind the broomstick as Saeed. Saeed tells the theater audience how the Israeli soldier held a gun to his head in front of his father. Bakri, changing back and forth from the soldier to Saeed's father performs the following violent and humiliating encounter:

> *Soldier: where are you from? Father: from Birwa, sir. Soldier: are you going back to Birwa? Father: yes, sir, please, sir . . . Soldier: didn't I order you not to return? Animals! You respect no law? Go on! Get out of here!*

The soldier treats Saeed and his father as uncivilized animals. In Saeed's fable of the sea, we recall, the victim and the perpetrator have a

mutual destiny. In this sequence, however, this mutuality is erased by the soldier's command: "get out of here!" This is a crucial scene because it ultimately conveys the underlining realities of power relations in the conflict.

The narrative of *al-nakba* in *1948* points at a dynamic reciprocity between the past and the present and between self and other in the process of the construction of a Palestinian identity. Exile in the present is the motivating force behind the retelling of the past. The film never resolves the inevitable tension between its aesthetic representation of the catastrophe, and its political message about the continuation of the catastrophe. The aesthetic representation, however, allows Bakri to reflect on the political massage, while conveying it over and over again through a plurality of storytellers and modes of storytelling. This allows the audience and the viewers of *1948* to see the parts as well as the whole of a great personal and collective trauma. What is most salient in *1948* is its polyphonic richness, which urges us to recognize the embodiment of *al-nakba* in the contemporary Palestinian identity and exile. As such, the film is an expression of a struggle for justice, emancipation, identity and survival, and a struggle against the intentional denial of human suffering.

Notes

1 *1948*, Director: Mohammad Bakri, Camera: Nedal Hassan, Editor: Eleen Hana – Zananiri, Sound: Mark George Mine, Songs preformed: Yaffa Mohammad Bakri. Palestine-Israel, 1998, Documentary, 54 minutes, Color, Beta.

2 Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge, 1990; and *Bodies that Matter: On the Discoursive Limits of 'Sex,'* Routledge, 1993.

3 Bal, Mieke. *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. University of Toronto Press, 1997: 142-160.

4 Habibi, Emile. *Al-Mutasha'il: al-waq 'i al-ghariba fi ikhtifaa' Said abi al-nahs al-Mutasha'il*. Haifa, Maktaba'a al-Itihad al-Ta'aquniyya, 1974. The play has an English translation, see *The Secret Life of Saeed: The Ill-Fated Pessoptimist*. Salma Khadra Jayyusi and Trevor Le Gassic (trans.), Zed books, 1982.

5 Freud is quoted in Merchant. M. *Comedy*. Methuen, 1972: 9; and see also Taha, Ibrahim. *The Palestinian Novel: A Communication Study*. Routledge Curzon, 2002: 56. On Henri Bergson's notion of laughter, see Bergson, H. *Laughter*. Doubleday Anchor Books, 1956: 185.

6 Inge Boer depicts "ontological vertigo" as the effect created when truth claims are made while the imaginary is at work. See Boer, Inge. *Disorienting Vision: Rereading Stereotypes in French Orientalist Texts and Images*, Rodopi, 2004: 91.

7 On Dier Yassin and its political impact on the Palestinians see Kanaana, Sharif and Zitawi, Nihad. "Deir Yassin," *Monograph No. 4, Destroyed Palestinian Villages Documentation Project*, 1987. Birzeit: Documentation Center of Birzeit University, 55. And see Morris, Benny. "The Historiography of Deir Yassin," *Journal of Israeli History* 24 (1), 2005: 79-107.

"Death to Arabs" versus the death of the Arab

The Modern Jew, the Mizrahi and the Arab in Him

Anat Rimon-Or

The call "death to Arabs" [mavet la'aravim] tends to provoke condemnation in Israel. This call is associated with a public from a low socio-economic background, and affiliated with the political Right. The death call and racist swearing is usually identified as an indecent Mizrahi speech. Yet, I argue, these speech acts enable the Mizrahi subject to maintain a distinct position in the dominant Zionist discourse. To be sure, the manner in which the Mizrahi subject participates in the Zionist discourse always reveals his radical otherness in relation to it. But my contention is that the call "death to Arabs" can be alternatively interpreted as a battle for coherent speech. It is a way of occupying a central position in discourse, a problematic position, but a powerful and visible one nonetheless.

In the following I focus on a group of fans of the soccer club Beitar Yerushalaim (Beitar). It is a distinct group, almost entirely made of so-called traditional Mizrahi men, followers of right-wing political parties. They regularly attract the attention of the Israeli media, more than any other group of soccer fans. The call "death to Arabs" is their trademark, an essential component of their identity. Media representations of this

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group depict a typical Beitar fan: a Mizrahi hooligan, who is threatening and ridiculous at the same time. Someone, whose actions and speech are incoherent and irrational.

The Mizrahi identity came to the fore after the political upheaval of 1977 when the Likud party headed by Menachem Begin, and supported by a large Mizrahi constituency, ousted the Labor party that has dominated Israeli politics up to that point. Especially from this historical turning point onwards the Mizrahi identity is perceived as threatening, but the nature of the Mizrahi threat remains allusive. What is nevertheless apparent is that the Mizrahi subject is threatening at the moment he appears in public and speaks. The very public appearance of the Mizrahi is already threatening the normal functioning of dominant discourse. When the Mizrahi takes a public stage normal communication is interrupted. The Mizrahi speech has no meaning beyond being perceived as an undefined threat. Beitar fans in a similar way represent a disturbance or a danger to the social order. Before I get to the analysis of their position in discourse, I examine first the emergence of the Mizrahi disturbance in the broader context of the rise to power of the Israeli political Right.

The Swearing Mizrahi

In an article titled "Few against the Multitude" Nurit Gertz depicts the verbal violence, which accompanied the election campaign of Menachem Begin in 1981.[1] She argues that verbal violence was intentionally employed by Begin to attract Mizrahi voters to the Likud party. Gertz claims that Begin, famous for his fiery public square speeches, gave his Mizrahi audience, "the multitude," an identity it otherwise lacked or failed to acquire under the hegemony of the Labor movement:

> *For years the labor movement constituted the "we" of this country, and these people in the public square were without a body. They came in mass immigration waves after the establishment of the state, and did not fit into the national identity or construct their own identity. Begin knows the level of bitterness that they have accumulated. He turns to these people and provides them a framework they could integrate into. He endows them with a singular plural body. (editor's translation).*

According to Gertz the verbal violence Begin used against the Labor establishment created the "singular plural body" of the Mizrahim, namely, established their particular identity and political agency as a group. The threatening tones and the atmosphere of incitement evoked in Begin's speeches, she further maintains, reflect a sharp escalation in propensity to violence of the Israeli society at large.

Note, that in this analysis the Mizrahi subject is entirely absent. What we have instead is an anonymous disembodied multitude: a mass having neither a body nor an identity. The Mizrahim are merely reflections in

the mirror of the political Right, having failed to acquire a clear identity before 1977. Gertz laments the rise to power of the Likud on the Mizrahi ticket, revealing a commonly shared concern among the Israeli elite over the fate of old Ashkenazi Israel in the wake of the political upheaval. The Mizrahi subject is absent, but not before he is construed as disturbing what was once a coherent and decent political discourse and cultural system of signification. The threatening reflection of the multitude in the mirror of the political Right is the specter that must be exorcised in order to return to a normative social order. The Mizrahi is at the same time a problematic and violent element of society, and a reflection of the violence of the society as a whole. The assumption is that this violence is a temporary deviance, which is a direct consequence of the Mizrahi disturbance.

The Colonial Encounter

The construction of the Mizrahi identity as a disturbance to the hegemonic order shares some characteristics with the colonial encounter as Homi K. Bhabha famously depicted it.[2] The colonial encounter is a disturbing encounter for the colonizer. The disruption of order is a consequence of contradictory tendencies. The colonizer must preserve difference from those, which he identifies as defective, inferior or partial. Yet, the colonizer must also attempt to erase difference in order to sustain his desire to continue to exist within the cultural framework of such values as the universal equality and identity among all human beings. The colonial encounter thus brings to light the contradictions in the colonizer's system of belief. The ensuing result of the encounter is a failure of discourse, a failure to instruct, to signify, to point at. According to Bhabha, the colonizer does not respond directly to the other, the subject who is generating a disruption, but rather to the emotional discomfort the other generates in him. And so, the threat to dominant discourse is not the other per se, but the awareness he raises of the colonizer's impossible contradictions, and to the potential collapse of dominant discourse.

This account on the colonial encounter is relevant to the way Zionist ideology conceives the identity of the new, modern Jew. The modern Jew was from the outset a Western identity, which first had to differentiate itself from the Arab, to erase his presence in the historical homeland, and to overcome it by erasing its traces. The Mizrahi other, by contrast, was supposed to be somehow subordinated to the rules of dominant discourse. However, the Mizrahi other cannot get rid of his otherness even as he attempts to follow rules that are not determined by him. The Mizrahi otherness is time and again reaffirmed by speech acts that confirm his inferiority, the sign of radical otherness. The radical otherness of the Mizrahi is, nevertheless, kept undefined and unnamed, because it can potentially collapse the identity of the modern Jew altogether. This potential collapse itself, not the other per se, is threatening. The Mizrahi other constantly threatens to implode the dominant Zionist discourse from within. The

modern Jew still entertains a contradictory desire, as in Bhabha, to make the Mizrahi other a normative speaker like him (and so validate the rules that privilege his own position in discourse). However, to incorporate the Mizrahi into the dominant discourse involves the risk of dismantling his own identity. The colonizer, in other words, wants to differentiate from the other and remain universal at the same time. The Mizrahi other, in turn, can never act naturally, that is, without creating a disturbance. By his very intention to enter discourse he already undermines the naturalness and transparence of normative, dominant discourse.

The position of the Mizrahi subject vis-à-vis the modern Jew brings to mind Pier Bourdieu's analysis of the position of the petit-bourgeois in French society, a society overdetermined by class. According to Bourdieu, the petit-bourgeois is trapped in a dilemma of over-identification, anxiety and negativity in his relation to the upper class. Any rebellion against its rules and tastes is an admission of failure.[3] And in the Israeli context as well, the Mizrahi subject is not adopting a rebellious position against the rules, yet neither is he fully conforming to them. By calling "death to Arabs," for instance, the Mizrahi subject draws attention to an explicit and expressed desire to kill the Arab in him, a desire, which is simultaneously an expression of over-identification with and mimicry of the modern Jew, and an expression of otherness. I next consider the dynamic of otherness these speech acts convey by analyzing media representations of Beitar fans.

The Handful [*Hakomets*]

By the end of the 1990s a "handful of hooligans," Beitar fans, assume a position similar to that of the swearing Mizrahi of the late 1970s. In 1999 a Beitar fan called "David Arak" is profiled in the media.[4] The real name of the "fanatic fan" is David Shmueli and his nickname originates from his addiction to alcohol (Arak is a cheap alcoholic drink associated with Mizrahi men). The reporter asks David Arak about taking part in acts of vandalism:

> *Q: During the riot in Petach Tikva did you also run with a water tube chasing the referees and the players?*
> *A: let me tell you where I was. I was working in a flower shop making deliveries. It was a cup match played in the middle of the week…*
> *Q: when the gate in Bloomfield [soccer stadium in Tel Aviv] was torched, were you there?*
> *A: no, that happened before the game in Petach Tikva.*
> *Q: when the seats in Bloomfield were vandalized, did you take part in it?*
> *A: no, I was in jail at the time . . . but I was around when they smashed a rival team's bus at YMCA [the old Beitar soccer stadium in Jerusalem] . . . 'Know what, I am very unlucky. I'm never there where the big riot is. I want to be, but it doesn't happen.*

Shmueli is "unlucky," each time he misses the bi riot. But regardless of that, he is positioned in the interview as the metonymy of the handful. From the time when the concept of a "handful of hooligans" first emerged in the 1980s, the phenomenon has been a complete mystery. No one knows who and how many are the handful. The handful in this profile, which attempts to give the phenomenon a human face, is someone, who actually claims he did not take part in acts of vandalism. And yet Shmueli still represents the handful whatever and wherever it is at any given moment. The handful disappears (Shmueli "missing in action") just as an attempt is made to give it a concrete expression. This fundamental allusiveness, does not undermine the assumption about the existence of the handful, and the position of Shmueli as a representative:

Q: do you belong to the handful?
A: sure
Q: how many are they?
A: ten thousand

Shmueli is not an incidental choice. When asked to speak on behalf of the allusive handful, he speaks for ten thousand of Beitar fans. He is an eloquent speaker, who shifts in between several positions he is occupying. Born to a poor Mizrahi family, he was adopted by a well off family from the rich Jerusalem neighborhood of Talbia. Shmueli lives in a luxury apartment he inherited from his parents, but works as a delivery boy for a grocery store and as a cleaner, drifting in between the parallel worlds of the Israeli upper class and working class. Shmueli does not take part in big riots. But the riot he creates in this profile is the failure to assign a stable and coherent meaning to his appearance as a public figure. Shmueli knows that he belongs to the handful and he knows that the handful is rioting, but neither he nor the reporter can point at the events, or at the presence of and at the part that the rioting subject – Shmueli – plays in the events. This unstable and undetermined position is the context in which the call "death to Arabs" appears.

In principle, the actual expulsion and killing of the Arab (symbolic, tactic, or pragmatic) is a rewarding activity, which opens up possibilities for mobility within Israeli society. Significantly, the symbolic expulsion of the Arab in normative discourse is not sufficient if it is not accompanied by the erasure of the traces of this expulsion. A normative speech act, for instance, is not supposed to leave any trace of the erased Arab, or of the Arab presence as that which is undergoing a processes of erasure. In the dominant Zionist discourse, the modern Jew is always the victim of the Arab, reborn time and again by overcoming the threat to his existence. This existential struggle is sometimes accompanied by a struggle with consciousness (individual or national) about what is actually being done to the Arab. But, generally speaking, the Arab subject does not exist in the Zionist story, neither in the story of overcoming an existential threat, nor in the story of an inner struggle with consciousness.

The call "death to Arabs" breaks this structure, bringing the fundamental rules of discourse unto the surface. Normally, the ability to obey the rules of dominant discourse depends on a more basic understanding, that rules are not made explicit. Zionist discourse sanctions the killing of the Arab. Yet, when a call to kill the Arab is made out in the open it produces a dissonance, a disturbance for the normative speaker, the modern Jew who kills but does not call for it. The call "death to Arabs" is not made in opposition to what is sanctioned by dominant discourse, nor is it a form of agreement with it. The emotional discomfort arises from the fact that it is neither here nor there but in and between the poles of opposition and agreement. The very disturbance that the Mizrahi generates with this call propels him nonetheless to the center of public attention, and precludes the option of simply ignoring what he has to say. The point is that racist swearing and the "death to Arabs" call are not an expression of a process of radicalization of certain ideological positions, but of an existential struggle to continue to occupy this visible and central place in discourse.

The [Palestinian Israeli] journalist Ali Waked shared his impressions from a match he attended between Beitar, the host, and the Arab team Hapoel Taibe. The match was held few days after a deadly bombing attack in Tel Aviv, which was planned in response to the government decision to build the illegal settlement Har Homa in the occupied territories. Waked recounts:

> *The entrance [of Hapoel Taibe soccer team] to the stadium was accompanied of course by a very loud boo sound, a perfectly legitimate boo. After the booing, "Mohammad is dead", and then he is dead, he is a fucking fagot, and they shout "Bibi, Bibi" and "Haide Bibi, build Har Homa, Har Homa. Har Homa," and at the end "death to Arabs" . . . 55 minutes into the game and a handful of 6000 revolting supporters of Beitar do not stop the death to Arabs call. I was waiting in vain for the loudspeakers to deliver a warning. The loudspeaker operator is a representative of the group, and the group is complaining that it is being singled out due to a handful of fans . . .*[5]

The fact that "death to Arabs," "Mohammad is a fagot," "Har Homa," and "Haida Bibi" are calls made at the soccer stadium, directed specifically against a rival team, is unsettling. But, the fact that the construction of the illegal settlement Har Homa is actually causing real damage is not. Needless to say, the actual construction of the settlement is, unlike the "death to Arabs" call, a normative act in the Israeli context.

It is interesting to note, moreover, that expressions of racist swear speech in Israeli soccer stadiums do not have only a single object, the Arab. For instance, in another interview, two Beitar fans claim their right to call names, make obscene sounds, and use the appropriate body language against a black soccer player:

This voice [uh-uh-uh-uh, imitating a monkey] is not going to stop. It's going to become the symbol of Beitar from now on, in all soccer fields. Q: how did it all start? It started in the first game this season against Maccabi Tel Aviv and spread to other soccer fields, and I hope that all the fields will not stop it. No one can restrain our tongue. Q: do you have anything personal against the black player? No, I don't know him, he is a very good player, very dangerous. One pass to him and there is a goal and that is it. But every human being has a right to open his mouth. We are not racist. It is our right to make these voices. He is a great player, so if I manage to drive him crazy by doing this, then I am a great fan![6]

Here, the goal of racist booing is clearly expressed as a desire to weaken the opponent from the rival team and drive him crazy. The meaning that the fans attribute to their action is strictly the desire to win games. Most striking is the sentence that keeps appearing throughout the interview in different variations: "nobody can restrain our tongue." The fans lay out in detail what they are referring to: "not the police, not the border patrol, not the Israeli soccer association, not the management of the team, not even the Prime Minister, yours and ours, can restrain our tongue." This is an expression of defiance directed against the authorities, and against the rules of normative speech in no ambiguous terms. At some point in the interview, it appears that the specific soccer player the fans wish to drive crazy has little to do with this defiant stance. Ali Waked himself reports that not only Mohammad was offended as a fagot in the game he attended, but so was the mother of Itzik Zohar, a star player of Beiter. I am of course not arguing that there is no racism or hatred of Arabs, but that the object towards whom hate speech is directed is not a fixed one, and is probably more hybrid than what is commonly thought.

In the case of the Mizrahi subject, racist speech aims at making explicit the un-said. That is, the normative and routine racism of Israeli society, which sustains both the actual violence against Arabs as well as the systematic marginalization of the Mizrahi himself. Those who denounce the "death to Arabs" call are usually modern Jews speaking in the name of universal norms and values. Yet, their "clean" speech ironically reveals the way dominant Israeli culture is reproduced: on the back of the Arab, and through his real and symbolic erasure and death. The symbolic destruction and the real destruction of the Arab is not part of the story. The real story is that of the conflict between Mizrahi and Ashkenazi Jews, whose focus is the verbal violence of the Mizrahim. The verbal violence of the Mizrahim is denounced, while in practice killing the Arab is a prestigious activity, reserved for those serving in the elite units of the Israeli Defense Force, normally Ashkenazim.

I have alternatively interpreted the "death to Arabs" call as a speech act disturbing a discourse, which stifles this truth. The call, finally, effectively constitutes a rational speech. It is rational in the sense that while the Mizrahi subject deliberately assumes a position of an irrational speaker,

his speech act positions him in an undefined place in discourse, which produces a disturbance that precludes his silencing. He is, in other words, positioning himself in a location, where his tongue cannot be restrained. The Mizrahi subject assumes this way a position of power, which is threatening as much as it is undermining the naturalness and transparence of the dominant Zionist discourse.

Translated by Hilla Dayan

Notes

1 Gertz, Nurit. "A few against the Multitude, the Rhetoric and Structure of Menachem Begin's speeches" [in Hebrew] *Siman Kri-a* 16-17, 1983: 106-114.

2 Bhabah, Homi K. "Articulating the Archaic: Notes on Colonial Nonsense." In Peter Collier and Helga Geyer-Ryan (eds.) *Literary Theory Today*, Cornell University Press, 1990: 203-218. And "Of Mimicry and Man: the Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse" in *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, 1994: 85-92.

3 Bourdieu, Pier. *Distinction, A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, Harvard University Press, 1984.

4 Ayalon, Giora. "No one can stop us," Ydiot Achronot, Friday's sports section, March 12, 1999.

5 Waked, Ali. *Ha-ir*, March 1997.

6 Porat, Tomer. "Jungle Fever," *Ha-ir*, December 3, 1993.

Political exile from a land with a sea

Ghada Zeidan

Ghada Zeidan was born a year before the occupation to a Christian Palestinian family in Beit Jala, a town near Bethlehem, Palestine. She studied English literature at Birzeit University, was active in the Palestinian women's movement and worked for Palestinian civil society and human rights organizations. In the Netherlands she is the director of United Civilians for Peace, a joint initiative of the organizations ICCO, OXFAM-Novib, IKV Pax Christi and Cordaid for a just and peaceful resolution of the Israeli Palestinian conflict on the basis of international law. Interview by Hilla Dayan, March 26, 2008.

Q: tell us about your background and how you came to the Netherlands.

GZ: I left Palestine in 2001 seven months into the second intifada. When I arrived here I knew immediately that I cannot but keep up my work on Palestine in the Netherlands. Like every Palestinian I eat, breath and live politics, it is part of my identity. I studied at Birzeit University in the period known as the "golden years," when Birzeit was the symbol of our national identity and the epicenter of the resistance to the occupation. The national movement was very strong at the time, and the Islamic movement hardly existed. Identity was interwoven with resistance to the occupation and steadfastness (sumud), and Birzeit was the castle of resistance. I completed my studies between 1983 and 1989, and it took me so long simply because of the regular closure imposed by Israeli authorities on the University. This policy of closure was implemented well before the first intifada broke out.

Q: your political consciousness was shaped then in Birzeit during the 1980s?

GZ: Well before. I come from a politically conscious family. My parents were teachers. My father especially was always politically involved, and that had an impact on all of us. Political mobilization in Palestine started very early on. As for the grassroots movement, its roots go back to the end of the 1970s with the emergence of the voluntary work movement.

Civil society in Palestine was vivid and creative. Voluntary work was considered an act of resistance to the occupation, and every act of voluntary organization, no matter how mundane, was therefore punished by the Israeli authorities. My first act of resistance was when I was a high school student in Beit Jala. We organized to help farmers with olive and watermelon picking in Jericho. These kinds of community initiatives were an attempt by the Palestinian society to keep itself together under the harsh circumstances of the brutality of the occupation. When there is no state to take care of you, you must rely on yourself and learn how to organize and mobilize. Here in the Netherlands and in the West in general Palestinian resistance is reduced to stone throwing or the attacks against civilians in Israel. There is absolutely no understanding of the everydayness and grassroots aspects of Palestinian resistance. Resistence and steadfastness are the art of the day in Palestine. Our literature and culture is also a form of resistance.

Q: what do milestones such as 1948 and 1967 mean to you? Do these dates have a personal meaning?

GZ: I often hear people talk about the conflict with detachment, referring to these historical dates, or analyzing them as historical events. For me these milestones are very personal, in the spirit of the famous feminist saying: the personal is political. My family is not a refugee family. However, my town Beit Jala absorbed 1948 refugees from two villages, al-Walageh and al-Malha. People who came from these two villages ended up in Beit Jala with nothing. They were hosted, given a place, became our neighbors. My father tells the story of how his family provided food for the refugees and how they became friends and how they as children played together. In essence this is what shapes our Palestinian identity regardless of religion or background.

Q: and then 1967, the occupation…

GZ: I don't know my country other than as a country under occupation. For me historical Palestine is an ideal country as it emerges from all the stories that I hear from my grandparents, and my parents. I feel Haifa and Jaffa in me as much as I feel Beit Jala. The other day, I was looking with my daughter at the book "Before the Diaspora," which depicts pre 1948 Palestine illustrated by photos, and there you see normal people and normal daily life. We looked at the photos of Akka (Akko) and Haifa, and my daughter was very upset and angry: She told me, "I don't know Palestine as a land with a sea and here in all the photos you see the sea." It touched me deeply because my Palestine is the one with the sea. My parents always took us to the towns on the coast. Before 1991 when Palestinians still enjoyed a relative freedom of movement we went to the beach, and because of my political consciousness, and my keen interest in Palestine, I

went many times to Jaffa and Akka, so I have had the exposure to Palestine as a land with a sea, which my daughter is deprived of.

Q: we started the interview going back to the roots of civil society organization in Palestine. We tend to think that civil society arrived in Palestine only after the Oslo agreements in the 1990s, with the entry of big international organizations, the donors' money, the NGOs boom, and not many people know that there was anything going on before that. How has the Palestinian civil society evolved since, and can you tell us particularly about your experience with the women's movement?

GZ: Palestine has one of the strongest, most vibrant and indigenous civil society movements in the world, which has been built up throughout its history of resistance, and historically catered to the needs of people in the absence of statehood. It was very connected to what was going on "on the ground." The first political group that was at the forefront of community organization was the communist party that began organizing voluntary initiatives around 1978-1979. When you are in Palestine you are in the midst of it all. Your contribution has direct relevance to the lives of people. During my work with various NGOs in Palestine we helped people to remain steadfast on their land, helped them in their sumud [the Palestinian term for steadfastness through holding on to the land, identity and way of life]. When the Palestinian civil society movement further developed throughout the 1980s and 1990s you had organizations that dealt with human rights and women's rights and I was very much involved in this development.

Palestinian women have been for a very long time very actively involved in the national struggle and within political parties and totally committed to the national cause, but in the midst of their political activism they neglected their own agenda. Even leftist parties were not ready to adopt the dual agenda. Thus their commitment to women's issue remained superficial, and bound by the urgency of the national agenda. But half way through the first intifada (which was characterized by a total grassroots mobilization of everyone; women, children, basically everybody) particularly by 1990, as the political process began to be set in motion through the Madrid conference, women felt that it was now high time to stand firm for their agenda. There was still resistance from their male counterparts. But, by the end of the first intifada, with already signs of the growing popularity of the Islamic movement, things began to change. At that point the intifada was crushed by Israel, people did not see what had been gained by all the sacrifices made. The first group of society that had to deal with the impact and the implication of the harsh repression of the intifada, and as a result of it with the rise of the Islamists were women's organizations. It was then that the women's movement started establishing itself as a separate movement from the nationalist movement, having its own agenda.

Q: at the time you were working towards building the future civil society of a would-be Palestinian state, no?

GZ: True, the period just before Oslo, if you put aside for a moment how the Madrid conference came about in terms of power relations and the unbalanced positioning of the parties, the Madrid era was a point at which Palestinians were still hopeful that a political process would bring about justice. In Ramallah we handed olive branches and flowers to Israeli soldiers in tanks as tokens of peace on the eve of the Madrid conference. People wanted to move on, we craved a sense of normality in our lives. That was by far the aspiration of the majority of the people, a consensus about the need to start a political process towards an agreement that would bring justice and peace. This was before major concessions on what we call in the national movement "the red line" were squeezed out of the leadership of the Palestinian Authority in Oslo. Before Oslo, there was still a consensus that no matter what, there are red lines for an agreement with Israel. There are basic justice demands that need to be satisfied. The international community often does not seem to understand that only this is the basis for a durable settlement. The equation is simple: only a national consensus shared across the board by Palestinians, and an agreement on the contours for a just solution acceptable by the majority of Palestinians can bring a durable and sustainable peace in our region.

Q: The bitter internal divisions between Palestinians attract a lot of attention, but not too much is known about the many ways by which the occupation actively splinters Palestinian society, and undermines national unity. How do you see indeed the future of Palestinian society and civil society in particular in this respect?

GZ: the future is very grim. I am not optimistic, but it has less to do with reaching an agreement about the red lines vis-à-vis Israel, and more with the lack of alternatives. In my opinion we have probably passed the stage of maintaining Palestinian unity. Palestinians have been left out in the cold for too long and have been let down too many times by the international community at large. The international community has never been able to put pressure on Israel to live up to its obligations as an occupying power, whereas the Palestinians have been always perceived as the aggressors. The occupier is perceived as the victim and the occupied as the aggressor. Palestinians have lost trust in the international community and that puts them in a situation in which they have to take things into their hands. And under the current circumstances they have few alternatives! We have Fatah, which is dragged by the Israelis and the Americans to play the political game according to their terms, and Hamas who poses as an alternative, and whether you can reconcile between these two is a very big question. Meanwhile, the fact is that the political left in Palestine

is completely impotent. That for me seems to indicate the real problem: there is no alternative to either Hamas or Fatah, no third way. As I see it, what happened during the Oslo years was the opposite of what you have described, and that is, a once strong and thriving Palestinian secular civil society was hard hit by the conditions created under the Oslo agreement to the extent that it is now entirely unable to translate its civil work into political gains, and to take a leading role in Palestinian politics.

Q: I see parallels here with processes that the Israeli civil society underwent during the Oslo years. After the first intifada there was a civil society boom, with NGOs becoming more established and more professionalized. Israeli civil society also developed a culture of legal challenges to the state. Unfortunately, with some notable success stories such as the campaign against torture, we know that the resort to the law consistently shores up the occupation. This, and not coincidentally perhaps, goes hand in hand with a sharp decline of the Israeli Left, an extinguished political breed, especially since intifada 2000.

GZ: I agree with you. In the case of the Palestinian civil society, the international organizations in the West also participated in spoiling it. They came with their agendas and their priorities to professionalize! And what they did was to create a gap between these organizations and the grassroots. So now we have highly competent professionals who analyze the situation, who monitor, come up with nice brochures, engage in theoretical discussions on the position of the Palestinian woman and the farmer and have no impact on the ground whatsoever, neither providing services nor serving as vehicles for political mobilization. If gender was the topic dictated from abroad, then all the organizations had to work on gender. And so gender issues were not dealt with on the basis of indigenous experience. The secular movement in Palestine is going nowhere because it took a turn too far in this direction.

Q: what is your experience working as a Palestinian in the professional environment of Dutch civil society, and as a Palestinian in the Netherlands generally speaking?

GZ: Linking professionalism with activism seems to be a curse to most professionals here. I deal with this problem day in and day out. Here, professionalism and activism can't be reconciled. That is maybe because the Dutch society has the luxury of not having to be an activist-oriented society. It is a different frame of reference than that of someone with my background. For me, being an activist is part of your identity, and I don't see why a person cannot be professional, analytical and an activist at the same time. But here people see the overlap between the professional, the academic, and the activist as a drawback.

As for being a Palestinian in the Netherlands, it is like walking with a question mark hanging above you all the time. You always have the fee-

ling that you have to explain something. If you are asked where do you come from, you can't simply say Palestine. There is a lot of ignorance. You see the question mark in the eyes of the person before you: where is Palestine? Many times when I said I am from Palestine people asked me if I mean Pakistan, really! So I usually say, "do you know where Israel is?" Oh yes! eyes lit, "so that is where Palestine is."

As a child of fifteen I had my first European exposure to the issue of my identity during a trip to Germany. In 1982 I was selected to join an exchange program in which youth from more than 60 countries all over the world participated, representing "Palestine / Jordan." They took us on a tour to a concentration camp. I am sitting in the bus, a child, having just learned about the holocaust at school. And the German guide singled me out of the whole group and said: if you don't want to come with us on the tour you can stay on the bus." It took me a couple of moments to absorb what he was suggesting! I was enraged. The underlying assumption is that as a Palestinian I wouldn't want to be confronted with the suffering of the Jews during the holocaust. But I am not responsible for the holocaust! This incident is inscribed in my memory, and keeps coming back to me. I keep asking myself did he want to save me the confrontation or to save himself the embarrassment . . . these are my first memories of being a Palestinian in a Western European country. If today I say that I am Palestinian to my neighbor on the street, I immediately have a feeling that I have to say with the same breath "I am a Palestinian and I am against terrorist acts."

Q: and the assumption is that you have to be impartial and objective about what is going on there?

GZ: Yes, you always have to maintain an assumption of objectivity. You and I, we do not talk about the conflict, we embody it. For instance in the professional context, we have a different standing and an interest that goes beyond just doing professional work. I take my work home not because I am workaholic, but simply because my work is part of me. This is a real challenge. The environment determines what an objective position is, and so basically everyone is biased, especially with respect to this conflict. What helps me to maintain my sanity is to try to live up to my principles not only as a Palestinian but as a human being as well. I always try to get this message across. I am doing this work as a person with principles defined by the framework of human rights, basic human dignity.

Q: last question, do you feel that you live here in the Netherlands as a political exile?

GZ: this is a very personal question. As I said earlier, I left Palestine for the sake of my children. The circumstances were horrible, my town was bombarded by Israel every night, my children could not go to school, it was not safe to go on the street, it was war, and we were caught under fire several times when I was pregnant. I made a conscious decision to

leave with my children, simply because I had the possibility to do so. But I do personally feel in exile. If it was up to me to make a choice only for myself I would be in Palestine tomorrow. The reason why I do this work with UCP is to reconcile with myself for leaving.

Q: You actually speak here of a twofold exile, the exile from the sea, the coast of today's Israel, and exile from your country of origin and place of birth.

GZ: I was born into this state of exception and abnormality. The tragedy is that there are no prospects for sovereignty and normal identity in sight over there. It is as if you are in a permanent state of exile from your own being, your national being and your cultural and personal identity. The exile from the sea is a metaphor for the exile from the possibility of living a full life of a normal and free human being in a country that is your homeland.

Interviewed by Hilla Dayan

eutopia

Editor in Chief: Farhad Golyardi

Eutopia is an international platform for politics, culture and art devoted in particular to stimulating the input of migrant-intellectuals in national debates. The many scholars, artists and writers who have recently migrated to Europe and made it their new home are looking to express and articulate their views and concerns in an atmosphere of liberty and free speech. Their voices are essential when it comes to enriching political and cultural debates with original and provocative views – not just on migration, diversity, globalization and cultural identity, but also on the underlying international political, technological and cultural changes.

Eutopia offers a platform for intellectuals and artists in diaspora. There is a need for such a platform in the Netherlands because Dutch universities, political organizations, media and cultural institutions are still very much nationally oriented. As a result, the work, ideas and international significance of leading migrant artists and intellectuals are still little known in Western Europe.

Eutopia seeks to situate national and European debates in a broader perspective, as a counterbalance for a more narrow national approach to worldwide developments. Since 2002 **Eutopia** has tried to accomplish these goals through the publication of **Eutopia** *Magazine*; through organizing debates, public lectures, conferences and cultural events; and via international networking efforts among migrant-intellectuals and consultancy for cultural institutions.

Eutopia is geared in particular – but not exclusively – towards dialog between North and South, as well as between Europe and the Islamic world. In addition, **Eutopia** aims to foster a concern for identity and intellectual development among young (migrant) individuals and to raise the quality of their input in Dutch debates on social, cultural and political issues.

Eutopia concentrates on three core activities:

Eutopia Magazine: an international window on politics, culture and art. This glossy Dutch-language paperback appears three times a year as a special issue with essays, interviews, reviews and photography.

Eutopia Live: lectures and workshops by and with artists and intellectuals in diaspora; events and discussions about popular culture, film, literature and music.

Eutopia Academy: international exchange, conferences, networking and consultancy for cultural institutions.

Eutopia's history and objectives

Eutopia, based in Amsterdam, was set up in 2002 by the sociologists Farhad Golyardi and Shervin Nekuee. Both **Eutopia** *Magazine*, of which so far twelve issues have appeared, and the **Eutopia** Live lectures and seminars have meanwhile found a niche of their own in Dutch cultural life. These activities are realized in collaboration with a great variety of local and nationwide institutions.

In general, **Eutopia** pursues closer collaboration with universities, governmental agencies and cultural institutions and foundations. Moreover, in the past few years, **Eutopia** has set up an extensive international network of scholars, authors, thinkers and artists in diaspora, many of whom are refugees. They provide major contributions to global intercultural dialogs and the formulation of new views about the dynamic of culture, identity and politics.

Eutopia aspires to develop into a more comprehensive interdisciplinary platform or institute that both nationally and internationally stimulates intercultural dialog in the areas of politics, science, culture and art. As such it fully follows in the prominent Dutch cultural tradition of politics and religious tolerance, which has spawned great thinkers such as Spinoza and Erasmus.

Eutopia is committed to promoting the debate on multicultural affairs in the Netherlands from a European and international perspective.

Eutopia focuses in many ways on cultural dialogue between Europe and the Islamic world.

What is the position of the Netherlands with respect to other European and immigration countries? Which social or cultural developments elsewhere have particular relevance for the Netherlands as an evolving multicultural society?

Eutopia activities are supported by Stichting Democratie en Media

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