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# **“Dressed in olive branches and cracked happiness”**

Palestinian identity in Susan Abulhawa and Nathalie Handal

**Relatore**

Ch. Prof. Shaul Bassi

**Correlatore**

Ch. Prof. Simone Sibilio

**Laureanda**

Lisa Altomani

Matricola 859089

**Anno Accademico**

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# Introduction

In the whole Arab world 1948 is the date of the disaster, the *nakba*, which marks the creation of the State of Israel and the climax of political failures. Although much has been written and discussed about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, literature provides insights into the human dimension that historical or sociological studies may not yield. Since that watershed date, Palestinian-ness has developed according to unique political and social changes prompted by the Israeli occupation, but in contemporary society the Palestinian cause has become emblematic of the international migrations, internal conflicts, diasporic existences and refugee camps.

This thesis takes a critical look at the ways Palestinian identities are represented in the works of Susan Abulhawa and Nathalie Handal, paying particular attention to the role of history and exile, traditional themes of Palestinian-ness that found new interpretations in contemporary writings.

The first chapter intends to shed light on Arab culture and literature in order to provide an insight into the scenario that produced the formation of Palestinian identity. Before the Zionist intervention, Palestinian political awareness was not fully developed but it entertained strong connections with Arab-ness; while in the aftermath of the *nakba* a solid collective sense of belonging started to grow among Palestinians scattered in the neighbouring Arab countries or abroad. Indeed, during the British mandate the lack of a cohesive society favoured, among other factors, Zionist policies of occupation. Thus, while the other Arab countries were striving against the Western occupation for political independence, which led to the strengthening of nationalist movements, Palestinians had to oppose the British as well as the Zionist movement. The initial alliance between the London's government and the Jewish settlers cut out Palestinians from relevant positions in the state affairs and it contributed to the delay in the creation of a national consciousness. Only after 1948 Palestinians recognised themselves in the condition of uncertainty and bitterness, translated into peculiar tropes that soon became exhausted cliché of Palestinian-ness. The past, embodied by olive trees and orange blossoms, was glorified into an unchanging benevolent landscape and into the fixed images of the farmer and the fighter that bolstered Palestinian identity. Indeed, extremist Zionist

policies envisaged the erasure of Palestinians, to corroborate the claim that “Palestine was a land without a people for a people without a land”. Thus, sticking to a mythic past became the main tool to fight Israeli attempts to deny nationalist narratives, but in the long run, it turned out to be an obstacle to the development of Palestinian-ness. The first to acknowledge the need to move forward from the nostalgic tones of Palestinian idyllic past was the celebrated poet Mahmud Darwish. He was given the title of the voice of Palestinian people and his verses were considered the embodiment of resistance; however, Darwish’s poetry was highly praised not only by Arab speaking countries, since the relevance of his verses was reflected in the international interest that he aroused. Darwish’s influence never faded since he broke away from the path of tradition and created a Palestinian discourse outside the limits of history and antagonism towards Israelis: he acknowledged the importance of placing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict into a broader historical perspective, characterised by migrations and by the creation of new societies after the encounters of different populations. Moreover, Darwish comprehended that Palestine could not be reduced to the loss of the land, the nationalist struggle would benefit from the disruption of monolithic assumptions of the past.

In the second chapter Abulhawa’s *Mornings in Jenin* is taken into account as a testimony of Palestinian-ness during the recent years of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Although narrations of Palestine abound, their reception in the West and particularly in the US was often complex and influenced by previous narrations. The Palestinian critic Edward Said often fought against the compromised representations of his countrymen in the binary terms of pitiful victims or cruel terrorists. According to him, Palestinians needed to make themselves available to the Western audience in order to deconstruct the myths that were imposed upon them. Abulhawa understood the importance of providing an Arab-oriented counternarrative to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as well as to stereotypical representations of Muslims. *Mornings in Jenin* provides a successful insight into Palestinian consciousness for Westerners, since its sensuous writing and the emotional identification with the main characters cannot leave the readers unperturbed. Abulhawa craftily infuses her novel with Western modernity and Palestinian-ness, dealing with the main themes of the glorified past, the longing for the motherland and especially the difficult developing of identities in the diasporic context. The historic aspect cannot be separated from the personal stories, History is a lumbering presence

which does not overshadow the fictional plot, but whose need to be heard is epitomised by the bibliographical section at the end of the novel and by the quotations from real news reports and foreign observers' commentaries. Through a four-generation family saga, Abulhawa attempts to recreate a family history that would hold together Palestine. Amal, the main character, tries to find wholeness in her hyphenated-selves by switching from an identity to another until she perceives that for Palestinians completeness is an illusion. However, the unexpected encounter with her lost brother who has become an Israeli, creates a space where motherly love blurs the antagonising positions of the self and the Other. In the climatic escalation at the end of the novel, the process of negotiating with identities transcends politics and allows an identification with the Israeli soldier who is pointing a gun at Amal. Thus, the political tension is released by a radical act of love which does not weaken Palestinian resistance but provides the other characters with the strength to negotiate their traumatised identities. Abulhawa infuses *Mornings in Jenin* with women's endurance, broken romances and touching human encounters to whom everyone can relate to.

The third chapter analyses Nathalie Handal's collection of poetry *The Lives of Rain* as a testament of multicultural solidarity that stems from Palestinian endurance after decades of sufferings but where different experiences of dispossession and exile converge. Her unique point of view as Palestinian-American who has lived in many countries and who is fluent in several languages, provides fruitful insights into Palestinian discourses. Moreover, the condition of non-Western woman places Handal in a double liminality, ethnic as well as gendered. Born in Haiti, the poet moved from Latin America, to Paris, London, US, but her Palestinian origins always played a significant role in her life. Handal managed to find harmonic coexistence with the contradictions aroused by her multicultural identity which includes different religions and languages. Having moved across borders for almost all of her life, Handal acknowledged the extent to which demarcations and languages have been used to separate people and to create hierarchies. Indeed, the poet's literary activism is intended to tear down those borders and to unveil the humanity that lays underneath ideological constructions. Handal's language demythologises the Western male logos that tended to silence women as well as subalterns, by creating a harmonic coexistence of different languages that refuse to be translated. The contradictions of divergent cultures and religions prompt an identity

crisis reflected in the language, but the homeland speaks to poet, telling her that all conflicts are resolved by accepting all the declinations of her identity. Palestinian-ness is a condition of in-betweenness, often expressed by doors half open or entering new rooms; yet, writing is the only place where incompleteness is resolved, poetry becomes Handal's homeland. Thanks to poetry, the burden of diasporic identities is mediated by the prospect of "impossible equations", of harmonic coexistences. Exile is intrinsically bounded to the homeland as well as family: "Mapping the ruins of this country and family is like trying to gather particles after a detonation" declared Handal (2017a). While digging into her grandfather's memories and into her father's Arabic, the poet hopes to find the whole picture of Palestine and family. Hence, her poems mirror a fragmented world, where not even bodies can stay whole in the wake of wars and at times language is defeated, it retires to silence and unuttered sentences. Yet, by listening to other voices coming from the East, from the voices of genocide in the Yugoslav wars and from the Haitian populations scourged by earthquakes and famine, the quest for wholeness discloses the endurance that connects every human being, fragmented pieces of lives that are held together by poetry.

# Chapter 1

## 1.1 History of Arabic literature

Arabic literature cannot be separated from its historical milieu and the linguistic apparatus from which it took strength and unity. Given its geographical vastness, which covers two continents from the North of Africa to the Arabian Peninsula, and its historical continuum, the Arab world cannot be treated as monolithic but it could be argued that throughout the centuries the different countries experienced similar socio-political and cultural developments. In order to give an account of these events, a common periodisation of Arabic history is generally defined as follows. An important temporal division is marked by the Quranic revelation to the prophet Muhammad in 622 AC, the period preceding this date is known as *al-Jahiliyya*, the “Days of Ignorance”, because the Arabs had not been enlightened by the grace of God. The following periods are named after the caliphates that reigned during those years: the Umayyad period from the death of the Prophet in 661 to 750 and the Abbasid period from 750 to 1258. In this year the Mongolian populations conquered the city of Baghdad, an event that symbolises the decline of the Arab world, also threatened by the success of the Christian crusades in the Northern Africa and the Ottoman pre-eminence in the military and political sphere. The period that spans from the thirteenth to the eighteenth century is called in Arabic *inhiṭaṭ*, which literally means “decay”, because of the political and military crisis of the Arab world that inevitably led to a cultural decline and a poor literary production. Indeed, although the Arabic language was not irreparably affected by this decline because it remained the language of religion and law, its cultural development seemed to arrest with the consequence of only sporadic outstanding literary works (Gabrieli, 1962). However, signs of rebirth were shown in the eighteenth century in Egypt and in the Syrian-Lebanese region, but it took until the second half of the nineteenth century for the *inhiṭaṭ* be considered over in all Arab countries. The period following the centuries of decay is referred to as *nahda*, the renaissance, in which a cultural movement similar to the French Enlightenment took place and favoured a prolific literary production together with renewed contacts with the West. Moreover, the contacts with Europe were mutual, as since the sixteenth century copies of the

translation of the Quran had appeared in Venice and the very first Arabic printed book had been printed in Fano in 1554 (Camera D'Afflitto, 2007); moreover in 1704 Antoine Galland translated into French the Arabian collection *One thousand and One Nights*, better known to the English world as *Arabian nights*. However, these tales that fascinated the West and were considered a faithful description of the Arab world, actually came from the Indo-Persian regions. Their length, different styles and different settings suggest no single author but a long process of retelling and rewriting of the tales that took centuries across the Asian and African continent (Gabrieli, 2006). As Allen (2006) points out although the *Arabian Nights* helped to shape the perception of the East, the Arab scholars discarded them from the literary canons or even ignored their existence. Nevertheless, modern writers countlessly reinterpreted the tales in order to address feminist, postcolonial or national issues.

Due to the European intervention in Africa and in the Middle East the period of the *nahda* was characterised by the modernisation of the cultural and political structures. Indeed, the Syrian philosopher and politician Antun al-Maqdisi, commenting Napoleon's troops retiring from the continent, famously said that when the French expedition retreated, it was the West that remained in Egypt (Camera D'Afflitto, 2007). Notably, Napoleon had brought printing presses and a well-stocked library and when he left in 1801 the Egyptians felt the need to publish their own newspaper and a new group of scholars was born from the study of Western knowledge (Camera D'Afflitto, 2007). During the second half of the nineteenth century, these new scholars gave a new imprint to literature by addressing issues that found fertile ground at the end of century: most importantly the awareness of belonging to an Arabic culture which included all religious identities, as the language was starting to depart more markedly from its Islamic roots; but also the European and the Turkish despotism, the illiteracy, the role of women, the lack of national identities. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Arab world could hardly be seen as unified, but writers and scholars lived through similar conditions, reflected in a communality of literary themes and cultural debates. Indeed, while France gained the control of the Syrian-Lebanese region, Britain obtained the protectorate of Palestine and Iraq in addition to the territories already occupied, respectively Maghreb and Egypt. As a consequence, in 1919 riots spread all over the colonised territories and nationalist movements grew in number until in 1945 the



League of Arab States was established in order to protect themselves. The 1950s were glorious years as Iraq, Morocco, Sudan, Tunisia and later Algeria gained independence. Therefore, the literature of this period is usually hopeful and euphoric with the exception of Palestine, where conflicts with Israelis were not close to an end as in 1948 the State of Israel was created. Although in the aftermath of the independence every country developed its own nationalism and its own literature, the tragedy of the Palestinian state was felt by every Arab; hence 1948 marks the beginning of the *nakba*, the disaster. The *nakba* was the main factor of Arab unity as it soon became clear that the leaders of the Arab world had lied to their people and independencies would not bring freedom or wealth (Allen, 2006). The bonds between Palestine and the rest of the Arab world will be further discussed, however it is important to acknowledge that the *nakba* marked the departure of Palestinian literature from the preceding literary tradition.

## 1.2 Some aspects of Arabic literature

The term Arab was originally attributed to the nomad populations that inhabited the central regions of the Arabian peninsula, while nowadays it refers to everyone whose main language is Arabic (Allen, 2006). Despite the geographic and cultural diversification of the Arab world, language has always been the linchpin of these vast territories, indeed the people of the different Arab countries define themselves as *ummah*, as belonging to the same nation thanks to the linguistic commonality other than the religious one (Anghelescu, 1993). Although standard Arabic is the language used for media, literary works and communication between people from different Arab countries, in more informal situations the dialect is generally spoken. This phenomenon where a language exists in two forms in different context is called diglossia and it affects Arabs not only by a linguistic or literary point of view, but also by a psychological one. As the psychologist Shouby (1951) interestingly points out, the *fushah* language or modern standard Arabic is able to express ideal concepts, while the more prosaic aspects of daily life are described through the use of the dialect. Many

scholars perceived this phenomenon as an obstacle for the development of a solid literary tradition because of the tendency to idealisation.

Interestingly, Thomas Edward Lawrence (1921), better known as Lawrence of Arabia, during his long stay with the Arabs at the beginning of the twentieth century emphasized that even during periods of deep crisis they were holding on to their language as a sort of homeland. Since the pre-Islamic era, the *Jahiliyya*, language has been considered both a form of art and the highest value for tribes, as the Arabic words for “chief” have their roots in verbs that mean “to say” (Anghelescu, 1993, p. 9). In the Arab tradition, poetry holds a superior literary status, it is considered the archive of creativity, the representation of social values and the best embodiment of Arabic language (Allen, 2006). Undeniably, poetry reached its completeness when it was sung or performed in front of an audience, as the poem was a mutual exchange between the poet and the group; moreover, the capacity of reciting poems by heart is a quality that is still well appreciated. Public readings of poetry arouse enthusiasm in modern audiences through all Arab countries and, although the comprehension of the poem may remain obscure due to the use of archaic language or dialect, the musicality and the voice of the poet produce something similar to magic. Originally, the most important features of Arabic poetry were the form rather than the content, which usually dealt with stocked experiences and images: wars, the desert, camels, heroic victories and lovers; therefore, poet’s ability was demonstrated through the use of a unique poetic language and through the observance of rhythmic and metric patterns, which also helped memorisation (Camera D’Afflitto, 2007). Given the importance of poetry, it is not surprising that the word “poet” in Arabic is *shair*, which comes from the same root of knowledge and it was often associated with wisdom and clairvoyance (Anghelescu, 1993). The value of music and poetry in the Arab world could be exemplified by the popularity of the well-known Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum, who gained the name of “Star of the East” for her artistic quality. Some poets composed verses with the only intention to have them sung by her stunning voice, the Egyptian government tried to gain her favours because she exerted an incredible influence on the whole Arab world. When Umm Kulthum died in 1975 her legacy was unprecedented and thanks to her singing, many poems from religious or laic tradition were immortalized in the minds of the Arabs and are still listened to by billions of people. Therefore, although orality was

a condition of poetry during the *Jahiliyya*, contemporary poetry writing is still influenced by the musicality of the oral repetitions. Indeed, as the poet Adonis (1990, p. 35) stresses, even after the advent of writing some scholars fought the idea of anthologising poetry because “they considered any deviation from this orality a betrayal of identity, a deviation from the Arab poetic ideal and a devaluation of the very idea of poetry”. However, the process of anthologising poetry had to take place ultimately, and the transition from orality to writing was favoured by the Quran. Interestingly, the Islamic holy book could not be found in the written form until decades after the death of the prophet Muhammad. Other similarities between the Quran and poetry have largely been found and this is still a matter of ongoing research but undoubtedly the Quranic text marked a departure from “a culture of intuition and improvisation to one of study and contemplation” (Adonis, 1990, p. 52). Believers agree on the inimitability of the Quran, which is to say that the text represents the perfect model to which all literary works must aspire to, although there is an awareness that nobody will ever be able to reach its musical and linguistic complexity. However, from a literary point of view, the sacred text triggered a series of innovations in Arabic poetry: the beauty of poetry resides in the ambiguous, in obscure meanings and in the transcendence of ordinary life, not anymore in the acoustic value of the text, but especially in the ability of creating figures of speech outside the traditional canons. More precisely, the metaphor is highly regarded for the possibility of harmonising divergent elements: “metaphor performs a magic operation, bringing a harmony to the unharmonious as if shortening the distance between East and West, making opposites agree, and uniting life and death, fire and water” (Adonis, 1990, p. 46). Moreover, the rise of Quranic sciences which defined new aesthetical rules also prompted a more sophisticated literary criticism.

At the beginning of the *nahda*, Western literature had not exercised any influence over the Arab literary production yet; therefore, the novel held a marginal role, while poetry was the highest expression of artistic dignity. This is why nineteenth-century poets looked back at the excellent poetry of Umayyad or Abbasid period, whose main features were artificiality and fixed musical and thematic structures. In the first decades of the twentieth century, the love for traditional poetry gave birth to the “Neoclassical Movement”. The tenets of this movement were to be found in the ancient classical poetry, whose first stanzas were always inspired by courtship love in the desert; as a

result, even when the subject did not concern love, neoclassical poets filled the poems with images of the lover's body, animals, the moon and sand dunes. Nevertheless, the neoclassical poets became influential in the Egyptian political scenario as they referred to images of a distant past as a symbol of contemporary matters, namely the nationalist cause, European colonial ambitions, the support to pan-Islamism. Similarly, novelists as Naguib Mahfouz concealed critiques to contemporary events under the Pharaonic past to avoid censorship. The "Neoclassical movement" did not restrict itself to Egyptian issues, but was politically active for the liberation of Palestine, poets also wrote anti-Italian poems to fight Libyan occupation in 1911. Notwithstanding these initial efforts, the movement was subjected to criticism because of its rootedness in the past, even the celebrated Egyptian writer Taha Hussein sharply commented that the Neoclassical poets had not given any contribution to Arab literature, but had simply borrowed the glory of the past (Camera D'Afflitto, 2007). In agreement with Taha Hussein were other Egyptian poets who decided to found another literary movement, *al-Diwan*, which drew inspiration from the Romantic poets as Shelley and Byron. The Western culture had entered the Arab world at last and the Romanticism, as a reaction to the form of the classical tradition, found fertile grounds for those young poets who felt the need to express their disappointment towards corrupted governments and Western occupation (Camera D'Afflitto, 2007). Colonialism had a huge impact on Arab thinkers and complicated an identity that had started to be questioned since the end of the nineteenth century. According to the poet Adonis, the renaissance of the Arab world is less positive than it may appear:

The period laid the foundations of a double dependency: a dependency on the past, to compensate for the lack of creative activity by remembering and reviving; and a dependency on the European-American West, to compensate for the failure to invent and innovate by intellectual and technical adaptation and borrowing. The present reality is that the prevailing Arab culture derives from the past in most its theoretical aspects, the religious in particular, while its technique comes mainly from the West. In both cases there is an obliteration of personality; in both cases, a borrowed mind, a borrowed life (1990, p. 80).

Therefore, although the first decades of the twentieth century were animated by a renovated cultural enthusiasm, especially in Egypt, poetry stood between two different traditions and the mediation did not always produce remarkable works. However, the

assimilation of Western literature, in particular Walt Whitman and T. S. Eliot, was facilitated by the translations and by the literary production of the Arab poets that emigrated to the Americas. Thanks to these poets, who could write more freely than their contemporaries, the Romantic poetry flourished in the Arab world until the 1940s. Undoubtedly, one of the most influential poet was the Lebanese Jubran Khalil Jubran, whose *The Prophet* became a best-seller in the Western world. Interestingly, the influence of the American poet Walt Whitman produced in Jubran and in the other emigrated poets the need to write differently, mediating between a genre that never achieved considerable popularity, such as the novel, and most successful one, poetry. The outcome was prose poems, which liberated Arabic literature from the metric and rhythmical constrictions, but at the same time they preserved the vivid and powerful imagery typical of poetry. However, these poets were accused by Taha Hussein of sloppiness and inaccuracy in their use of the Arabic language, while others stopped writing in their mother tongue at all (Camera D'Afflitto, 2007). Nonetheless, Hussein's accusations were part of a more rooted crisis acknowledged by other scholars, as Adonis points out:

The problem here is that this language which is regarded in theory as the essence of Arabness appears in practice to be an amorphous heap of words, which some use imperfectly, others abandon in favour of a dialect or foreign tongue and few know how to use creatively (1990, p. 82).

After centuries of unquestionable supremacy, the role of Arabic language had started to vacillate, as a consequence it was poetry, the embodiment of Arabic language, which resented the most. One of the most exemplifying case is Jubran, who after 1918 wrote mainly in English and translated from Arabic himself the most part of his previous works. He was born in 1883 in Lebanon to a Maronite family but in 1894 he moved to Boston with his mother and siblings, where his name was westernised into "Gibran". In the following years he travelled from Beirut, where he completed his studies in Arabic literature, French and painting, to New York, Boston and Paris. This period was probably the darkest period of his life, as all his family died within few years and his career as a painter seemed destined to sink. Considered by Westerners a prophet himself, Khalil Gibran instilled in his works the love for his country, the search for truth and an all-encompassing love. The adoption of poetry in prose allowed Gibran to draw

from his roots without being constrained by the conventional metrical patterns and imagines. However, his prophetic tone and his adoption of the English language had Arabic scholars dismissed his production as not valuable and Gibran was also accused of contributing to creating cliché on the East. Nevertheless, professor Wail Hassan (2009) argues that Gibran and the other emigrated poets played a fundamental role in the establishment of an Arab-American literature. Although Gibran was not the first to have a bilingual production, his importance lies in setting the ground for Arabic literature in English that only recently gained considerable success in the West. In addition to these contemporary issues, Gibran's prose poems paved the way for another poetic revolution in the Arab world, which is to say the introduction of the free verse and the abolition of all the classical rules. This renovation, started in the late 1940s in Iraq, was the expression of precise changes within the society, namely the claim for an identity separated from the past and from the colonisers, but also the raise of the middle class, the role of women and better education. Therefore, it is meaningful that was a poetess, Nazik al-Malaika, who pioneered the free verse, which was not merely a formal innovation. According to her indeed, free versification was caused by the need of the writers to get out of the ivory towers and to socially commit with their works, which should express their singularity without relying on the classical forms. Having completed her studies at Princeton, in 1947 Nazik al-Malaika wrote a famous poem, 'Cholera', a free-verse poem intended for the epidemy that spread in Egypt and caused many deaths.

It is night.  
Listen to the echoing wails  
Rising above the silence in the dark  
[...]  
the agonized, overflowing grief  
clashing with the wails.  
In every heart there is fire,  
in every silent hut, sorrow,  
and everywhere, a soul crying in the dark.  
[...]  
It is dawn.  
Listen to the footsteps of the passerby,  
in the silence of the dawn.  
Listen, look at the mourning procession,  
ten, twenty, no... countless.  
[...]

Even the gravedigger has succumbed,  
the muezzin is dead,  
and who will eulogize the dead?  
[...]  
O Egypt, my heart is torn by the ravages of death.

(Handal, 2001, p.176-182)

A Western readership may assume that 'Cholera's' poetical innovations such as the free verse, the prominence of content rather than form, a controlled lyricism rather than the excessive Romantic one are trivial elements for twentieth-century poetry, but they were not in countries held together by traditions. On the other hand, although the poem was expressively composed for the outburst of cholera in Egypt, al-Malaika expresses the sentiments aroused by every humanitarian crisis; in fact, Palestinian and Syrian refugees identified with the helpless and melancholic tone. From a literary point of view, 'Cholera' marked the beginning of modern poetry, so that poets as Mahmud Darwish, Nizar Qabbani, Samih al-Qasim and Fadwa Tuqan benefited greatly from the work of Iraqi authors. In this sense, poets from all Arab countries empathized with one another, as their condition was similar in many ways. Since the 1920s Iraq had either been under the protectorate of Britain or under the control of corrupted governors; Syria and Lebanon were occupied by French troops after the European conference held in San Remo in 1920 and the oppressive political regime forced poets to flee their country; Egypt gained independence from Britain in 1922 and was allowed more freedom but it remained under the British yoke until the 1950s; Palestine became the victim of decisions taken by the Western governments that eventually led to its partition. Therefore, since the 1920s poetry was given an unprecedented value of social and political commitment that culminated in the 1950s, when the most part of the Arab countries gained independence. Alienation, oppression, fear, claims for justice filled the poems that preceded the independencies, but even after the longed freedom from the Western protectorates, the poets had to be careful about what they wrote. An example of the difficult living conditions of poets is offered by the Syrian writer and literary critic Ali Ahmad Said Isbir, better known under the pseudonym of Adonis. Not only is he considered the best contemporary poet, but he created a new language for poetry that has its origin the classical poetry and addresses the dilemmas of Arab society. 'A Mirror

for the Executioner' emphasized insignificant value of poets' life in countries where censorship is in force:

Did you say you're a poet?

Where do you come from? You have a fine skin.  
Executioner, do you hear me?  
You can have his head  
    But bring me his skin unbruised.  
    His skin means so much to me.  
Take him away.

Your velvet skin  
Will be my carpet.

Did you say you're a poet?

(al-Udhari, 2005, p. 89)

At only fourteen years old, when Syria was a newly independent state, Adonis composed and read a poem to the freshly elected president, urging him to ensure a better future for his country. Such a precocious maturity gave Adonis a full consciousness of the terrible state in which his century lies, exemplified in 'A Mirror for the Twentieth Century':

A coffin bearing the face of a boy  
A book  
Written on the belly of a crow  
A wild beast hidden in a flower

A rock  
Breathing with the lungs of a lunatic:

This is it  
This is the Twentieth Century.

(al-Udhari, 2005, p. 91)

'A Mirror for the Twentieth Century' as well as the other poems in the collection were written for the 1982 siege of Beirut, yet it expresses the horror and the alienation that was not only felt by the other Arab countries, but also by the whole world in the twentieth century.



Although the novel was attributed a marginal position in the Arab literary tradition, since the second half of the twentieth century it has superseded poetry due to the need of communicating information and describing the social and political conditions of the Arab populations. Before the encounter with Western literature prose works consisted of encyclopaedias, manuals, historical and geographical publications, Quranic transcriptions and the *hadith*, the report of words and habits of the prophet Muhammad. Prose writing usually bears the traces of poetic language which was difficult to sweep away even when the novel became a consolidated reality in the literary panorama. Since the nineteenth century the colonial enterprise, the diffusion of press and the extensive work of translations carried on by the emigrated poets in the Americas have allowed a wider number of publications to circulate and consequently to take hold among the Arabs. In particular, historical novels and short stories became much appreciated, while the social and political changes were expressed in realistic and political narrations. In Egypt the novel was able to flourish thanks to the cultural vivacity, the prominent role of its dialect and a less authoritative British rule; therefore it is not surprising that three Egyptian novelists step out from the Arab prose writing for their inventiveness and social commitment: Muhammad Husayn Haykal, Taha Hussein and Naguib Mahfouz. After the publishing of *Zaynab* in 1914, Haykal is generally considered the father of the Arab novel although scholars never relented their critiques on some aspects of the narrative. The novel tells the story of an Egyptian peasant, Zaynab, who falls in love with the educated middle-class Hamid. Forced to marry according to other people's will, the heroine dies tragically from consumption. The themes of combined marriages, difficult living conditions, freedom and the role of women were also explored by Gibran's only novel *Broken Wings* (1912), establishing the features of the Arab social novels. As Camera D'Afflitto (2007) suggests, Haykal was inspired by French novelists and in particular by Alexandre Dumas's *The Lady of the Camellias* (1848) in the insertion of elements unknown to the Egyptian countryside so that some passages seem to be set in France. Notwithstanding the unsophisticated focalization of the characters and the lack of psychological depth in some passages, *Zaynab* was published when the fight for the renovation of the literary tradition was at its peaks and contributed to merge harmoniously Egyptian content and Western form. The first to

acknowledge the importance of Haykal's work was Taha Hussein, one of the most prominent Arab novelist and critic. Taha Hussein excelled at a genre, the autobiography, that found fertile ground in contemporary literature having its roots in the *hadith*, in the memoirs and biographies of great poets and prophets. *The Days*, published in 1929 and titled in the English translation as *An Egyptian Childhood*, covers Hussein's life from his first years until his adulthood fated by an eye disease that degenerated into blindness at the age of six. In the following passage the protagonist, referred to in the third person, has to attend the Quranic school where a strict discipline ensures that all children learn the Quran by heart:

From that day our small friend was a sheikh, although he was barely nine years old, because he had learnt the Quran by heart; for who memorises the Quran is a sheikh whatever age he be. [...] Now our youthful sheikh was short, thin, pale and rather shabby. He had none of the dignity of sheikhs, and neither a large nor a small part of their reverent demeanour. Moreover his parents contended themselves with magnifying and exalting him by this epithet, which they attached to his name more out of pride and satisfaction with themselves than with the idea of pleasing or petting him (Hussein, 1932, pp. 36-37).

Hussein was often critical of the religious education imposed on children and dreamt of "an Egypt steeped in the sweetness of education, an Egypt in which the light of education brightens hovel and palace alike" (Galal, 1993, p. 687). His wishes seemed to become concrete when, after years spent abroad and especially in France where he married, he came back to Egypt to teach at the university and finally in 1950 he was nominated Secretary for Education. In addition to his progressive point of view on education and his social commitment, Hussein is especially remembered for the elegant and precise use of the Arabic language. A touching example of Hussein's narrative technique is the opening of *An Egyptian Childhood*:

He cannot remember the name of the day nor is he able to place it in the month and year wherein God placed it. In fact he cannot even remember what time of the day it was exactly and can only give it approximately. To the best of his belief, the time of the day was either dawn or dusk. That is due to the fact that he remembers feeling a slightly cold breeze on his face, which the heat of the sun had not destroyed. And that is likely because notwithstanding his ignorance as to whether it was light or dark, he just remembers on leaving the house, meeting with soft, gentle, delicate light as though darkness covered some of its edges. Then that is also likely because he just

seems to remember that when he met with this breeze and light he did not feel around him any great movement of people stirring, but he only felt the movement of people waking up from sleep or settling down to it (pp.1-2).

On the one hand the studies on Western literature and a recognized antagonism for Preislamic poetry liberated Hussein's works from the exhausted symbols of the classical tradition, while his sensibility and his blindness infused imagines with an unprecedented vividness. His talent gained him fourteen nominees to the Nobel Prize of Literature although he never won. On the contrary, his countryman Naguib Mahfouz was the first Arab to be awarded the prize in 1988 and in his Nobel Lecture speech he explained that he was the son of the happy union between the Pharaonic civilization and the Islamic one (Mahfouz, 1988). In opposition to the most part of twentieth century writers, Mahfouz hardly left Egypt and was devoted to the tradition, both past and present. Indeed, he notably became a representative of the historical novel set during the Pharaonic period. As many other Arab writers who had to live under the censorship of despotic regimes, historical novels allowed to talk about the present political situation under the protection of the literary fiction. According to the literary critic Francesco Gabrieli (2007), Mahfouz was successful in becoming the interpreter of both his country and his generation together with his ability to navigate through the political events that shook Egypt and the whole Arab world. In this sense, many works were set in the Pharaonic past such as *Kifah Tibah* which narrates the ancient Egyptians fighting against the Hyksos, while Mahfouz's intent was to mobilise his countrymen against the British who despite Egypt's independence were still controlling the country (Camera D'Afflitto, 2007). The writer's literary production was never indifferent to the political situation of his country and others, hence he stopped writing in 1952 when a coup headed by the general Nasser ended the Egyptian monarchy and in 1967 in the aftermath of the Arab-Israeli war. Only in 1959 did Mahfouz return to writing with *Children of Gebelawi*, a work that was different to the preceding social, realist or historical novels and that even caused an attack on his life. Indeed, the novel was accused of blasphemy by the Islamic extremist as it is an allegory of the role of religion in the history of humanity and the main characters are gang leaders living the life of Adam, Moses and Jesus in the Cairo districts. Although Mahfouz's novels were primarily set in Cairo and concerned with the Egyptian cause, Mahfouz was not

unfeeling towards the political situation of all Arab countries, which called for an encompassing range of themes including alienation, the role of Western countries as colonizers, social inequalities and the aspirations of the middle class.

Having the novel gained a prominent role in the Arab literature as the most suitable genre to describe and analyse the social changes, writers in the 1970s reached an unprecedented social commitment, especially in the Middle East region (Camera D'Afflitto, 2007). Besides Palestinian writers whose condition was utterly dramatic, Arab authors felt the need to look outward and direct their anger towards the West and to the corrupted governments with the consequence of being exiled, imprisoned or even killed. Although many writers are worth mentioning, Abd al-Rahman Munif certainly embodies the prototype of the Arab intellectual during those difficult years. Born in Jordan to Saudi father and Iraqi mother, he lived across Syria, Lebanon, Egypt and Iraq, where he was imprisoned for opposing the war against Iran and then exiled in France. In an interview with Camera D'Afflitto (2007) he explained that for European citizens it is impossible to understand the distress of having to live with borders and passports in countries where people used to move freely, blurring the concept of geographical identities. Having that in mind, in 1982 Munif wrote *A World without Maps* together with the Palestinian writer Jabra Ibrahim Jabra. As Munif did not see barriers separating the countries, he affirmed that his nationality is Arab and to the whole Arab nation he is devoted to and this is the reason why one of his most popular novel, *Sharq al-Mutawassit* (1975) is set in an unnamed land at the East of the Mediterranean Sea. In the novel, the protagonist is accused of unspecified crimes against the government and he is tortured until he does not declare that he will stop his political activity and will surrender to the regime. However, the renunciation of his beliefs causes him more harm than the physical pain inflicted by torture and his desire to live will fade together with the hope of obtaining justice through his writing. Besides lack of human rights, censorship and imprisonment, Munif was also interested in denouncing the economical exploitation of the Middle East after the discovery of oil at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The theme is developed in a five-volume work titled *Cities of Salt* where he describes the oil as a sentence to death because it will reduce the Middle east to a waste land without bringing any richness to the populations (Camera D'Afflitto, 2007).

Some features of the Arab literary tradition are meaningful to understand the extent to which Palestinian literature is embedded within its Arab origin. For example, the identity crisis perceived in the twentieth century resonated more loudly in Palestine and as a consequence writers felt themselves trapped either in the classical poetry or in an uncritical imitation of Western forms. However, Palestinian literature developed its own features departing from the rest of the Arab world after the proclamation of the State of Israel.

### 1.3 The Anglo-Arab encounter

English colonialism had a huge impact on the colonies' literary production such as South Africa, Kenya, Nigeria, India and the Caribbean. Similarly, French colonialism in Northern Africa gave birth to a prominent and flourishing tradition of Arab literature in French. Given these different but successful experiences, it is surprising that Arab works in English were generally sporadic and unremarkably until as late as the 1990s. The reasons for such a scarcity of literary production are numerous, but the colonial policy that British exercised over the Middle-East contributed to a non-absorption of English culture in the colonies. Indeed, while the French were interested in creating a Francophile ruling class in Northern Africa, British colonisers exerted informal control and did not press for a wide-spread use of English during the colonial period nor did they establish their system of education. Moreover, as Geoffrey Nash (2007) points out, up to the 1980s only small groups of Arabs had emigrated to Great Britain and therefore there has not been a consistent tradition of exiled writers as in the case of French literature; as a consequence, writing in English is not the result of colonial policies or diaspora but rather a personal choice. After Ahdaf Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun* (1992), Arab literature in English experienced an unprecedented popularization thanks to Andre Lefevere, who pioneered the concept of "rewriting" instead of merely translating from Arabic into English, taking into account the cultural dimension together with different literary canons in the Arab and English-speaking world (Nash, 2007). In addition to new theories of translations that made texts more compelling to foreign audiences, other

factors contributed to the emergence of Arab writers in the Western literary scenario: firstly, in the twentieth century the Arab world was in the media spotlight because of the Gulf War, the Oslo accords concerning Palestine and notably, terrorism; as a consequence Arab writers felt more than ever the need to open up their culture to a new readership often biased or misinformed about Islamic religion and Arab society. Particularly, novels from Palestinian authors started to be translated at the beginning of the 1980s, twenty years after they were written, as in the case of Ghassan Kanafani, the first novelist who tried to include the Jewish point of view and understand the other who was but an enemy for Palestinians.

The socio-political changes that took place during and after colonialism resonated in the literary production, particularly regarding to the novel, which increased its popularity while poetry did not produce innovative results. Hafez (1994) argues that under colonialism the Arab societies suffered a stop in the process of modernisation and a return to rural or tribal vision; as a consequence, the prose production mirrored this trend in a series of features: a binary structure (usually the Arab countryside in opposition to the foreign other), omniscient narrators, simple linear structures, closed texts, conventional morality and diglossia. However, after national independencies and particularly after Egypt's defeat in 1967 and Lebanese civil war, it was clear that the conflict with the foreign other had become a conflict within the self. The uncertainties of the post-independence period opened up the Arab novel to a constant dialogue with tradition and lack of point of references, polyphony, intertextuality and a more complex psychological exploration.

#### 1.4 The Palestinian-Israeli Conflict

While Africa and Asia have witnessed the end of Western colonialism from the second half of the twentieth century, Palestine experienced a completely different situation as it had to endure another kind of colonialism under Zionist rule. As the other Western colonisation, Zionism appeared to be incompatible with the native population; however, in the Palestinian case it was even more problematic since the radical Zionist fringes envisaged the substitution of Palestinians with Jews. Although present history

emphasises the differences between Jews and Arabs, there are also many analogies in their past: firstly they have both Semitic origins and they constructed their communities as the expression of God's will in the classical period; secondly, they experienced a similar historical periodisation characterised by a golden age followed by a period of darkness until in the nineteenth century they both developed nationalist movements in a general climate of cultural reawakening (Tessler, 1994). In particular, Arab and Jewish nationalism were a response to Europe's physical and cultural threats, as they both aimed at self-rule and emancipation from Western intrusion. Moreover, the Jewish community is very similar to the Arab *umma*, as the law of the Torah makes Jews a nation rather than a religious group and inspires a sense of almost nationalistic solidarity (Tessler, 1994).

The beginning of the Arab-Israeli conflict may have had a religious component, as Palestine was originally the land of Canaan promised by God to Abraham's descendants, but the present nature of the war and the involvement of Western as well as Arabic authorities clearly exceed religion. Initially Jews were not numerous in Palestine but they settled across Europe, Arab states and Americas and had no interest in going back to the Land of Canaan. However, throughout the centuries they endured segregations and humiliations until the liberal principles of the French Revolution assured them equality as individuals but not yet as a nation (Tessler, 1994). The waves of antisemitism that spread across Europe in the nineteenth century forced the Jews to emigrate, particularly from Russia where since the 1870s they had been subjected to brutal violence. Although many fled to the Americas, other decided to go back to their original land as a consequence of the Zionist propaganda that started to gain consensus after the centuries of prejudices and segregations in ghettos. The journalist Theodor Herzl advocated a land for the Jewish people, which according to him could not be but Palestine, where they could rule autonomously and live freely. Jews had started to settle individually in the Middle-East before the 1880s and it can be argued that they lived peacefully with the Arab populations until the first *aliyah*, migrations to Palestine with the intent of founding a Jewish state. Therefore, thousands of Jews started to settle and buy lands from the Ottomans that at the end of the nineteenth century ruled over Palestine. A second *aliyah* at the beginning of the twentieth century brought more Jews to Palestine as a consequence of renovated pogroms in Russia and Poland, but it was in

the aftermath of World War I that tensions began to heighten. Indeed, a Palestinian identity separated from the Arab one started to take shape together with nationalistic claims that were partially threatened by Zionism although Arabs and Jews generally cooperated with each other; however, as Britain obtained the mandate of Palestine, both Arabs and Jews wanted European support to their nationalist movements. On the one hand, as it was stated in the 1917 Balfour Declaration, Britain viewed favourably a Jewish settlement in Palestine which inevitably caused stirrs that delayed the possibility of Palestinian independence; indeed, Jewish presence on the Arab soil prevented the British from leaving the country and allowed them to maintain their control over India and Egypt. On the other hand, British government had already been committed to support the Arabs as they fought against the Ottomans who sided with Germany during the World War I. The ambiguous position taken by Britain, which clearly could not support both nationalisms, was the cause of mounting tensions that eventually led to violence and riots in the 1920s. Indeed, although the first *aliyahs* did not bring excessive numbers of immigrants on Palestine soil, the main problem was that Zionism emphasised the importance of self-sufficiency and agricultural development and therefore Jewish started purchasing as many lands as possible with the consequence of the displacement of Arab peasants. Therefore, the conflict became a fight for the land which represented the origins for the Arabs and a future for the Jews; this is the reason why a great part of Palestinian literature is frozen into images of the land, olive trees and burning sun in an attempt to immortalise their homeland. Particularly, Arabs suspected that Jewish immigration and possession would mean the loss of their political rights and the metamorphosis of their country. Arab sources reported that in 1930s one fifth of Palestinian villagers was landless (Tessler, 1994) although it is problematic to rely on numbers as they were often inflated or diminished according to the party involved. Notwithstanding the 1920s fights that were the prelude to the escalating violence in the following years, a reporter in 1930 testified that “it is quite a common sight to see an Arab sitting on the veranda of a Jewish house” (Tessler, 1994, p. 183). Although hopes for a peaceful resolution were envisaged by other peripheral Zionist fringes as the Brit Shalom, the mounting unrest culminating in the 1933 Arab Revolt limited contacts and interpersonal relations between Arabs and Jews. The former were still the majority in 1930 counting for the 80% of the population, but extensive numbers



of Jews kept on asking to enter Palestine consequently to the consensus gained by Nazism in Europe. As British started to limit the Jewish immigration and their purchase of land, Zionists were tenacious in their demands and strengthen their actions while the Arabs were striking and protesting but their leadership was politically fragmented. During the Revolt, not only were Jews targeted but the British as well, whose policy tried to keep the balance but went to the detriment of both causes. The relentless fight of Arab peasantry led to the creation of the Peel Commission, one of the numerous commissions of inquiry that visited Palestine with the aim of finding a suitable solution for Arabs, Jews and Europe; partition of the land was a recurring proposal although it would not satisfy the parties involved in the conflict. In the meanwhile, in 1939 the Arab Revolt lost its strength, Arabs were exhausted and leader's personal rivalries called for the support of Egypt and other countries which had to spoke out on behalf of Palestine. In the eve of World War II, Britain was anxious to sedate the conflicts while at the same time wanted to gain the support of the other Arab countries which would back up the English army in the forthcoming war. Bearing this in mind, the White Paper was issued in 1939 and although it was never formally approved it acted as British governing policy in Palestine. According to the White Paper, Jewish immigration and land purchase was to be limited and in ten years' time Palestine should be independent and not partitioned but Arabs and Jews would both rule the country together. Such an optimistic view could suite neither the Arabs who were afraid of losing their country while their neighbours were preparing for independence nor Jews who also feared that their survival was at risk with the Nazi threat. Therefore, while Jews kept on immigrating, the Arab radical nationalist al-Hajj Amin was planning with Hitler to get rid of Jewish and British intruders on Palestinian soil. In the aftermath of the war, as the tragic numbers and effects of genocide started to be revealed, Western countries could not avoid the pressing demands of Zionist ambassadors concerning their need for a land. While other commissions were issued to examine the legitimisation of Jewish claim, Britain wanted to turn the Palestinian question over to the newly-created United Nations as violence on English troops had not come to an end and culminated with the explosion by Zionist extremists of the King David Hotel, one of the English headquarters in Jerusalem. In 1947 the United Nations General Assembly established that Palestine was to be partitioned into an Arab and Jewish state with an international supervision in the

contested city of Jerusalem; the plan was reluctantly accepted by Zionists while it was forcibly rejected by the Arabs, who lamented that the UN had no right to interfere on Arab soil and that the American president Truman, who sympathised for the Jewish cause, had pressured other countries to gain a favourable deal for Zionists. Therefore, as British troops started to withdraw from Palestine in 1948, Jews were immediately attacked by the Arab Liberation Army with the support of the other Arab countries. After initial victories, the Haganah, the Zionist Army retook control over their lands and occupied areas which were allocated to the Arabs until small amounts of lands remained to Palestinians: the coastal Gaza Strip destined to be under Egyptian control and the West Bank under Jordan control. In this way, the State of Israel was created and the majority of Palestinians had to flee the country or was expelled and found refuge mainly in Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq and Syria. According to Arab sources by Israel independence 300,000 Palestinians had already left their country, the UN reported that this number increased up to 750,000 by the beginning of 1949 and reached 940,000 by June; Israeli sources diminished the number to 500,000, but every party agreed that 150,000 Palestinians remained in the State of Israel by the end of 1949 (Tessler, 1994). Those who did not leave their homeland lived in the Occupied Territories or in Israel although they were considered second-category citizens and had to find a way to cooperate in a general climate of hostility.

The 1948 *nakba* gave origin to a new feeling, persistent in Palestinian literature and felt by every Palestinian which goes under the name of *ghurba*, the feeling of living in exile and being alienated, melancholic, lost. Famously, the Palestinian novelist Emile Habibi said that he himself felt as a foreigner in his own home although he never left Palestine (Camera D'Afflitto, 2007). As Edward Said (2002) underlines the word *nakba* does not only mean “disaster” but bears in its roots a more tragic and profound rupture, an unavoidable deviation from the course of history with catastrophic consequences. Hence, no Arab writer was left untouched by 1948 events and for those who undertook the enterprise of narrating their contemporaneity, literature did not mimic life but became life itself, it was the proof of still existing while being erased from the maps (Said, 2002). Palestinian history and literature was inextricably intertwined with the other Arab countries’, yet they departed irretrievably after 1948 events. Indeed, although in the Occupied Territories Palestinians were allowed to form an Arab

Government of All Palestine and to some extent to keep their economic and political structures, the Egyptians and the Jordanians exerted a tight control and it was soon clear that there was no possibility for Palestinian independence in Gaza or in the West Bank. The years following the *nakba* were characterised by a series of diplomatic efforts to bring acceptable solutions for both Israelis and Arabs to the problem of refugees, the legitimacy of the State of Israel and the problem of Jerusalem, which was the political and spiritual capital for Muslims, Christians and Jews but was partitioned to the benefit of the Israelis. However, diplomacy failed in most cases and the presence of Western powers did not decline as hostilities were increased by the Israeli army and Palestinian paramilitary groups mainly stationed in the East Bank and neighbouring countries from where they launched their attacks against Israel. Although their initial involvements did not impact greatly on the conflict the Fatah and the other guerrilla groups kept the Palestinian fight alive when the other Arab countries took the leadership in the conflict. Indeed, as Egypt together with British troops controlled the main accesses to Israeli ports, particularly the Suez Canal and the Gulf of Aqaba, tensions were not eased. Although the Egyptian general Nasser, who dethroned king Faruk with a military coup in 1952, initially preferred to withdraw from the conflict for the sake of his country's internal turmoil, a climate of general mistrust with the Israeli government led him to force Britain to leave the Suez Canal area. In the meanwhile, hostilities escalated in the Occupied Territories because Palestinians were boycotting Israeli products and making incursions into the country to kill and sabotage; the *fedayeen*, the Palestinian guerrilla fighters, targeted mainly civilians not excluding women and children, and the Israeli army responded with severe retaliatory strikes. Not only was the Palestinian cause supported militarily, but also through a prolific literary production aimed at sensitising the West towards their conditions and expressing their emotional state. Famously, the Israeli general Moshe Dayan once said that Fadwa Tuqan's verses were more efficient than the *fedayeen* fight as they could inflame Palestinian hearts far better (Camera D'Afflitto, 2007). The poem 'Enough for Me' expresses the patriotism and the attachment to the land that invigorated the *fedayeen* to persist in their fight.

Enough for me to die on her earth  
be buried in her  
to melt and vanish into her soil  
then sprout forth as a flower

played with by a child from my country.  
Enough for me to remain  
in my country's embrace  
to be in her close as a handful of dust  
a sprig of grass  
a flower.

(Cited in Azzam, 2016)

Other than poetry, short novels and novellas were the most widespread literary genres as they expressed the immediate need to record the present history.

Nasser's intent to nationalise the Suez Canal distressed Israel and Western powers and led to the Sinai-Suez war of 1956. France joined the conflict with Britain and Israel, as Egypt had supported the Algerian and Tunisian revolts against the Paris government. Although eventually Nasser was able to secure his positions on the Gaza Strip, Sinai and Suez Canal, the war epitomized Egypt's military difficulties; moreover, in order to maintain the peace, the United Nations Emergency Force troops were sent to the contested territories. Besides, the Soviet Union joined forces with the Arab countries but a series of military coups in Iraq and Syria caused a fragmentation in the Arab coalition, originating a climate of suspicion between the Damascus government and Nasser. In 1967 another war was about to explode as Israeli invasion of Syrian territories seemed imminent, consequently to the raids by the *Fatah* and by Nasser's decisions to occupy the Sinai on the basis of erroneous information supplied by the Soviet Union. At the beginning of June the Israeli forces attacked the Arab countries and proved their military superiority by taking control of the Occupied Territories, the Syrian Golan Heights and East Jerusalem in only six days. The Six Day War is known to Arabs as the June War or *naksa*, the defeat. Although the roots of the word bear the connotation of a temporary setback, the Arabs were pervaded by the feeling that nothing would be the same anymore; Palestinians acknowledged that those who escaped had become eternal refugees depending on international assistance, while those who remained were destined never to reach independence or freedom. Indeed, if before 1967 the West Bank and the Gaza Strip escaped the complete crumbling of their political economic and cultural structures, in the aftermath of the war, little hope was left according to those Palestinians who lived through the *nakba*. However, the injustices

suffered by Palestinians and their lack of freedom in the aftermath of the June War caused a growing popularity of the guerrilla movements which became politically organised and gained consensus also among non-Palestinians. Moreover, the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), which originally had been created by the Arab countries to control the operation of the more extremist factions, was striving for political autonomy, especially in Jordan where the Hashemite regime feared that the PLO would undermine their regency in the West Bank. In 1970 tension escalated to the Black September, a civil war causing thousands of Palestinian casualties by the well-trained Jordan army. As a consequence, the weakened PLO established its bases in Lebanon, where the increasing numbers of Palestinian refugees were alarming the Christian Maronite population. Even though Lebanon was the place where different religious groups had always coexisted, it became the theatre of massacres such as in the refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila. However, notwithstanding the internal fractures of the Arab states, the conflict with Israel was not projected towards an end: in 1973 the joint Syrian and Egyptian forces attacked simultaneously the Golan Heights and the Sinai Peninsula starting the Yom Kippur War for the liberation of the territories under the Israeli control. In 1977 two important events, destined to change the course of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, took place: firstly, the Israeli parliamentary elections were won for the first time by the Likud party that believed in the retention of the Occupied Territories; secondly, Nasser's successor Anwar Sadat visited Jerusalem expressing his intention to come to peace with the Israeli state. The reconciliatory atmosphere led to the Camp David Accords declaring a normalisation of the relationship between Cairo and Jerusalem and the withdrawal of Israeli troops from the Sinai Peninsula with the consequent settlement of Egyptian forces; however, the accords were ambiguous about the future of the West Bank and Gaza, where Israel enforced its presence both in terms of military control and number of Jewish inhabitants. To be sure, Egypt and Israel were drawing towards what is usually defined as a "cold peace", but PLO forces, enraged by Cairo's betrayal, did not envisage withdrawing from the conflict until the rights of Palestinian people were legitimised. Since the 1970s the PLO led by Arafat had used suicide bombing attacks as its modus operandi; in this way, they could cause the highest Israeli casualties with the least Palestinian losses. The 1980s mark a difficult period for the Arab world: Sadat was assassinated and replaced by Hosni Mubarak; Lebanon

invoked the help of the United Nations to sedate the civil war between the Muslim population and Christian Maronite one invaded by Israel with the intention of dismantling the PLO in Beirut; Iran was facing a difficult internal crisis caused by the intransigent regime of the *ayatollah* Khomeini and in the meanwhile the country was at war with Iraq for the supremacy over the Persian Gulf . As far as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is concerned, the first half of the 1980s is characterised by stalemate and futile diplomatic efforts. On the one hand, the USA presented the Reagan Plan as a consequence of Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, while an Arab Summit came up with the Fahd Plan, which also called for the end of the Gulf War. In addition to these proposals, negotiations between the Palestinian-Jordan front and the Israeli Shimon Peres were carried out without significant results and the 1985 bombing of PLO headquarters in Tunis ended the possibility of any diplomatic transactions. Being subjected to an iron fist policy and increasing Jewish settlements, Palestinians living in Gaza and West Bank felt they could no longer rely exclusively on diplomacy or PLO actions and started to join Islamic organisations such as the Muslim Brotherhood or were involved in protests and strikes. Towards the end of 1987, civil protests in the Occupied Territories reached their peaks starting the *intifada*, literally “shaking off”, when an Israeli tank crushed some Palestinians returning from work. The incident took place in the Jabaliyya refugee camp causing anger and uprisings that soon extended to the other cities in the Gaza Strip, East Jerusalem and also to the West Bank. What happened in these territories was unprecedented, comparable only to the 1936 Arab Rebellion: all the Palestinians engaged themselves in the active participation for the liberation of their country. While men were actively fighting, women supported strikes but also ensured food and medical assistance without any external help. Even children were involved in the fight by blocking the streets to Israeli vehicles, setting tyres afire and throwing stones to the tanks. The image of Palestinian adolescences wearing keffiyeh and throwing stones (and later Molotov bombs) became emblematic of the extent to which Palestinians were determined to achieve their independence. Many poets exalted the sacrifice of these young stone-throwers, exemplified in Fadwa Tuqan’s ‘Martyrs of the Intifada’:

They died standing, blazing on the road  
Shining like stars, their lips pressed to the lips of life  
They stood up in the face of death

They disappeared like the sun.

(Cited in Joffe, 2003)

Although stone-throwing appears as an act of violence, for many Palestinians it was not, given the supremacy of Israeli equipment. It was an act of pure rebellion that reached the proportion of martyrdom. Indeed, Tuqan depicts them as the Palestinians saw them, as fierce youngsters, willing to die for their country; their heroism granted them the paradise and the status of the sun and stars. Similarly, in 'Song of Becoming' Tuqan expresses the effort of those children who had to grow in wartime and were asked to become adults by taking part into the fight:

Suddenly now they have grown  
Grown more than the years of normal life,  
Merged with secrets and passionate words,  
Carried love's messages like the Bible or the Quran,  
To be read in whispers.  
[...]  
Anger smoldering on the fringes of a blocked horizon,  
Invading classrooms, streets, city quarters,  
Centering on squares,  
Facing sullen tanks with streams of stone.

Now they shake the gallows of dawn  
Assailing the night and its flood.  
They've grown more than the years of a life  
To become the worshipped and the worshippers.

(Jayyusi, 1992, p.316)

Not only is Fadwa Tuqan describing the violence children had to witness, but she is also pointing out that their childhood did not exist because they had to grow "more than the years of normal life" and their death elevated them to the status of martyrs, commemorated by those who survived. In Palestinian poetry during the occupation is common to find references to the Bible or Judaism as children had to learn Hebrew at school and in the Occupied Territories the contact with Jewish people incorporated substantial vocabulary into the Arab culture (Camera d'Afflitto, 1986). As Palestinians became familiar with Judaism, they reinvented the David and Goliath myth, depicting themselves killing the giant Israelis only with the use of their slingshot and stones.

During the *intifada*, it should be pointed out that the Unified National Leadership of the Uprising (UNLU) promoted non-violent activities, such as strikes, boycotts, graffiti, marches, flag raisings; another way to oppose Israelis was to withhold taxes from them or refusing employment, but although Israel and its supporters were condemned by the UNLU, no accusations were made against Judaism. However, the general revolts were supported by the Islamic groups which did not disdain the use of violence, particularly the newly founded Islamic Resistance Movement, Hamas, gained increasing support and promoted terrorist attacks together with anti-Semitic propaganda. Israel's severe response to the *intifada* included imprisonments, shootings and even the use of tear-gas in enclosed spaces and therefore it aroused serious criticism from the international observers. As Israel had no intention to diminish their territorial control and the *intifada* had proved that Palestinians would not stop fighting until Jewish withdrawal from the Occupied Territories, the Oslo Accords of 1993 were welcomed hopefully, but did not prove to be a permanent solution. Indeed, the accords envisaged a two-state solution partitioned as follows: territories entirely occupied by Palestinians (Area A), occupied by Palestinians but under Jewish control (Area B) or entirely occupied by Jewish people (Area C). However, although both the PLO and the State of Israel recognised each other rights and existence, the accords did not take into account the core problem of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, such as the borders of the two states, Jerusalem's partition, the colonies in the West Bank and the alleged return of 1948 and 1967 Palestinian refugees to their homeland. Moreover, according to the accords, an independent Palestinian state was to be created by 1999, while during the interim period a provisional Palestinian Authority led by Arafat would govern. However, Israel did not withdraw from the established territories and when the Israeli right-wing Benjamin Netanyahu became Prime Minister, respecting the Oslo Accords was not part of the political agenda of the new government. In 2000, another summit meeting between USA, Israel and Palestine was held at Camp David but it was concluded without reaching a solution to the conflict. In the wake of the ruinous Camp David negotiations, Ariel Sharon's visit to the Temple Mount sparked a second *intifada* in Jerusalem that reached all Palestinian settlements and caused significant casualties on both parts; new wave of violence was unleashed and although it is generally agreed that the second *intifada* ended in 2005, fights were never-ending. Palestinian guerrilla fighters' modus



operandi was mainly suicide bombing attacks or the launch of missiles, while Israelis kept on with raids, retaliatory strikes and increasing Jewish settlements. In 2002 Israel started erecting a wall aimed at separating the West Bank from the its territories as a form of protection from guerrilla fighters' attacks, while Palestinians perceived it as a form of racial segregation. In 2005 Abu Mazen became the leader of the Palestinian National Authority but the extremist movement Hamas reached more and more consensus especially in Gaza and it gained the majority of the votes in the following year. The two parties started a war fought mainly in Gaza, where ultimately Hamas established its headquarters, forcing the Fatah to flee to the West Bank. The internal fracture between Hamas and the Fatah, which contrary to the Islamic group was inclined to open a dialogue with Israel, was fatal to the Palestinian fight for freedom. The conflict with Israel is not close to an end, violence is the daily routine for those who live in Gaza, West Bank of East Jerusalem despite the endless proposals for peace promoted by NGOs and Western countries. In fact, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was implicated in complex international relationships with the neighbouring Arab states, but also with US, Great Britain, France and Russia. The consequences of the conflict have important repercussions in the whole Middle-East. For example, after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon aimed at destroying the PLO in 1982, an ongoing fight with the extremist paramilitary Hezbollah culminated in 2006 Lebanon War. On the border with Syria Israel has to deal with the Syrian civil war, whose relationships are deteriorating also by the tensions with the Iranian government. Moreover, since the first Palestinian exodus, Iraq has been deeply involved in the conflict, especially in supporting the second *intifada* which also led to Israel's support to US in 2003 Iraqi war. The only Arab states at peace with the State of Israel are Jordan and Egypt. Although Palestine was recognised as a state by 136 UN members, it still is a state without land whose countrymen are scattered all around the world.

## 1.5 The Palestinian Poetry: The Voice of Mahmud Darwish

Poetry has always been the preferred genre for Arab world, especially in Palestine where the poetical oral tradition never faded; in the aftermath of Israeli occupation,

poetry became the source of solace and the roots of nationalism. Generally speaking, Hanan Ashrawi (1978) distinguishes three main poetical attitudes: firstly nationalist poets whose verses reached a patriotic scale with the intent of shaking the masses, as in the case of Mahmud Darwish; secondly poets who did not write committed poetry but internalized the conflict and used writing as a sort of psycho-therapeutic treatment; finally “foreignized” poets drew inspirations from Western literature as well as Hebrew imagery and aimed at attributing an international visibility to their works. However, great part of the initial poetical production after 1948 did not engage with a constructive discourse but tended to be frozen into clichéd images of Palestine. A more diversified production was articulated after 1967, but the role of literature as assertion and reminder of the lost land never faded, literature is still the place where memory lingers. Inevitably, Palestinian literature during the Israeli occupation dealt with dispossession, injustice, alienation, rage; the main themes included the loss of the land, motherhood and History. Many poets and novelists have tried to depict the condition of being without a land but few succeeded and certainly nobody was able to represent Palestinian identity as Mahmoud Darwish. In his poem ‘Concerning Poetry’, Darwish exhorts poets to use their talent as a weapon and to abandon the Arabic traditional themes in order to address the masses to resist:

Comrade poets!  
We're in a new world  
What's past is dead, who writes a poem  
In the age of wind and the atom  
Creates prophets!

Our verses  
Have no colour  
No taste  
No sound  
If they do not carry the lantern  
From house to house!  
And if the “simple” cannot understand our poems  
Better for us to shed them  
And resort to silence

If only these words were  
A plough in the hands of a peasant  
A shirt, a door, a key  
If only these words were!

A poet says  
If my poems please my friends  
And anger my enemies  
Then I'm a poet.  
And I shall speak!

(Darwish, cited in Ashrawi, 1978, p.87)

According to Darwish, poetry must become “a plough, a shirt, a door, a key”, daily objects that everybody can use. The humble elements of the poem together with the straightforward tone, the short lines, the use of the emphatic first person belong to the new tradition of committed poetry and some of its features will be adopted by all other Palestinian poets. However, despite Darwish's claim that poets are those who enrage the enemy with their verses, Ashrawi complained that:

The prevalent use of free verse in Palestinian poetry has given freedom to the good poets and licence to the weak ones. Many poets ended up writing prose arranged on a page like poetry, while others string together the familiar series of images and symbols to come up with a nationalistic poem. These poems remain fragmentary without any internal unity and development, relying mostly on the emotional appeal of the topic itself (1978, p. 90).

On the contrary, Darwish, who rarely used the free-versification, acknowledged that the constant dialogue with the Other, whether Jewish or not, and a shift from the object (the land) to the subject (Palestinians) could free poetry from its exhausted images. Being born in 1942, Darwish lived through the *nakba* when he was only a child, forced to escape to Lebanon with his family, he then returned to Palestine as an illegal citizen. He could not go back to his hometown for it had been destroyed by Israeli soldiers who created there two colonies for Jews from Europe and Yemenite immigrants; eventually he was able to obtain the identity card that Palestinians had to carry with them all the time and that identified them according to their religion and place of residence. This was a sensitive matter for Palestinians whose passports represented an identity imposed by the Israeli intruders, while they recognized themselves in their land. Two poems significantly entitled ‘Passport’ and ‘Identity Card’, express the need of proving Palestinian as well as Arab identity in a historical moment where their existence was at risk. ‘Passport’'s final stanza urges to recognize that Palestinian identity could not be

appointed by Israeli papers but was embedded within their land and their collective consciousness.

Stripped of my name and identity?  
On soil I nourished with my own hands?  
Today Job cried out  
Filling the sky:  
Don't make an example of me again!  
Oh, gentlemen, Prophets,  
Don't ask the trees for their names  
Don't ask the valleys who their mother is  
From my forehead bursts the sword of light  
And from my hand springs the water of the river  
All the hearts of the people are my identity  
So take away my passport!

(Palestine Advocacy Project)

Darwish does not want to be asked to give proof of his Palestinian-ness in the same way as nobody would ask it to a tree; although some common elements of Palestinian poetry are present, such as the land and motherhood, Darwish reinvents the stock images of olive trees, doves and blinding sun. Moreover, he compares their situation to that of Job, a prophet common to Islamic, Jewish and Christian religions. Job, who was suddenly stripped of his family and land and left to an unfortunate destiny may remind of Palestinians, but it is not excluded that he may refer to Jewish as well, forced to flee their countries because of pogroms and Nazism. The condition of exile is common to other cultures and Darwish's strength is shown in his attempt to embrace all the cultures that passed on Palestinian soil. Similarly to 'Passport', 'Identity Card' emphatically proclaims not only the Palestinian but also the Arab identity and the poem became the outcry for all those who were belittled under oppressors:

Put it on record!	I am an Arab
I am an Arab	Working with comrades of toil
And the number of my card is	in a quarry.
fifty thousand	I have eight children
I have eight children	For them I wrest the loaf of
And the ninth is due after	bread,
summer.	The clothes and exercise books
What's there to be angry about?	From the rocks
	And beg for no alms at your
Put it on record!	door,

Lower not myself at your  
doorstep.  
What's there to be angry about?

Put it on record!  
I am an Arab.  
I am a name without a title,  
Patient in a country where  
everything  
Lives in a whirlpool of anger.  
My roots  
Took hold before the birth of  
time  
Before the burgeoning of the  
ages,  
Before cypress and olive trees,  
Before the proliferation of  
weeds.  
My father is from the family of  
the plough  
Not from highborn nobles.  
And my grandfather was a  
peasant  
Without line or genealogy.  
My house is a watchman's hut  
Made of sticks and reeds.  
Does my status satisfy you?  
I am a name without a  
surname.

Put it on record!  
I am an Arab.  
Colour of hair: jet black.  
Colour of eyes: brown.  
My distinguishing features:

On my head the 'iqal cords  
over a keffiyeh  
Scratching him who touches it.  
My address:  
I'm from a village, remote,  
forgotten,  
Its streets without name  
And all its men in the fields  
and quarry.  
What's there to be angry about?

Put it on record!  
I am an Arab.  
You stole my forefathers'  
vineyards  
And land I used to till,  
I and all my children,  
And you left us and all my  
grandchildren  
Nothing but these rocks.  
Will your government be  
taking them too  
As is being said?

So!  
Put it on record at the top of  
page one:  
I don't hate people,  
I trespass on no one's property.  
And yet, if I were to become  
hungry  
I shall eat the flesh of my  
usurper.  
Beware, beware of my hunger  
And of my anger!

(Darwish, 1964, p.17)

The poem was highly praised and immediately aroused enthusiasm when was recited for the first time and still nowadays it is considered a testament of Arabness other than Palestinian identity. In fact, the lines are short, vibrating and concise, structured to appeal and penetrate the audience. The English translation cannot express the steadfastness of the Arabic versification where the first two lines count only three short

words (Saggil! Ana ‘arabi); moreover, nominal sentences don’t need the verb “to be”, leaving the line with the most important elements of the poem, “I” and “Arab”. The structure of the poem is inspired by the tedious papers that Palestinian had to fill in order to be allowed to move but Darwish reverses the conditions of his countrymen: through the repetition of the imperative “put it on record!” the poet refuses the passive role and demands to be listened to. The assertion of identity is powerful and enforced by the repetition of the first person “I” and the possessive adjective “my”. The imagery adopted by Darwish is effective and recognizable by every Palestinian: a numerous family, the pride taken in the hard work of tilling the land, the vineyard and the tress, the black hair and the keffiyeh. Inevitably, the poem appeals to the patriotic feelings in declaring the fierce dignity and the anger at the usurpers of the land they belong to. Although the anger, literally capable of eating the enemy, is perceivable throughout the whole poem, Darwish wants to underline that he is free of hatred; in another long poem, ‘State of Siege’, he further explains his argumentations: “I don’t love and I don’t hate you / Yes, I don’t love you / Are you perhaps a part of me? / But I hate my imprisonment and I don’t hate you” (Darwish, 2014, p. 69). Darwish’s relationship with the Other has always been multifaceted and marked by difficult personal relationships. As a child, Darwish was already a gifted poet and was asked to read one of his poem for the celebrations of the State of Israel. He recalled that in the poem he addressed a Jewish boy wondering why they could not play together, and the following day he was summoned by the military governor who threatened him that his father would lose his job if he did not stop writing poems against the establishment (al-Udhari, 2005). However, his talent was evident and his new teacher, a Jewish woman, helped Darwish to develop his skills and taught him to appreciate the Old Testament as a literary text without discrediting the Arab culture. Perhaps, the motherly figure of the Jewish teacher provided the counterbalance for the military governor and contributed to Darwish’s vision of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a historical momentum. Notably, the poet fell in love with a Jewish woman but as he recalled later, the war insinuated between them and if he did not want to hate, he could not love either. Being imprisoned frequently in his adolescence and having to spend a consistent part of his life in exile, Darwish could not accept the Israeli presence peacefully, yet he tried to separate the notion of enemy from foreigner and of collective from individual. In a literary meeting with the Lebanese

poet Abbas Baydoun, Darwish (2007) distinguished among three different layers of being foreigner in the context of Palestine: on the one hand, he feels that Palestinians are treated as foreigners in their own land or they are foreigners as they have to live hosted by the other Arab countries; on the other hand, a more complex vision of human history depicts all people as foreigners because migrations, wars and heterogenous societies have always existed and therefore nobody is excluded from the process of foreignization. In *State of Siege*, written during the siege of Ramallah in 2002, the opposition with the enemy is swept away in four straightforward lines:

“Me or him”  
That’s how a war starts. But  
It ends with an embarrassing encounter:  
“Me and him”

(Darwish, 2014, p. 68)

History is another important theme in Darwish’s poetry. On the one hand, by placing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in an historical perspective, Darwish was endowed with a more human vision of the world; on the other hand, History contributed to free him from the obsessive thought of the loss the land, which affected deeply Palestinian development, including poetry. “I discovered that the land is fragile”, admitted Darwish (2007, p. 26) and he added that as he could not find Palestine in the geographic part of History, he preferred to look at the historical part of geography. Palestinian history is not limited to the land, his homeland hosted multiple cultures, including the Jewish one, and it was his intention to embrace them all.

# Chapter 2

## 2.1 Susan Abulhawa and Palestine

Susan Abulhawa was born to Palestinian parents originally from Jerusalem, as they were refugees from the Six Day War, her childhood was marked by the diasporic condition that brings together all Palestinian experiences. Although her novel *Mornings in Jenin* is a work of fiction, Abulhawa (2010) declared in an interview that the chapter of her book devoted to Amal's stay in an orphanage was autobiographical. At the beginning of the 1980s she had lived for three years in one of the most famous orphanages in Jerusalem, "Dar al-Tifl" (literally the house of the child), which was run by Hind al-Husseini. This remarkable woman initially took care of Der Yassin massacre's survived children and then decided to devote her life to assist and educate Palestinian refugee orphans. Thanks to her care, some Palestinian girls were saved from a life of difficulties and were allowed scholarships to study abroad. Having moved to the United States when she was a teenager, Abulhawa graduated there in the medical sector and then she started to work in a drug company. After being sent to the occupied territories as an international observer, she witnessed the atrocities committed against Palestinians in 2002 massacre in Jenin refugee camp. Interviewed by the *Gulf News*, Abulhawa explained that she was so shocked by what she saw and by the generosity of the people she met despite their poverty that she could not return to America light-hearted (Badih, 2012). Some months after her departure from Jenin she was fired from the company she was working for and the lay-off allowed her to give voice to the tormenting images of the Palestinian refugee camp; without realising it she was writing her first novel. In the "Author's Note" of *Mornings in Jenin* Abulhawa remarks that she was encouraged to write by the Arab critic Hanan Ashrawi, who after reading one of her article about her memories of Jerusalem, invited her to share her experiences in an autobiography, because Palestine needed such a touching and humane counternarrative. The novel was firstly published in 2006 by a small editor under the title of *The Scar of David* but in 2010 it was re-edited and republished by Bloomsbury, reaching a wider audience. The novel was praised and received with enthusiasm particularly by the



Arabic readership because Palestinian lacked an effective narrative to tell their story in the West, where the public was more accustomed to Jewish narratives rather than Palestinian ones. Not only were Palestinian novels started to be translated later if compared to other postcolonial literatures, but the Arab prose posed a challenge to Westerners who did not immediately identify with Middle-East characters.

*Mornings in Jenin* was promoted around the US in book groups and it was chosen as the first book of the reading campaign “One book – Many Communities” sponsored by the “Librarians and Archivists with Palestine”. The aim was to gather readers from different US cities to discuss the book together, helping to grant the Palestinian case visibility more easily than with historical fictions. Indeed, the novel was chosen for its accessibility and ability to arouse powerful feelings, together with linear structure which facilitated the reading for those who were not familiar with Palestinian history (Irving, 2014). However, notwithstanding Abulhawa’s claim that she wrote the book out of any political intent, mainly as a love story, Palestinian history is inevitably political and collective. Even in the genres of memoir and autobiography the individual focus could not be separated from the fate of Palestinian collective experiences. An example is Palestinian writer Ghada Karmi, author of *In Search of Fatima*, she added the subtitle *A Palestinian Story* to demonstrate the inextricability of personal and collective history.

In 2001 Abulhawa founded the non-profit organisation “Playgrounds for Palestine” aimed at raising funds for asserting children’s rights to play even in wartime and recognising their vulnerability, as in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict children were not protected. In 2015 Abulhawa wanted to return to Palestine as a political commentator and human-rights activist but she was denied the access to the West Bank by Israeli authorities, as many others who opposed the government.

In 2013 Abulhawa’s collection of poetry *My Voice Sought the Wind* was published, a work that embraces the Palestinian diaspora as well as the Arab culture and the writer’s personal experiences; in 2015 her second novel entitled *The Blue Between Sky and Water* came out. Even in this case, Palestine is the subject but this time the story is mainly told from the point of view of a young boy living in Gaza.

Abulhawa first novel can be placed between Palestinian recollections of diasporic identity and American narrative set out to shed light on the Palestinian case to a Western readership. Indeed, the choice of a Western audience is suggested by the in-text

explanations and by the presence of a bibliography section and a glossary translating Arabic terms into English at the end of the book. Moreover, *Mornings in Jenin* pays homage to one of the greatest Palestinian authors, Ghassan Kanafani, in narrating the loss of a Palestinian child who ultimately is adopted by an Israeli family. His novella *Returning to Haifa* was the first Palestinian work which tried to understand the Other without hatred nor idealisation.

*Mornings in Jenin* is the story of the Abulheja family spanned across four generations mainly following the life of Amal. As she grows older, she sums up her story:

The story of one family in an obscure village, visited one day by a history that was not its own, and forever trapped by longing between roots and soil. It is a tale of war, its chilling, burning, and chilling-again fire. Of furious love and a suicide bomber. Of a girl who escaped her destiny to become a word, drained of its meaning. Of grown children sifting through the madness to find their relevance. Of a truth that pushed its way through lies, emerging from a crack, a scar, in a man's face (pp. 284-285).

The novel begins in the late 1930s in the small Palestinian village of Ein Hod, where Yehya and Basima live with their sons Hasan and Darweesh. The former marries a wild Bedouin girl, Dalia, while the latter, after being married and having children, spends his life on a wheelchair as a consequence of a shotgun in his spinal by an Israeli soldier. In 1948 the village is occupied by the Israeli army and in the chaos of the invasion Dalia loses sight of her second born Ismael. Ismael, whose face is marked by a scar accidentally caused by his older brother Yousef, is kidnapped by the Israeli soldier Moshe to give solace to his sterile wife Jolanta, a victim of the concentration camps. Ismael, renamed David, will grow as a Jew and the fate has him meeting with his brother Yousef respectively in the role of oppressor and victim. Amal, Dalia's third born, grows in Jenin refugee camps with her family, until her father Hasan disappears, Yousef joins the Palestinian resistance and her mother dies after years of dementia. Being left alone, with her best friend Huda betrothed and about to start a family, Amal decides to accept to enter an institution which can guarantee her a better education and allegedly a scholarship to study abroad. When she is given the possibility to finish her studies in Philadelphia, Amal leaves Palestine saying goodbye to her friend Huda, who has just given birth to a girl named Amal in her honour, and to Palestine. In the United States she experiences the feeling so common to exiles, the *ghurba*, as she felt a

stranger and tried to adapt to the new life apparently turning herself into an American young woman named Amy. As she returns to Lebanon where Yousef is living with his wife Fatima several years later, she falls in love with her brother's best friend Majid, a doctor working full time to save lives in the refugee camp. Their marriage seems to arouse high hopes for a happy love-story in the background of the horrors brought by war, but as Amal becomes pregnant and Israeli invasion of Lebanon is impending, she returns to America with the intention of obtaining visas for all her family. However, in the meanwhile Majid's apartment is bombed while he is asleep, Fatima is brutally killed with her daughter and Yousef leaves to join a terrorist group. Left alone with her daughter Sara, Amal shuts everything and everyone out not to feel the pain that would otherwise overwhelm her; as her mother before, Amal keeps her daughter at distance until she receives a phone-call from David, the long-lost brother. Their meeting unveils the past bringing mother and daughter close together and willing to embark in a journey in Palestine to discover Sara's and David's roots. The return is fatal to Amal who is killed by an Israeli soldier in an attempt to shield her daughter; nonetheless, the novel ends with hopeful expectations for those characters who had finally embraced their homeland.

## 2.2 History in *Mornings in Jenin*

The history of Palestine, including the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict, has long been published and discussed, whether it can be considered biased or not. It implies ethnic, religious, political and social stances that reached far beyond Palestinians and Israelis, creating a complicate nexus of international involvements where a serene narrative of the conflict is still unconceivable. Despite the numerous productions of historical or sociologic nature, the everyday-like human activities are those which seem to be lacking for Palestine. Literature provides the human dimension and, in the particular case of Palestine, roots its characters in History. In this sense, *Mornings in Jenin* is no exception. An urgent need to be grounded in historical facts can be felt, perceived both in the very structure of the novel and in the attempt to give truthfulness to the fiction. From a mere structural point of view, every chapter of the novel describes a particular moment of Palestinian history: the opening chapter is unavoidably "El Nakba", which

spans indicatively from the late 1930s to 1955, including 1948 exodus and the birth of Amal; “El Naksa” from 1960 to the Six Day war; “The Scar of David” follows the Palestinian rebellious movements in Jordan and Lebanon in the aftermath of 1967 war; “El Ghurba” covers Amal’s exile in the US; “Alfi fi Beirut” narrates Shatila and Sabra refugee camp massacres; “Elly Bayna” describes the first *intifada*; “Baladi” and “Nihaya or Bidaya” are about the 2002 massacre in Jenin refugee camp. Thus, the novel mainly follows the chronological order (except for the prologue and the last chapter), letting History unfold itself. From the vantage point of the present, Abulhawa can acknowledge the different steps that led to the partitioning of Palestine and insert her fictional plot in the general framework of historical cause-effects. Thus, *Mornings in Jenin* tells of a four-generation family saga, from Amal’s grandparents experiencing the *nakba* to her daughter Sara living in 2000s. The length and the structure of the novel are the expression of the contemporary phase of the Arab-Israeli conflict, which, although it is not even close to an ending, has reached a stability in the daily outbursts of violence. As the conflict has been going on for more than sixty years, the initial need to record the present as a form of existence is now eclipsed:

Under the influence of a highly important event that is incompletely understood and difficult to apprehend aesthetically, the story-telling tradition tends to become highly self-conscious; the event is 1948, and art turns back on itself to become meta-art. The scene is the location of the nexus between art and its objects: it knits time and character together in an exhibited articulation. Pushed to the surface thus, articulation guarantees survival, as Scheherazade’s nightly recital in *The Arabian Nights* postpones her own death (Said, 2002, pp. 54-55).

In post-1948 narratives, the urgent need to write was articulated in short stories and novellas which could express the immediacy of the present; to some extent, writing in itself was more important than what was written. Contrary to Abulhawa’s need to present Palestinian history in its chronological fluency, Mahfouz’s and Kanafani’s novellas were marked by episodism where “the scene dramatizes *periodicity*, that is, the active historical process by which Arab reality, if it is to have existential status, must form itself” (Said, 2002, p. 54). The current relationship with History is politically more complex and emotionally troubled, as Palestinians do not have a place where History can follow its course. Therefore, the issue at stake is not only what is happening in the present, but also what has happened in the past in an attempt to root Palestinian identity

throughout the course of History. According to Cariello (2012) Palestinians constitute a paradox: their identity is imbued with history and yet they are excluded from it as history needs to be grounded in time and geography; being time not anchored to a place, it cannot flow and it remains stuck in the past, re-enacting it again and again. Given the attempts to erase Palestinian history to legitimise Israeli state-building, rooting the past becomes pivotal in Arab narratives. Abulhawa epitomises this trend of placing Palestine throughout the course of history by inserting fragments of news reports or foreign observers' commentaries; she also included passages taken from British correspondent Robert Fisk's memoir *Pity the Nation: The Abduction of Lebanon*. Moreover, she added a bibliographical section at the end of her novel to invite further readings, but especially to emphasise the truthfulness of what is being narrated. Frequently in *Mornings in Jenin* History meets personal stories, emphasising how the destiny of Palestinians was decided by foreign powers in foreign lands: "Thus the PLO was exiled to Tunisia carrying the written promise of the United States. The fate of those I loved lay in the folds of that Ronald Reagan promise" (p. 219). The repetition of the word "promise" in the context of international state affairs emphasises the fragility of Palestinian fate, all they have is a promise to cling at, adding tragedy to a reality that seems to exist only in hope. Abulhawa's choice of words is never random but denotes awareness in the way Palestinian identity was created by media to convey a certain image more favourable to the Israeli cause: "The television headlined "Operation Peace in the Galilee". Such was history's name. *Operation*; how words are violated. Majid performed operations to save lives" (p. 216). What is defined as "Operation Peace" is actually Lebanon's invasion by Israeli troops that will lead to 1982 Sabra and Shatila massacres.

The novel often shifts from the journal-like narrative to the idyllic and romantic fiction, creating a striking contrast between the harsh reality of living in refugee camps and rich poetical frameworks embroidered by Abulhawa. While Amal is reading Robert Fisk's reports on Shatila massacre in 1982, her personal history intertwines with the historical report:

In the next passage, I found the fate of Fatima and her friends - those friends who were at her side when she gave birth to Falasteen [...]: "On the other side of the main road, up a track through the debris, we found the bodies of five women and several children. The women were middle-aged and their corpses lay draped over a pile of rubble. One lay on her back, her dress torn open and the head of a little girl

emerging from behind her. The girl had short, dark curly hair, her eyes were staring at us and there was a frown on her face. She was dead. Someone had split open the woman's stomach, cutting sideways and then upwards, perhaps trying to kill her unborn child. Her eyes were wide open, her dark face frozen in horror" (p. 226).

Although Fisk's report is nothing but cold and inhumane, Amal's personal attachment to her sister-in-law Fatima and her niece Falasteen exceeds the description. Moreover, the reader can also recognise the characters by their physical description and delete the note of uncertainty in Fisk's accounts about Fatima's pregnancy as the reader already knows that her unborn child was due in the same month of Amal's. However, if the report may have left any doubt about the corpses' identity, the narrative adds:

An Associated Press photographer pressed his fingers and sent the scarlet of darkness of that scene around the world. I saw the photo in the Arab press and first recognized the woman's pale blue dress. *Fatima's favourite dishdasha, worn thin in nearly two decades of use.* The curly-haired little girl behind her was my niece. *Falasteen* (p. 226).

The photographer's action seems almost alienating, mechanical and external to the scene, while the image of the "scarlet of darkness" is passionate, almost intimate. Indeed, this is the connection between History, represented by journalists and photographers, and those who are living that particular history; while pictures are taken, their subjects have whole different stories. In another episode, Amal is reading Norman Finkelstein's *The Rise and Fall of Palestine* about the abduction and torture of Palestinian children by the Israeli army and the passage focuses on the photo of a six-year-old boy blindfolded in an army jeep. Again, the report is reinforced by the photographic reportage and by the shift to a third-person omniscient narrator who informs the reader that Amal does not know that the boy she is reading about is Mansour, Huda's son. Moreover, another interesting device adds tragedy or suspense to the novel: while an informed reader is aware of the events that took place in Sabra and Shatila in 1982 and may expect a similar tragedy, somebody who is new to the Palestinian history has completely different expectations. From the vantage point of the present, *Mornings in Jenin* leaves the former kind of reader hopeful that History will be defied but prepared to the worse, while the latter accesses History through the heart-breaking unfolding of the events. Although both readers benefit from the narrative, it is

probably the uninformed reader that Abulhawa expected to constitute the majority of her readership. Indeed, what Edward Said (2010) complained about Palestinians was their inability to provide a truthful representation of their identity and acquire visibility in the West, where they are represented only in the binary terms of violent terrorists or pitiful victims. According to the critic, although both Jews and Arabs embodied the passive category of the colonised being represented by the West, ultimately the former managed to represent themselves successfully, with the consequence of attributing a barbaric identity to Orientals. In the framework of colonialist occupation, the counterforce was the most immediate reaction but it also proved to be futile in the Palestinian case. While the direct clash of resistance literature would “bind the colonised into the myth” (Iskandar & Rustom, 2010, p. 299), *Mornings in Jenin* liberates Palestinians from the static dichotomy imposed on them by not hiding the brutality operated by fighters but neither depicting them as weak-willed passive recipients of violence.

Temporal constructs play a significant role in Palestinian discourses as “life in exile has to the Palestinian refugees implied a temporal situating of meaning in the past and future tenses” (Lindholm Schultz & Hammer, 2003, p. 94). According to Johnson, Palestinian society has come to define “its presence in terms of its past and of its future in terms of inversions of normality and with reference to what it has lost” (Lindholm Schultz & Hammer, 2003, p. 95). Indeed, as the present has become intolerable in most cases, Palestinians think about the past or the future: the former brings nostalgia and the awareness of what was lost, while the latter cannot be imagined but as the reversal of the present. Consequently, the perception of time is inextricable from the loss of the land. Although these are the aspirations of Palestinians, the present cannot be avoided, “the present is not an imaginative luxury but a literal existential necessity” (Said, 2002, p. 53). Abulhawa perfectly frames the problematic handling of time, but while other Palestinian narratives describe the present as the necessary condition to reach the future, as a moment of waiting that is not really inhabited by human activity, *Mornings in Jenin* pays great attention on the sufferings of the present. Although there are dreams for a better future, for a time when all the Abulheja family will be happily reunited, the contemporaneity cannot be rejected because it exists, it is the space that characters have to inhabit in order to survive. Therefore, life in Jenin refugee camp is also an attempt to

normality, where the Arab life is dictated by the daily prayers, by cooking traditional food and trying to keep busy. Moreover, Abulhawa depicts intimate scenes of daily life such as sex or masturbations to emphasise how Palestinian refugee life is no different from any other regarding to human basic needs. However, after 1967 the priority of these needs was destined to be reconsidered: Amal's desires for a bicycle or the lack of soldiers or a real bed are turned into desires for survival. Present is a feminine space in refugee camps, as men were imprisoned or joined PLO or similar groups, women were left to take care for everything. At times, there is the feeling that life was just the same as before 1948, but only in feminine moments: when children are born, in women's celebrations before marriages and in their zagharid, when women gossip cheerfully paying visits to their neighbours. The title of the novel itself evokes the daily rituals that take place in Jenin, the routine that gives a purpose to refugees' life.

Moreover, not only is the present paid attention to, but it is also enlarged as if under a magnifying glass. According to Cariello (2012) in *Mornings in Jenin* time dilutes, as it acquires a personal dimension, while History is pacing; during a truce in the village of Ein Hod, Palestinians are offering food to Israelis hoping to be spared from the imminent occupation of their land. Two important passages narrate the episode of Ismael's disappearance during a truce from two different points of view. In the first, Ismael's mother Dalia is looking for her son in the chaos of the Israeli invasion:

The clouds passed as suddenly as they came. The sun stung like a scorpion. Dust was high, cactus low, and Dalia thought of water. *In an instant*. One instant, six-month-old Ismael was at her chest, in her motherly harms. In the next, Ismael was gone. [...] Dalia stopped and so did time (pp. 32-33).

In the second passage, the Israeli soldier Moshe is watching Dalia and his sons. While in Ein Hod the atmosphere is dense with suspicion and fear, time dilutes to leave space for Moshe's reflections about the injustices that hit the Jewish and especially his wife Jolanta:

Jolanta had suffered so much; how could God deny her the elemental gift of motherhood while granting so many healthy children to Arabs, who were already so numerous? The injustice of it all solidified in him a resolve to take – by force if necessary – whatever was needed (p. 37).



Moshe's resentment stops the time of the narrative while Palestinians are being bombed and Israeli soldiers attack the unarmed civilians in the background. The year is 1948 and the villagers do not know that they have reached the breaking point of their history. In the novel, the personal tragedy is inscribed within the collective tragedy of 1948, as Palestinian identity will be locked in that year in a constant fixation of what was lost; in the same way Amal's mother mourns for the loss of her second born:

An instant can crush a brain and change the course of life, the course of history. It was an infinitesimal flash of time that Dalia would revisit in her mind, over and over for many years, searching for some clue, some hint of what might have happened to her son. Even after she became lost in an eclipsed reality, she would search the fleeing crowd in her mind for Ismael (p. 32).

Not only was the course of history changed, but also the Abulheja family's story. Dalia, who eventually will sink into dementia in the constant mourning of Ismael, is representative of both the collective and personal history of Palestine as the loss of a son also means the loss of the land. In the wake of the *nakba*, Dalia's detachment from life has enormous consequences: Amal, desperately seeking for her mother's love and inevitably turned down, will grow cold towards any affections. After her husband Majid and the rest of her family die as casualties of the Arab-Israeli conflict, she finds refuge in the maternal creed "whatever you feel, keep it inside", applying it also to her new-born Sara. In this context, the separation from her homeland is an emotional separation from her daughter, in the same way as Dalia's loss of land in 1948 was also the loss of a son:

In the sorrow of a history buried alive, the year 1948 in Palestine fell from the calendar into exile, ceasing to reckon the marching count of days, months, and years, instead becoming an infinite mist of one moment in history (p. 35).

Dalia then, would live forever in that mist where together with her home, she had also lost Ismael. *Mornings in Jenin* is the novel where separation becomes absolute, as time stops after the *nakba*, Amal is forever entrapped in her condition of refugee, without being able to overcome the emotional distance from her daughter (Cariello, 2012). According to Sibilio (2013) the *nakba* institutionalised a collective memory as a counter-narrative to the Israeli discourse, but it developed throughout the decades. After the 1993 Oslo Accords, the nationalist narrative ceased to be identified in the idyllic

relationship with the farming land since it took on more complex issues related to the problem of refugees and a general lack of confidence on the possibility of returning. During these years multiple memories of the homeland were reactivated, fearing that the *nakba* would be forgotten on the international scale, but also that Palestinian struggle could be weakened by the erosion of memory. Thus, Sibilio (2013) emphasises that different practices that involved the reiteration of memory took place in the 1990s, involving public ceremonies as well as cultural events. However, literature is the most effective genre to oppose oblivion and the most flexible to adapt to the different articulations of memory throughout the years. Abulhawa testifies the different standpoints from where the Palestinian discourse is expressed in relation to the collective memory, after the *nakba* in the Abulheja family and in Amal's diasporic identity. Thus, the period before 1948 is remembered as a triumphant time of hard and fulfilling work, the rural dimension came to represent Palestinian identity in opposition to Israeli modernisation of the country. Therefore, the pre-1948 past is idyllic in Palestinian memories, an untouchable and unchanging fragment of identity. In *Mornings in Jenin* the first chapter is emblematic of this attitude. The opening of the novel is almost fairy-tale like:

In a distant time, before history marched over the hills and shattered present and future, before wind grabbed the land at one corner and shook it of its name and character, before Amal was born, a small village east of Haifa lived quietly on figs and olives, open frontiers and sunshine (p. 3).

As the description moves forward, the moonlight casts shadows over Ein Hod, enlightening the peasants waking up early as it is the start of the olive harvest. The daily routine of the main characters is simple and loving, framed by the five-a-day prayers and by beautiful landscapes. Such a beginning is intentionally idealised and romantic, as Hasan and Darweesh, still young, could be the appealing protagonists of a romance. On the one hand, the idyllic description is symptomatic of the Palestinian collective memory of a perfect past in contrast with the harrowing and demanding living conditions of the present. On the other hand, the first chapter is placed in contrast with the prelude set in 2002, when Amal is about to be shot by an Israeli soldier. The scene is almost cinematographic and the reader is abruptly brought into the tensions of the novel. Without providing a general context, the scene seems to be under a magnifying

glass: the reader can even see the soldier wearing contacts and blinking. These contrasts are frequent throughout the novel, not only the extremes of realistic and the idealised, but also of the historical and the idyllic. As already mentioned, the novel is provided with historical accounts to give a status of truth and existence to Palestinians. In addition to this aspect, history avoids to be “buried alive” in the collective memory of Palestinians; Yehya, Amal’s grandfather, represents the essence of Palestinian-ness before the *nakba*:

So it was that eight centuries after its founding by a general of Saladin’s army in 1189 A.D., Ein Hod was cleared of its Palestinian children. Yehya tried to calculate the number of generations who had lived and died in that village and he came up with forty. It was a task made simple by the way Arabs name their children to tell the story of their genealogy, conferring five or six names from the child’s direct lineage, in proper order (pp. 34-35).

Yehya bears the memory of Palestinian past and when he is gone his stories will be retold because they are the only evidence left of belonging to Palestine. In a context where Palestinian history and people were tried to be erased to give legitimacy to Israelis, the stories of the elders became the only history. Those children who were born in refugee camps and never came to see their homeland had to be nourished with the tales of their country never to forget who took their land. The village of Ein Hod was cleared of its inhabitants following a consolidated Israeli policy, but it did not go through the common process of modernisation and suppression of Palestinian architecture. Indeed, Marcel Janco, one of the founders of the Dadaist movement, insisted for the preservation of the village, so that it could be turned into an artists’ colony. In this sense, Dada helped to create a native and nationalist art within the new-born state of Israel that was in agreement with Zionist ideology; however, Janco differed from the initial artist settlers who moulded their art around an idyllic union of man and the land (Slyomovics, 1998). Drawing from a natural inclination to nativism and vernacular expressions, Janco romantically idealised Palestinian architecture and appropriated it into the claim that he had preserved Ein Hod from the modernistic attitude of the Israeli government (Slyomovics, 1998). Thus, the objects left by the former Palestinian inhabitants became works of art exhibited in museums as the expression of primitivism rather than as archeologic testimonies. Abulhawa records the complex relationship that both Palestinians and Israelis maintained with the village,

which epitomised the denied presence of the former despite the “archeologic” proof. Hence, elderly people constituted the evidence of belonging and the collective memory of the past, yet in the aftermath of the *nakba*, memories took a different shape in the outset of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Notably, the Palestinian poet Mureed Barghouti epitomised this attitude in countless experiences:

My relationship to place is, in fact, a relationship to time. I live in islands of time. Some of which I already have lost; others I possess for a moment, then lose them, because I am always placeless. The monastery spring is not a place, it is a period of time. Specifically, it is the time when I was a child and my Uncle Ibrahim was a farmer and fisherman, whose traps enticed birds from our mountains... The places we yearn for are really periods of time (1998, p. 64).

In Amal’s childhood, the old Hajj Salem was the one telling stories that gave shape to a Palestine she never had the chance to see, a Palestine without refugee camps, because she was born in 1955 after the *nakba*. The title of “Hajj”, given to those who made the pilgrimage to Mecca, was also a title of respect, acquired thanks to his knowledge and the episodic history of Palestine that he narrated to children. “He was the most animated and lively character of my youth, and it was he who passed history on to the camp’s children. My treasure of Palestinian folklore and proverbs came from him” (p. 78) would remember Amal and she would pass his stories to her daughter Sara. At a particular moment of her life when Amal feels rootless and unloved in the United States, she would look for Hajj Salem’s stories in books, to ground them in history and have an anchor to her past. When Amal comes back to Jenin, she regrets that children cannot hear his stories because the life of refugees has changed and it lacks the hope and vivacity that characterised Amal’s childhood. Not only has Hajj Salem’s death been felt as the loss of a close-knit relation, but it also represents the loss of a part of history. Moreover, similarly to Barghouti, Amal constructs her relationship to Palestine as a relationship with time: Jenin to her means the days spent with her friend Huda and especially, the hours she spent reading with her father. The memories of her homeland become “the chronicles of times” during her years of nostalgia. While memories of places were fading during her stay in America, even the face of her beloved Majid, she would recall fragments of Gibran and Rumi that her father used to read when everyone was still asleep. The habit of waking up early never let her and Arab poetry gave her comfort in her darkest hours. After visiting Hasan's childhood friend Ari in Jerusalem

with Sara and David, Amal wants to stop in a particular spot where she can contemplate the old city from afar as she did before entering the orphanage in her childhood. Amal complains about the changes in the architecture that turned Jerusalem into a Jewish city and she cannot avoid thinking that it is now cold and cruel. While Sara is enchanted by the sight, Amal reflects:

Why do dignity and honor hinge on stone and soil? Generation upon generation disembowel the earth, building monuments from her entrails to mark their time, to mold the dream of some relevance in an immense universe, to manufacture a significance from utter randomness to attain immortality by seizing, stamping, gouging an immortal earth. "It is only stone, Sara". My thoughts escaped. "Stones that represent history, Mom", she said, turning to me in disbelief that I would belittle what seemed so grand. "It's magnificent". "I'll show you an olive tree in Jenin - Old Lady, she's called - that has more history than the Old City walls. It's more beautiful, humble, authentic than the chiseled stone here" (pp. 290-291).

Only when Amal is older can she find Palestinian history outside the chiseled stone. In her previous trip to Khilwa on the Mount of Olives from where she observed Jerusalem, her young mind was impressed by the monumentality of the city and she found comfort as she observed that "it possesses me, no matter who conquers it, because its soil is the keeper of my roots, of the bones of my ancestors" (p. 140). Having destroyed much of the Arab architecture to rebuild Jewish infrastructures, Amal realises that history cannot reside in what can be wiped out or it would mean that Palestine can be removed so easily as well. History then, resides in the symbolic figure of Old Lady, the olive tree growing in Jenin, worshipped by Yehya and subject of Hasan's and Hajj Salem's stories. The old tree represents both the personal dimension as it was a sort of playground for refugee children, and the history of Palestine because it is one of the oldest things left that has not been destroyed yet. Moreover, it bears the symbolic connotation of rootedness and lack of ownership, a fundamental topic for Palestinians:

No one can own a tree. It can belong to you, as you can belong to it. we come from the land, give our love and labor to her, and she nurtures us in return. When we die, we return to the land. In a way, she owns us. Palestine owns us and we belong to her (p. 62).

Therefore, history is inscribed within the two-way relationship with the land: Palestinians belong to their homeland and vice versa; moreover, the rootedness of the

tree is emblematic of the rootedness of the family. Indeed, family history and identity are carried on in the Arab names, as every child bears the names of his father and grandfather up to the fifth or sixth degree of kinship. In 1982, after Majid is dead and Falasteen and Fatima were massacred in the Shatila camp, Amal describes her feelings as “a deafening crescendo of a two-thousand-year-old lineage” (p. 223). Pain, losses, humiliations are carried by the entire lineage, the burden of history is extended beyond the nuclear family to seek comfort in every Palestinian. Frequently throughout the novel, Amal questions time and history in the futile attempt to navigate different paths for her life: she cannot avoid asking if her life would be different if David did not beat Yousef at the checkpoint or if her family would still be alive if Jolanta’s parents had not died in concentration camps. “Would history have happened?” (p. 269) is the haunting question that victims of history cannot avoid asking, the feeling that Palestinians had to pay the price for the Jewish Holocaust cannot be shaken off from Amal’s rambling thoughts.

Although History’s lumbering presence reaches the proportion of a character, it does not overshadow the everyday human dimension nor the fictional plot of the novel. While characters are striving to keep their world together, history pulls them apart by placing more obstacles and more pain to endure. Moreover, in the fiction of the novel as well as in real life, Palestinian families are scattered, separated and erased from history; in this context, the family tree of the Abulhejas that Abulhawa places at the beginning of the novel may be seen as an attempt to reunite them, to keep them all together. As Amal fails at providing Sara’s ancestry, her daughter forces her to follow the roots of the family tree in order to find her own identity. During the years spent in the US Amal tried to find refuge in an international environment where she could suppress the burden of Palestinian identity and history; she embraced US mainstream culture in an attempt to shut down her past and live only in the present where she changed her name into Amy, an ordinary woman with no history but consequently, no future as well. Indeed, she cannot suppress the lumbering presence of her history and never forgotten ghosts come to haunt her. In the Palestinian case, the present bears the tensions created by the dialectic with either past or future, this dialectic is constant, but also enriching (Said, 2002). During her American stay Amal tries to live her present by shaking off her past and the demons that she inherited from it and yet she starts seeing a future for herself

only when she accepts the tensions in her life, when she finally decides to go back to Palestine.

### 2.3 Palestinian identity and exile

The condition of exile and diaspora has existed since the beginning of time and it characterised Jews, Armenians, Palestinians, Sub-Saharan Africans and many other ethnic groups; whether imposed or voluntary migrations, at the turn of the twentieth century, it became almost a cultural phenomenon as people have fled from famine, wars, persecutions or despotic regimes. Exile implies rootlessness, a nostalgic sadness for the lost home but also exalting dreams of return mixed with a constant interrogation of the past. In the Palestinian case exile is a condition of forced mobility not single-directed since people were scattered all around the world, in the Arab countries as well as in Europe and in America. In many cases families were separated and reuniting them or even keeping contacts implied transnational movements; being on the move is so intrinsic to Palestinian-ness that Darwish defined his countrymen “wanderers of the earth”. This condition was particularly painstaking for Palestinians, as the concept of family in the Arab world does not only count the closest blood-related but is extended also to third or fourth degree of kinship. Most part of Palestinians moved to Jordan, Gaza Strip, Lebanon and Syria, but their status is often ambiguous. While in Jordan they are usually given Jordanian citizenship notwithstanding the fact that their integration remains problematic, in the other countries Palestinians are generally considered, and consider themselves, foreigners. Although their condition arouses sympathy and pity, yet their difficult integration into the socio-economical nexus is more complicated than it may seem. Indeed, it should be acknowledged that even in Gaza and in the West Bank refugees are considered as guests rather than countrymen; moreover, marriages between refugees and non-refugees are rare, employability for the former is neatly inferior than for the latter (Lindholm Schultz & Hammer, 2003). Such a problematic relationship among Palestinians themselves epitomises the extent to which the condition of exiles poses challenges in establishing the cornerstones of Palestinian identity. Khalidi points out how Palestinian identity is created by outside ascription and labelling in terms of difference:

The quintessential Palestinian experience, which illustrates some of the most basic issues raised by Palestinian identity, takes place at a border, an airport, a checkpoint: in short, at any one of those modern barriers where identities are checked and verified. What happens to Palestinians at those crossing points brings home to them how much they share in common as people. For it is at these borders and barriers that the six million Palestinians are singled out for 'special treatment', and are forcefully reminded of their identity: of who they are, and why they are different than others... As a result, at each of these barriers which most others take for granted, every Palestinian is exposed to the possibility of harassment, exclusion and sometimes worse simply because of his or her identity (Khalidi, 1997 in Schultz & Hammer, 2003, p. 88).

The condition of statelessness and homelessness is not only emotional but also legal; the fact that Palestinians do not have passports, the legal systems do not recognize them as citizens of any state creates additional discomfort to their situation. The long procedures at Allenby Bridge to enter the West Bank from Jordan do not assure the entrance to anyone, not even those with American passports, as in the case of Susan Abulhawa in 2015. For this reason, recurrent tropes of identity cards and checkpoints fill the narratives of Palestine, in the footsteps of Mahmoud Darwish's powerful declaration of identity in 'Identity Card' and 'Passport'. In *Mornings in Jenin* checkpoints are described as a humiliating routine since refugees have to stand in long queues while they are often beaten or refused to pass according to the whims of the Israeli soldiers. Having to beg to move in their own land, Palestinians considered checkpoints and ID papers as the emblematic of their condition, the nullification of their pride but also of their humanity. Significantly, one of the most important encounter in the novel between David and Yousef takes place at a checkpoint. Although they had already met after Yousef was tortured in 1967, their second encounter is more problematic. David bears doubts about his identity, evoked in the image of demons, but he is too afraid to allow these demons to surface. However, when Yousef is queueing at a checkpoint near the village of Bartaa, his resemblance to David who is inspecting Palestinian IDs there, calls the attention of the other Israeli soldiers. David's rage falls on Yousef who is brutally beaten but cannot rebel against an Israeli soldier; years later David will explain to Amal how power derived from possessing one's life. The consequences of the beating are inscribed within Yousef's abused body as well as within his tormented mind: as Dalia and Amal, he has to turn his pain inwardly, alienating him from his



younger sister and from the love for Fatima. Not only had he to endure torture and humiliations, but the only hope that was left to his family, finding Ismael, is turned into the worst possible scenario. In addition to this episode, checkpoints mark not only Yousef's destiny, but also Amal's: she is caught while trespassing the confinements of the refugee camp, when she needed to see a glimpse of the free Palestine of her parents; the soldier intimates her to stop and after her papers are being checked she is politely invited to go home. However, her innate instinct, like a wild animal being haunted, is to hasten while she is shot from a watchtower. Although her kidney is not damaged, the flesh is teared apart from her abdomen leaving an everlasting scar. This scar adds to the other visible scars of the novel: Dalia's burnt hand and David's ominous mark on his face, each expressing the indelible memory of a traumatic identity.

Notwithstanding the fact that Israelis simplified the problematic categorisation of Palestinian-ness with papers of different colours according to religion and place of origin, Palestinians exist in a paradoxical condition: they are not allowed a passport, only a document stating their date of birth and place of origin, which is not considered valid in every country and they still need Israeli authorisation to move. Given this condition of uncertain existence and dependency, identity is to be found outside the legal system, in a common past shaped by a persistent imagery. According to Said (2002) the status of exiles strengthened Palestinians' awareness of their national identity by creating a bond among refugees and a fierce opposition to Israelis. In this sense, Arab identity was grounded in those features that represented Palestinian-ness but that were also in contrast to Zionism. Therefore, one of the most recurrent trope is the land, a land which romantically resists the modernisation of infrastructures operated by the Israelis, and it is usually addressed to as a caring mother or female lover. The frequent metaphors used to describe Palestinian identity are the orange blossoms, thyme, valleys, figs and especially olive trees. Indeed, more than anything else they embody Palestinian-ness in the ability to grow in poor soil conditions and to survive draughts and other unfavourable climates; moreover, olive oil is operated for the most basic needs such as cooking, lighting in substitution of oil and producing soap (Lindholm Schultz & Hammer, 2003). Therefore, it is not surprising that Israelis promoted the uprooting of olive trees to the benefit of cypresses plantations in an attempt to eradicate Palestinian identity as well. However, throughout the novel the landscape is portrayed

as imperturbable even in the aftermath of 1948, an unchanging peaceful solace to Palestinians. If the city of Jerusalem is subjected to the changings brought by Israelis in two different moments of Amal's life, the countryside remains the idyllic calcification of Palestinian-ness. While the future involves storms and earthquakes, the past is embodied by the figure of the peasant, the prideful *fellah*, as the counternarrative of modern Israelis. In the novel it is represented by Yehya, who after years spent living in West-donated tents cannot bear the permanency of his condition as refugee epitomised by the turning of the tents into clay walls. Therefore, after five years without being able to come back to his house, Yehya was turned into an old bending figure, slowly hardening his soul. As all the other Palestinian peasants, he was used to wake up early to work the land, while as a refugee the lack of self-sufficiency and inactivity equaled a death sentence. Therefore, Yehya's decision to go back to his village during the olive harvest is to be intended as a re-appropriation of his identity and of his honour. Indeed, the concept of honour, which is crucial in the creation of Palestinian social status, as in the other Middle-Eastern countries, must be inscribed within the larger issue of being deprived of the land (Lindholm Schultz & Hammer, 2003). Yehya performs a sort of ritual before trespassing: he has his own clothes cleaned, he shaves his beard, he plays a new tune, "a call to the Earth. To Allah. To the country within him" (p. 42). When November comes Yehya feels the olives and figs ripening, he feels he cannot stay away anymore. His departure enacts the process of re-appropriation of identity that had been denied in the act of deprivation of the land: while Yehya is described as straightening his posture and reacquiring his pride, the other refugees are lifted from their low spirits. The story of Yehya's triumphant return with the fruits of his land filling his pockets will be narrated to Amal and every other child in the refugee camp; when Yehya goes back for a second time and he is killed the event reaches the proportion of a myth. However, the harvest also implied family, while Yehya has to go alone, re-enacting the pain of what is lost. Indeed, at the beginning of the novel the happiness for the approaching of the harvest was a collective moment where all families gather to pick olives, eat together and dance. Yehya's brave act cannot be but a singular re-appropriation of identity, his death feels like a redemption to him, but it cannot release memories from their nostalgic and timeless past. Drawing from Khalidi's notion of Palestinian-ness as defined by barriers, the illegal trespassing is always perceived as a necessity: Yousef

trespasses only to sit and read among the olive trees although he is likely to be shot, when Amal learns that her brother Yousef is taking off to join the PLO, she sneaks out from the refugee camp to have a glimpse of the Palestine she knew only from second-hand stories. Being left alone to take care of a distant and insane mother, Amal needs to find the bond that connects her to her ancestors' land:

It was the picturesque backdrop of my parents' lives – miles of pasture carpeting valleys nestled amid waves of olive groves. Trees like beckoning grandparents, hundreds of years old wrinkled and stooped with heavy arms that stretched to every direction, as if in prayer (p. 117).

Trees are personalised into “beckoning grandparents”, the land becomes her family, but at the same time it is denied to her since she has to live in the clay walls of the refugee camp. Trees represent both the connection with her past, which becomes more and more relevant as she is almost alone in the world, and the hope for a future represented by the stretched branches. When Amal comes back to Palestine after years spent in exile, she perceives that the land rejoices her return like a family would. Moreover, trees witnessed hundreds of years of history and are a constant reminder of Palestinian grandeur:

The trees had lost their leaves to winter's chill and the silver wood of olive trees stood bare like colossal ancient hands, the gnarly and twisted guardians of time reaching from the earth, patiently resigned to wait for the ripe season [...]. Many years later, Amal would recall that life-giving beauty she had taken for granted, never imagining something so breathtaking and ancient could be wiped away or that anyone would want to ripe it away (p. 113).

In Palestine some of the oldest trees in the world grow, they are emblematic of Palestinian resilience to adversities while their old age is the representation of history as they are “the guardians of time”. Moreover, as olive trees are also a symbol of peace and life, their destruction emphasises the brutality of Israeli occupation since it was part of Israeli propaganda to claim that “Palestine was a land without a people for a people without a land”, trees are the witnesses of Palestinian existence. Trees and natural elements fill the narratives as living beings in the role of both protectors and witnesses of Palestinian-ness. Sibilio (2013) emphasises the extent to which traditional Palestinian literature abounds with images of trees, whether they are figs, orange, pomegranate or

olive trees. Other than being so persistent in narratives, they are “hypersaturated cultural symbols in the construction of both Palestinian and Israeli collective memory” (Bardenstein, 1999, p.148). According to Bardenstein, these symbols stand for something that is lacking in both communities, although the reasons behind are opposite. Trees for Palestinians are the representation of the lost homeland, thus embodying stability, legitimacy, history. Together with aspects of collective memory, trees also have socio-economic implications: Palestinian economy and survival are largely based on agricultural products. Thus, it is not surprising that trees condense multiple expressions of Palestinian-ness to the extent that they can become “beckoning grandparents” for Amal. As far as the Israelis are concerned, Bardenstein (1999) highlights that the policy of uprooting and replanting the trees mirrors the deterritorialization of Palestinian geography, but also a symbolic role of trees which functions as an act of legitimate rooting within Palestinian territory connected to the return to the Holy Land promised by God. While for Palestinians trees are “sites of Palestinian collective memory at different points of dislocation and disruption of the Palestinian bond between the land and peoplerefugism”, for Israelis they are “the restoration of a long-absent immediate bond between land and people (Bardenstein, 1999, p.157). Thus, Palestinian literature works as a re-appropriation of the images of trees in the attempt to vindicate the territory and keep alive a nationalist struggle fought on the same symbols by Palestinian and Israelis; nonetheless, contemporary writers often develop a more complicated relationship with the signs of Palestinian roots since they did not live through the *nakba* (Sibilio, 2013). Therefore, for Abulhawa trees embody a concrete sense of belonging, but also the idyllic past which is no longer available to Amal. Moreover, the process of identification with the land and recognition of Palestinian identity is troubled by the diasporic dimension of her life. According to her, the ancient tree Old Lady can survive the destruction brought by Israelis, thus representing the most solid affirmation of identity. Indeed, while her daughter Sara perceives Jerusalem’s ancient walls as the emblem of history, Amal corrects her that they are easily erasable whereas trees are the real essence of Palestinian-ness in their rootedness and sense of belonging. Nonetheless, Amal comes to this final resolution after a long and troubled process of negotiation of identities. Indeed, drawing from postcolonial theories, identity should be considered as a process rather than a state of

being, it is subject to diverse and continuous changes. According to Stuart Hall (1990) it is possible to look at cultural identity through two different positions: firstly cultural identity, which is defined by the common history and ancestry of one people, provides solid cornerstones that can endure the changings of history in the construction of the self; secondly, cultural identity undergoes the changes of history and therefore it should be considered as a process in the making, where identities represent the different positions from where one can look back at the past.

On the one hand, Amal has lived abroad for almost thirty years, trying to erase her past and live a different rootless identity in America; on the other hand, her notion of Palestinian-ness is complicated in itself even in an existence without exile. Indeed, it can be argued that her identity is not only concerned with loss, but especially with existence. As she was born after 1948, she grew up in a context where her home was not really hers, the notion of home for her family was Ein Hod but since she never lived there, she lacks something she does not know. As for all the other Palestinians who were born in exile or refugee camps, returning home represents the fulfilment of what was amiss in their identity (Lindholm Schultz & Hammer, 2003). Her identity comes from second sources, from the stories that Yousef and Baba told her, from the landscapes that she occasionally had the chance to see when she sneaked out at curfews. She experienced Jenin refugee camp, not being Palestinian. Indeed, before 1948 Palestinians considered themselves mainly Arabs, while after the *nakba* they fiercely proclaimed to be Palestinians; those who were born in refugee camps experienced a process of de-Palestinisation operated by foreign governments, which created a cultural identity in terms of what was not (Litvak, 2009). Moreover, Palestinians' identity was crystallised into the only element which differentiated them from the other Arab countries, namely collective memory, since language and geographical limits could not be taken as distinctive traits. However, in Amal's case the collective memories carry the burden of the narrators of those memories who had either died or disappeared. Although she tried to remove those narrations, they intrude into her soul as well as into the narrative, shifting the timeline in flashforwards and flashbacks. During the years in the United States characterised by economic stability and job opportunities, Amal will miss the period spent in food restrictions and lice infestations at the orphanage because it created a sense of belonging, intertwined experiences that needed each other to survive:

We were friends who doubled as mothers, sisters, teachers, providers, and sometimes as blankets. [...] The bond we forged was molded from an unspoken commitment to our collective survival. It reached through history, straddled continents, spanned wars, and held our collective and individual tragedies and triumphs. It was girlhood letters or a pot of stuffed grape leaves. Our bond was Palestine. It was a language we dismantled to construct a home (pp. 164-165).

The chapter that follows Amal's girlhood in the orphanage where she moves to Philadelphia after obtaining a scholarship is entitled "el ghurba", translated as "state of being a stranger". It is the condition of homelessness, nostalgia for the motherland that produces alienation and solitude; as Cariello (2012) points out the root of *ghurba*, *gha-ra-ba*, which means to set, to decline, is the same root for *gharb* (West, the place where the sun sets) and for distance, expulsion. The nostalgic feeling is not only relegated to a general longing for the homeland, but it also brings the desire for native dances, music, Arab voices in the street, a place where the mind can finally be at rest (Janbey, 2009). Throughout the novel, the feeling of *ghurba* is persistent: Amal cries when she hears her Arabic name aloud after ten years of calling herself Amy and the moment she lands in Beirut, although it is not Palestine, she feels her body responding to the Arab language:

But the guttural silk of tones of Arabic rippled through me as I heard the melodic calls and responses of my language. It's a dance, really. A man at a desk was offered tea as I walked through the metal detectors. He said, "Bless your hands" to the one making the offer, who responded, "And your hands, and may Allah keep you always in Grace". Calls and responses that dance in the air (p. 185).

Undoubtedly, together with food, Arab scents of Madonna lilies and camphires, the Arabic language plays a pivotal role in rooting the identity. When she returns to the US for the second time, after replying "thank you" she would repeat the Arabic blessings in her mind in a sort of compromise between the American and Palestinian culture. Similarly to what Amal expresses about the physicality of the language, Leila Ahmed (1999) describes her relationship with the Arabic language as a carnal encounter, where words acquire the vitality of a living body when they are spoken. Thus, language can be listed as one of the other physical losses that accompany Amal in her exile in the United States.

Amal's encounter with the US culture brings together numerous experiences of other Palestinians and Arabs. Al Maleh (2009) emphasises that Arab immigrants were not

distinguished according to their nationality and their ethnicity was a consequence of their socio-economic status rather than of their cultural descendants. Moreover, she adds that before 9/11 the Arab-Americans could easily vanish in the multicultural US society, where the cultural tensions were eased by “subsuming them under an ontologically unified identity – doubtless an idealistic situation which challenges and disavows the most insistent of Hegelian controversies” (p. 428). Amal feels at ease with the other minorities that live in Philadelphia and she is not afraid when she finds a job in the poor area of West Philly, inhabited mainly by black people. Among them she does not feel a foreigner, her accent is not “a call for mistrust” (p. 178) and more importantly she learns that blacks’ “enslaved culture had given birth to rock and roll, a kidnapped race that came to define the entire culture with its music” (p. 176). The similarities with Palestinians do not escape Amal and when a black teenager points a gun at her, she is not scared, she reflects that the young man is nothing compared to Israeli soldiers with assault rifles, violence is part of their existence. The scene evokes the prelude where Amal, with a gun pointed at her head, is calm, detached and identifies with the young Israeli soldier. Similarly, in Philadelphia she hands more money to the black robber and adds a packet of cigarettes despite his remark that he does not smoke. What is remarkable about Amal is that as she grows, she learns to negotiate with her identities by creating moments where she bridges the gap with the Other/enemy. The ability to feel a humane all-encompassing love though, is the outcome of a long and troubling coming to terms with her selves. Initially, Amal only wants to embrace the disavowal of cultural tensions in order to become “an American niche with no past” (p. 173), in order to impersonate a “simpler” identity without having to carry with it decades of inherited losses and usurpations. Her attempts at dropping the hyphen in her Palestinian-American identity lead her to change Amal into a more indifferent “Amy”; substituting her name means more than just Westernisation, it is the abandonment of what her name implies:

“We named you Amal with a long vowel because the short vowel means just one hope, one wish,” my father once said. “You’re so much more than that. We put all our hopes into you. Amal, with the long vowel, means hopes, dreams, lots of them (p. 72).

Amal literally drains herself from hope and from her past to find a space where she can live without the pain of what she had lost. However, as in the immigrant tradition of

finding a balance between two cultures, trying to suppress one of the halves is more problematic: “hyphenation somehow defies the old metaphor of the “melting pot”, suggesting instead identities that seem resisting to “melting” or dissolving in mainstream America” (Al Maleh, 2009, p. 423). Indeed, the Palestinian half at times overwhelms Amal without notice, throwing her into a state of desperate nostalgia; yet, she recognises that the past cannot be removed from her life since it lurches back under different shapes, one of which is her mother’s ghost. Amal throughout the novel experiences what Bhabha (1994) defined as the “uncanny”, a psychological experience in the colonised subject caused by the repression of an unbearable identity which inevitably reappears as something excessive. Amal’s ghosts represent her traumatic childhood that she tried to remove in order to live without the memories of war and death; indeed, Amal’s move to the United States represents a need for psychological unity rather than political refuge:

Dalia, Um Yousef, had bequeathed to me the constitution that could not breathe while holding hands with the past. She could isolate each present moment while existing in an eternal past, but I needed physical distance to remove myself (p. 174).

Similarly, since Amal’s father had disappeared, she tried to summon his face to give her strength. However, Hasan’s body overlaps in her mind with images of the men she saw dying in her childhood, thus Amal has to deny to herself the thought of her father. Drawing from Hall’s understanding of identity as changing process coming from the future, it is clear that national identity is related to space as well as to time. In the specific case of Palestinians, they are often inseparable:

“When place is lost, time is lost”. This conflation emerges in the way Palestinians might answer “I am from 1948” to the question “where are you from?”, the part of Palestine that became Israel in 1948 is simply called “1948”, so “1967” means West Bank and Gaza (Lindholm Schultz & Hammer, 2003, p. 110).

Thus, in the novel the place outside the boundaries of the refugee camp is perceived as “outside the limits of that eternal 1948” (p. 43). Amal’s uncanniness becomes more persistent as past memories emerge unexpectedly blurring time and space:

Palestine would just rise up from my bones into the center of my new life, unannounced. In class, at a bar, strolling through the city. Without



warning, the weeping willows of Rittenhouse Square would turn into Jenin's fig trees reaching down to offer me their fruit. It was a persistent pull, living the cells of my body, calling me to myself. Then it would slouch back into latency (p. 175).

According to Bhabha (1994) it is common for emigrated colonised subjects to reproduce moments experienced in the country of origin in their new life as a way to not let them fade away. However, the repetition of past memories is always transforming, it cannot be their exact copy because contexts change the connotation of events. As identity is not fixed, neither is the relationship with the past. However, notwithstanding the tentative efforts to deceive her consciousness, at times Amal experiences the contrary phenomenon, the hypermnesia. Derrida (2004) defined it as need to find the traces of one's identity beyond the accessible past and beyond the memory, it is a desperate anamnesis that exceed knowledge for those who live in exile. As Amal receives her green card and officially becomes an American citizen, she suddenly fears rootless and needs to re-establish her connection with Palestine: "my Arabness and Palestine's primal cries were my anchors to the world. And I found myself searching books of history for accounts that matched the stories Haj Salem had told" (p. 179). As she scrutinises the past for memories of her childhood, Amal cannot pacify with her double consciousness of American and Palestinian.

If on the one hand Amal's attempts to lock her Palestinian self are functional to her mental survival, on the other they are also part of a more general attitude for migrants. American-ness is the condition for removing traumas while at the same time Amal benefits from her experiences there, but they also feel as a betrayal towards her family. Although her relatives wanted her to study abroad because in her father's view "the land and everything on it can be taken away, but no one can take away your knowledge or the degrees you earn" (p. 60) and the common acknowledgement that "the future can't breathe in a refugee camp. The air here is too dense for hope" (p. 136), Amal felt she had turned her back on her Arab-ness by moving to the US. Indeed, in addition to a university education, she enjoyed the small pleasures that are denied to Arab women or refugees: she became financially and sexually independent, she drank alcohol and she wore a bathing suit. Amal's behaviour reflects what Bhabha (1994) calls hybridity, a condition of in-betweenness where the colonised subject is both attracted and repulsed

by the coloniser/Other; hybridity emphasises the unstable and mobile identities that defy the solid assumptions of nationalisms. Contrary to this view, traditional representations of Palestinian-ness deal with essentialism rather than hybridity since essentialism is the response of a culture against the attempts of erasing it (Lindholm Schultz & Hammer, 2003). However, it should also be acknowledged that the condition of diaspora, so widespread among Palestinians, enables to acquire different ways of identification with other cultures. Hybrid identities are inevitable in the context of diaspora, but Palestinians often avoid to acknowledge it because it would mean to give away the essentialist claims of rootedness (Said, 2002). In the novel, Amal breaches into the essentialised constructions of reality as she inhabits both spaces of American-ness and Palestinian-ness: she tries to intermittently embrace and break up with her selves “wandering in and out of the American ethos until [she] lost [her] way” (p. 173). Amal’s feelings reflect Said’s views on identity as a clash of currents. Being out of place is a permanent state of mind for migrants since their life is characterised by antagonising flowing currents that intermittently surface without providing harmonisation in the subject, nor a monolithic identity (Said, 1999). If on the one hand Amal adheres to the American lifestyle, she also feels ashamed by it, meaning that she still clings to the Palestinian ethos. Another event, when Amal swims for the first time in the ocean, triggers the emergence of Palestinian memories as her best friend Huda’s desire was “just to sit by the ocean” because she could not swim. Her life of relative wealth and freedom as well as her friends’ ordinary tragedies powerfully evoke Amal’s and Huda’s simplest and most complicated desire: to go back to Ein Hod. These episodic moments that allow the past to surface create an abyss that divides her more from her American friends than her American half separates her from her homeland. Indeed, after she graduated in South Carolina and she obtained the green card, she misses Palestine more than ever:

*Amy.* Amal of the steadfast refugees and tragic beginnings was now Amy in the land of privilege and plentitude. But no matter what façade I bought, I forever belonged to that Palestinian nation of the banished to no place, no man, no honor. My Arabness and Palestine’s primal cries were my anchors to the world (p. 179).

However, although Amal is willing to accept her ghosts, she cannot bridge the physical distance to her homeland yet, as she still holds onto the maternal creed “whatever you

feel, keep it inside”. The emotional block that Amal inherits from her mother is both a curse and a blessing, a mechanism of defence but also an alienating tool. To some extent, it is also part of the Arab culture, where women had to endure pain and difficulties in a discreet privacy, but it is also a hallmark of the Abulheja family. Both Amal’s grandmother Basima and Dalia were strong and proud women that turned their feelings inward and would not allow to show the depth of their pain. Moreover, both Amal and Yousef are shielded by the poems that their father Hasan used to read to them and in their darkest hours they would find solace in the hypnotic cadences of Rumi or Gibran. Significantly, some lines from Rumi are held as a talisman and repeated throughout the novel:

How does a part of the world leave the world?  
How can wetness leave water?...  
What hurts you, blesses you...  
Darkness is your candle.  
Your boundaries are your quest.  
I can explain this, but it would break  
The glass cover on your heart,  
And there’s no fixing that.  
Are these enough words,  
Or shall I squeeze more juice from this?

Rumi’s poem is an invitation to endurance which was also reinterpreted as a declaration of Palestinian identity; in Amal’s and Yousef’s case it also represents their attachment to their father who will always be a part of them, as water in wetness but whose direct evocation is too painful to bear. While Dalia is able to “break the glass cover” that wrapped her heart only when she meets death, Amal and Yousef find solace in their reunion and in love. As her brother reaches to her, Amal can finally face her ghosts and the pain they cause:

I had washed and left, pursued by the labor of hours past, the gnawing memories of years past. Pursued by Dalia. How it hurt, ever sweetly, satisfyingly, to be Amal again – not anonymous Amy (p. 195).

Having discovered the possibility to have a family and roots with Yousef and his wife Fatima, Amal does not hesitate to return home, although it is Lebanon and not Palestine. A common condition for exiles is the creation of imaginary homelands, inevitably the country of origin becomes idealised and distant, yet in the Palestinian case the homeland is always out of reach as it is grounded in a non-existing territory (Lindholm

Schultz & Hammer, 2003). Consequently, the construction of home has less to do with a confined or concrete space and more with the place where family resides, which can be either physical or abstract such as in memories and affections. Given the diasporic dimension of Palestinian-ness, homelessness is defined as a plurality of homes: Palestine, the refugee camp, Lebanon, a dream land (Lindholm Schultz & Hammer, 2003). Similarly, Cariello (2012) argues that the condition of being home is to be placed in relation to a sense of belonging to a community rather than to the physical boundaries of the nation. As Amal suffered greatly from the loss of her parents, being loved and rooted in a family has become paramount, more important than actually coming back to her actual homeland. Being born in a refugee camp and not in the free Palestine makes Amal miss something in her identity that can never be fulfilled, but at the same time it allows her to fill it with something else, with love. Although her hyphenated identity still requires negotiations as her American half cannot be suppressed, Amal's love for Majid seems to dismantle the ambivalent state of American-ness and Palestinian-ness to uproot her in a new compromised self:

At last, fate had surprised her with a dream of her own. A dream of love, family, children. Not of country, justice, or education. Amal would have gone anywhere, as long as Majid was by her side. He became her roots, her country (p. 209).

The possibility for the disavowal of Amal's double consciousness seems to be granted by two important factors in her identity. Firstly, her desire for rootedness prevails over the other dismays typical of the refugee condition; Majid to some extent replaces the painstaking loss of her father and fills Amal's thoughts preventing her from slipping into the hard core where her mother used to find refuge. The passage from father to husband is alluded to when the two lovers meet in the early morning, the time that the young Amal used to spend reading with her father. Moreover, Majid seems the only one who accepts, and helps Amal to accept, the scar in her belly, the physical representation of her "sins" and her traumatic childhood that troubled her so much. Secondly, as Fatima explains to Amal, emotions in refugee camps are amplified, pain takes the shape of joy as well as death resembles life:

Our anger is a rage that Westerners cannot understand, our sadness can make the stones weep. And the way we love is no exception, Amal. It is the kind of love you can know only if you have felt the

intense hunger that makes your body eat itself at night. The kind you know only after life shields you from falling bombs or bullets passing through your body. It is the love that dives naked toward infinity's reach. I think it is where God lives (p. 193).

This understanding of love as a unifying force as an outcome of great pain pervades also Gibran's *The Prophet* when he says that "the deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain" (2013, p. 43). The joy that fills Amal after her marriage allows her to think of the days of *ghurba*, to think of her mother and to embrace the pain because it is counterbalanced by equal love; the joy blurs time and space belonging to a non-place between the ocean and the sky, which can resist the fallacy of memory. This concept is further developed in Abulhawa's second novel where a song recites: "I'll be in that blue / between sky and water / where all the time is now / and we are the forever" (2015, p. 29). As Majid, Fatima and Falasteen tragically die, Amal is thrown again into the fortitude of her mother's "whatever you feel, keep it inside". After a chapter of short-lasting but blinding joy, the tragedy reaches its climax as Amal is pregnant and alone in the US. The tragedy is functional to arise a powerful emotional response in the readership, emphasised by Darwish's poem 'The Earth is Closing on Us'. If after 1967 violence Yousef found refuge from pain in the solitude imparted by Dalia, when his wife and child are massacred his only aspiration is revenge in the shape of martyrdom.

Toughness found fertile soil in the hearts of Palestinians, and the grains of resistance embedded themselves in their skin. Endurance evolved as a hallmark of refugee society. But the price they paid was the subduing of tender vulnerability. They learned to celebrate martyrdom. Only martyrdom offered freedom. Only in death were they at last invulnerable to Israel. Martyrdom became the ultimate defiance of Israeli occupation. "Never let them know they hurt you" was their creed (p. 108).

Both Amal and Yousef aspire to martyrdom not for the religious implications, but as part of Palestinian-ness; together with loss, Palestinian identity was crafted around the notion of struggle and resistance. The latter was not only directed towards the Israeli government, but also towards the condition of refugee itself, towards every attempt to label or force Palestinians within categories imposed by foreigners; paradoxically, the armed struggle did not entirely mean violence, but normality, it consolidated identity and imagined community (Lindholm Schultz & Hammer, 2003). Therefore, the image of Palestinian-ness was embedded by two different male figures: the *feday*, the

courageous fighter, and the *fellah*, the peasant, in the novel respectively Yousef and Jamal, and Yehya. The figure of *shaheed*, the martyr, probably became the most representative of Palestinian identity in Western media. Notwithstanding the religious aspect, the reward of paradise for those Muslims who would die in the name of God, martyrdom came to signify the nationalistic struggle, as the Holy Land is both Palestine and paradise. Moreover, nationalistic rhetoric emphasised this association, indeed Article 7 of the Palestinian Charter reads: “sacrifice of his property and his life to restore his homeland, until the liberation of all this is a national duty” (in Schultz & Hammer, 2003, p. 123). In this context, Yousef’s decision to commit to the Palestinian Jihadist group seems to be based on the loss of his family rather than on the willing scarification of “his property and his life to restore his homeland”. Being left with no family, Yousef retraces his family tree in an attempt to assert his identity:

I am an Arab son. Born of Dalia and Hasan. My grandfather is Yehya Abulheja and my grandmother is Basima. I am the husband of Fatima, father of two. I am a haunted man, possessed now by their corpses (p. 241).

Yousef then goes on invoking storms and the wrath of vengeance that reaches the proportion of a demonic figure. These imagines are recurrent in Palestinian resistance literature: violent natural elements such as storms and earthquakes represent the *intifada* and the revolutionary rebellion of the land from the usurpers (Lindholm Schultz & Hammer, 2003). Dalia’s creed “whatever you feel keep it inside”, Rumi’s lines and martyrdom, they all represent the struggle to survive physically and mentally, to assert the identity as individuals and as Palestinians. They are repeated throughout the novel as a sort of talisman, a source of strength and endurance. Significantly, the novel ends with a chapter entitled “Yousef, the Cost of Palestine”, where through his point of view readers learn that he could not go through with his suicidal plan of having the American embassy in Lebanon exploded, but after he retreated he was used as scapegoat. While Yousef is hiding with a gun with only one bullet as companion, he reads Sara’s blog and writes letters to Amal, thus love for his family prevailed over vengeance and hatred. Therefore, the cost of Palestine implies the perennial condition of refugee and of migrant, statelessness and loss; yet, the ending is hopeful in the scent of blossoms and in Amal’s name.

If in her first stay in the US Amal had “learned to make peace with the present by unknowingly breaking love lines to the past” (p. 156), after Majid’s death her isolation becomes complete. This time, her double consciousness or hyphenated existence is complicated because Amal survives in the present by keeping Palestine and her daughter at distance, by embracing the maternal creed that she finally came to understand as the only way to endure pain. Amal’s return to America reenacts Bhabha’s feelings of unhomely and uncanny:

The recesses of the domestic space become sites for history’s most intricate invasions. In that displacement, the borders between home and world become confused; and uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as disorienting (1994, p. 9).

Amal’s ghosts reappear haunting her invigorated by Palestinian news on television and she transfigures reality as if to feel the world crumbling over her as walls crumbled over her husband. The state of disorientation created by the unhomeliness would lead into dementia unless Amal tries to stop all the possible sources that trigger the appearance of her ghosts. Her resolution parallels those enacted by other refugees:

You become so embittered and anguished over seeing yourself mutilated everyday on screen that you build a castle around your immigrant heart and refuse to have anything to do with the host society. Like a mole, you live underground, in the darkness (Faqr, 1998, cited in Al Maleh, 2009, p.276).

Amal stop watching the news and wraps her heart around cold walls of indifference towards the world. She returns to be Amy, the unremarkable and uprooted woman who inhabits only the present. However, her Palestinian self is present whether unconsciously or not in her relationship with her daughter: she allows herself to love Sara only when she is asleep in the very same way that Dalia used to do, while reading to her Arab poetry reenacts the routine that went on with Hasan. The telephone call from David, the long-lost brother, provides the possibility for a reconciliation not only with him, but especially with Amal’s past and consequently with Sara. When Amal asks David if he ever hurt Yousef, the ghosts reappear, but the need of a family and rootedness prevails over the rage and over the solid walls that Amal had built around her heart. By accepting David, a sudden consciousness overcomes her:

The past seemed like a dream now. I do not know when its ghosts stopped haunting me or when my baby girl became a woman. Or when I grew into Dalia's legacy as a distant mother. [...] Only the scar on my abdomen had not aged. The webbed skin was as young and tight as it had always been, embalmed by cruelty, that indelible ink of memory and preservative of time (p. 281).

Her scar, as Dalia's and David's is the physical representation of their internal traumas, the hallmark of their identity. Yet, after this recognition Amal undergoes a metamorphosis that allows her to transform the traumatic experiences into an all-encompassing love. Founding her brother, recreating a bond with her daughter, going back to Palestine and re-embracing Huda reconstitute Amal's diasporic identity into a loving and humane voice that runs throughout the novel, beginning in the prelude. Although the recurrent experiences with violence in Amal's childhood allowed her not to fear when the Israeli soldier presses his rifle against her forehead, this time her feelings exceed mere cold-blood:

He blinks hard. And a solitary drop of sweat travels from his brow. Down to the side of his face. I watch it fall and note his smooth skin, still too young to need a regular shave. The power he holds over life is a staggering burden for so young a man. He knows it and wants it lifted. He is too handsome not to have a girlfriend nervously waiting for his return. [...] I am sad for him. Sad for the boy bound to the killer. I am sad for the youth betrayed by their leaders for symbols and flags and war and power. For an instant, I think he could be my nephew. But no. Uri has no doubts of his duty to kill for Israel. This soldier is not my nephew. *Strange, strange*, he is handsome and I, loving (pp. 305-306).

The physical closeness brings forth an emotional closeness where Amal is as worried for her daughter as for the Israeli soldier. Having come to terms with her diasporic identity, Amal is empowered with a benevolence that transcends the hostilities of war as well as time and space. Moreover, her all-encompassing love seems to be built on her father's legacy, on Rumi's and Gibran's poems, whose presence creates a persistent halo even when they are not explicitly quoted. The initial friendship between Hasan and the Jew Ari seems to find fulfilment in Amal's reflections, time is brought back to when nationalisms and ideologies could not rot affections and betray their people. As Amal negotiates with the enemy, she creates a space where she can remove the distance that separates them in order to create a dialogic discourse that provides love, stability and a



sudden consciousness, in contrast to the fragmentation and loneliness that characterised her whole life. Thus, the novel opens and ends with hope, Amal's death does not bring more violence but it reunites people; the Palestinian identities are not revolted against the Israelis but produce a productive crisis: David stops drinking hard to find peace with his double identity, Sara is spared from the hereditary maternal toughness by the empowering process of writing, Yousef finds a reason to live in the distant love for the only relative he has left, Ari renovates his devotion for his friend Hasan through Sara.

An important point to underline is that the narrative voice clearly states in the prelude that Amal is American. On the one hand her passport is problematic as it complicates the issue of hybrid identities; on the other hand, it provides to be a powerful literary device. Indeed, the reader wonders why an American citizen, an alleged ally to Israel, is about to be shot. It also widens the concept of war and violence beyond the dichotomy of Palestinians and Israelis by denouncing the nationalisms that do not allow to have a humane comprehension of the Other. Amal's narrative voice in the prelude, filled with motherly and benevolent understanding, is the main consciousness that prevails throughout the novel, even when Amal was not yet born. Other than Amal, first-person narrators are Moshe, David, Yousef; all of them widen the perspective and do not allow for a singular identification. Moreover, the narrative also shifts to third-person narrators; in chapter thirty-eight the omniscient narrator intertwines the vicissitudes of Amal, Huda and David together with the journalist accounts of the injustices in Palestine. Sometimes, even within the same chapter the narration shifts from Amal's first-person narrator to the third person omniscient narrator. In a postcolonial context, the shifts in the narration and focalization as well as the deviations from the chronology are emblematic of non-linear spatial and temporal boundaries, where different consciousnesses destabilise the traditional narratives of colonial texts (Cariello, 2012). Moreover, all the different points of view emphasise the sense of resistance while providing a touching intimacy with the characters that is functional to convey sympathy for the Palestinian cause. At the same time Abulhawa does not deny the identification with the Jewish characters: although their consciousness is given less space, it is equally powerful in depicting the violence and the pain that both Palestinians and Jews had to endure as a consequence of international politics of betrayal and exploitation. Thus, Amal bridges her divided self to acknowledge the Jewish point of view: by hearing

Jolanta's sufferings she cannot avoid reflecting the extent to which Palestinians were affected by the wrongs committed to the Jews. However, mentioning the Holocaust suggests the pervasiveness of violence in every country and in every religion rather than providing an excuse for the Israeli domination. Nonetheless, Amal's humanism is the outcome of a difficult internal struggle, but almost paradoxically the acceptance of the Other is functional to the understanding (and forgiveness) of her mother Dalia. While disrupting the distance between polar identities, for the first time Amal can see through her mother and let go of the resentment she had carried for years that was likely to be directed to her daughter Sara as well. In the encounter between David and Amal, as well as with Ari, the common pain is able to transcend nationalisms or political differences. Ari, who is called the "self-hating Jew" by his countrymen, inhabits a similar position to the Palestinian characters: life took so much from him that he found refuge in himself and his books rather than to affections. Indeed, Ari embodies the person conscious of his individuality as a friend of Palestine, but at the same time aware of his belonging to the Jewish society; in order to bear his internal divisions in a society that would not allow him to give justice to his friend Hasan, Ari had to become an alienated man, separated from his countrymen by his alliance to the memory of an everlasting friendship, which "had been born in the shadow of Nazism in Europe and in the growing divide between Arab and Jew at home, and it had been consolidated in the innocence of their twelve years, the poetic solitude of books, and their disinterest in politics" (p. 9).

## 2.4 Motherhood

*Mornings in Jenin* is the story of the Abulheja family through four generations, but of these four generations, few men survive and the narrative is left in the hands of women. Womanhood and motherhood in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict acquire a significant symbolism as femininity evolves independently from the Western (but also Arab) women's rights movements. Undoubtedly, in the early development of the

resistance movement women were assigned the traditional role of raising children, the future fighters, and the control of the domestic sphere. However, as the struggle for independence became a national effort, gender roles lost their hierarchies in the military context where everyone could play their part in the struggle: “Palestinian women were very active socially and politically in resisting occupation – while connecting their gender roles with their national roles and constructing them as a new mode of coping” (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2003, p. 394). Since the socio-political conditions were not stable to require traditional feminism’s demands, radical Palestinian feminists transformed it into a militarised feminism which portrays women fighting and killing as male soldiers; however, if on the one hand the very condition of war and occupation provides the possibility for blurring the boundaries between feminine and masculine spheres, on the other it also denies the right of security and home (Tahboub, 2009). Rather than feminism, militant Arab women preferred to be associated with the concept of “familialism” which identifies the family as the central core of their discourse. Although it was mainly women who were considered the providers of stability, the protection of the family was pivotal and exceeded the traditional gender roles (Tahboub, 2009).

In *Mornings in Jenin* gender roles are portrayed according to the traditional separation of domestic and militant sphere since Amal has to ask her brother’s permission before marrying Majid and women are generally assigned the roles of cooking and raising children. However, their militancy emerges in other ways. As almost all the men in the novel had to flee, died or disappeared (Yehya, Hasan, Yousef, Majid, Jamal, Jamil, Osama, Hajj Salem), women could not count on them to survive; women’s spaces built on strength and solidarity are one of the most touching aspects of the novel. Undoubtedly, the character who embodies Palestinian resistance and endurance is Dalia. As a young girl she was already fearless, riding and then stealing Darweesh’s horse Ganoosh; in order to restore her father’s honour for the crime committed Dalia had her hand burnt with hot metal under the intimation that if she screamed, then also the other hand would be injured. At this point the narrator reflects:

Had she screamed, perhaps the fire would not have reached so deeply into her. [...] For the rest of her life, Dalia would have the unconscious habit of rubbing the tips of the fingers of her right hand back and forth on their palm while she gritted her teeth, giving the

impression that she held something in her grip that was living and trying to get out (p. 15).

Dalia's demonstration of stoic endurance marks the beginning of her path of pain and losses that she can live through only by caging her vitality and affections. After Ismael is kidnapped, she is aware of neglecting Yousef but it is the only way to cope with pain while performing the tasks required to women, since life in refugee camps does not allow much time for mourning. Dalia barricades into silence and she permits to love her children only when they are asleep so that they cannot reciprocate the affections otherwise the pain would break her. Her energies are devoted to gardening, in an attempt to keep the memory of another loss alive, that of her mother-in-law Basima, but when the conflict reaches the refugee camp in June 1967, Dalia turns into a fearless mother for all the refugees, she refuses to flee and to abandon the only home that her daughter knew. After the war, her courage is acclaimed as the essence of Palestinian-ness. Traditional Palestinian literature generally acknowledges a different symbolism in the portrayal of women after 1967: they embody the motherland as well as the mothers of the nation, the mothers of martyrs, they are both the warriors and the refugees (Tahboub, 2009). In particular, after Kanafani's publication of the short story *Umm Saad*, the eponymous character embodied all Palestinian women. Given the extent to which Kanafani's character influenced resistance literature, it is likely that Abulhawa may have drawn Dalia's strength from his novella. Indeed, both women are entrapped within their role of protective mothers while at the same time they support the militancy, never allowing themselves to complain for their condition. Although Dalia fights courageously during the Six Day War, little Amal only desires to receive the solace of her mother, but she is in shock, distant and paralysed by the trauma of violence. After 1967, Dalia slowly sinks into dementia and notwithstanding Yousef's safe return home, because of the losses and traumas she experienced she is turned into an empty shell, breathing but not living. Yousef reflects: "mother is stoic, though I know she is crying. Her tears fall on the wrong side, into the bottomless well inside her" (p. 103). Abulhawa conveys a realistic representation of women's handling of inflicted violence, as the strategies for coping with pain often included barricading into silence and denying emotions to surface (Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2003). However, demanding love and affection Amal cannot avoid resenting her mother, but her memories always

linger on the only moment that the two of them shared, when Dalia asked her daughter to help her delivering a child during the curfew hours, when Amal learned her mother's creed "whatever you feel, keep it inside". Since that moment, Amal has internalised her mother's stoicism in the unconscious tightening of her jaw, but the process of pacification needs time to develop. During the period of the *ghurba*, when Amal experiences an ambivalent state of dismantle and reconciliation with her diasporic identity, she sees her mother in her figure, realising that Dalia is the only person that could understand her desire for a complete detachment from reality. Similarly, having delivered Sara alone after Majid's death, Amal understands the lesson imparted by her mother as a survival strategy while re-enacting the same relationship: "So, I tended, to the demands of motherhood, containing that burning love behind the cold walls of fear" (p. 246). Although Amal partially acknowledges the reasons for her mother's detachment, at the same time she does not realise that she is replicating Dalia's behaviour with Sara, persisting in not breaking "the glass cover on [her] heart". It is only with David's appearance that Amal can break the circle. Amal acknowledges David as her brother: "in the complicity of siblinghood, of aloofness and unrootedness, Amal loved David instinctively, despite herself and despite what he had done or who he had become" (p. 270). Yet, she cannot overlook the fact that David was the cause of Yousef's (and Palestinian) suffering; thus, their encounter is primarily an encounter with the Other. Firstly, Amal perceives the mutual exchanges about their mothers as a battleground that sees Palestinians against Jews and she feels jealous that Dalia cannot compete with Jolanta's devotion for her son:

Jolanta gave her blessing for David to do whatever his heart commanded. Be he Jew or Gentile, Jolanta loved that boy. God only knows how much. That love had saved her once upon a time. Jolanta had done what neither Dalia nor Amal could do: she had transformed the energy of her pain into expressions of love, and David was the sole beneficiary (p. 256).

By hearing Jolanta's sufferings in the loss of her entire family in concentration camps and the inability to conceive a child, Amal feels a pain akin to hers and to Dalia's that transcends politics but that takes into account only love and motherhood. Through acknowledging the Other Amal can finally understand her mother:

She watched over all of us, carefully and unobtrusively from the shadows, hardening or recoiling into her mystery if anyone approached her with tender thanks. Alas, her heart was not of ice at all, but of a roiling lava contained by her own will, held back with her iron jaw and tireless fluttering hand, and the contents of that heart were seldom betrayed. Perhaps what made reality fade from her mind was not the unending string of tragedies that befell Palestinians, but rather, an immeasurable love that could not find repose (p. 275).

Through the negotiation with a specific Other, Moshe and Jolanta, Amal can reconcile not only with a general Other, but also with herself. Indeed, she can identify with the Israeli soldier that points a gun at her head, she does not feel hatred nor anger, only a regretful sympathy for the burden he has to bear. Moreover, Amal reconciles with herself, with her diasporic identity as well as with the sense of guilts she felts towards her mother:

I understood that Dalia, Um Yousef, the untiring mother who gave me far more than she ever received, was the tranquil, quietly toiling well from which I have drawn strength all my life. I had to travel to the other end of the earth, improvise like a dog, and bathe in my own grief and inadequacy to understand how her persevering spirit had bestowed on me determined will (p. 274).

Amal's final thought is that she has not loved enough, her diasporic identity comes to a fulfilment in the unconditional love for her daughter that embraces the whole world. When the American embassy is attacked in Beirut or when the 9/11 images are transmitted on television, Amal identifies with the victims notwithstanding their place of origin or religion, she only feels their pain as if it was hers. It is possible to inscribe Amal's ordeals into what Said intended as humanism. According to him, it was a kind of heroism that required an unsettling voyage into the Other, it is not a self-satisfactory abstract belief, but an actual prospect for understanding and shared future (Said, 2004). A lesson similar to humanism was imparted by Hajj Salem's wisdom, although it took many years and many shattering experiences for Amal to understand it:

We are all born with the greatest treasures we'll ever have in life. one of those treasures is your mind, another is your heart. And the indispensable tools of those treasures are time and health. How you use the gifts of Allah to help yourself and humanity is ultimately how you honor him (p. 133).

Besides Amal, also Jolanta is endowed with humanism, since she does not try to accommodate the reality in an apologetic discourse, but she is willing to face the truth:

Now she could and wanted to set the record straight. To embrace the woman who had given birth to her David and find reconciliation in the truth. For if life had taught her anything, it was that healing and peace can begin only with acknowledgment of wrongs committed. The truth set her free and she found the urgent path of peace, where religion and history bowed before the sympathies of two mothers forever joined by the love for one boy (pp. 256-257).

Given the extent of the hostilities of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict it is important that Abulhawa places such a hopeful perspective for the future and that the Jewish characters trigger the difficult process of understanding the Other. Whereas political discourses impede humanism, love as a shared experience is an inclusive circle that allows to see a future.

Although *Mornings in Jenin* certainly echoes the political discourse of the Palestinian national cause and resistance literature, Abulhawa particularly excels at depicting the ordinary life in the refugee camp. While mothers in Palestinian literature were often transfigured into mothers of the nation or into the motherland, Abulhawa pays attention to women in their most humble and ordinary experiences. To some extent, it is possible to draw a comparison between the women in the novel and Abulhawa's experience of exile. In *Mornings in Jenin* the diasporic space between the mother and the child becomes a site where to inscribe the sense of belonging as well as the pain of exile and separation. Cariello (2012) argues that the space created between mothers and the distanced children is not only a metaphor for exile but that it is where meaning is produced; drawing from an analogy with the feminine body that gives birth to children, it also generates the text. She adds that the separation of the child from the mother activates a crisis, which ultimately proves to be productive since its limits can be explored in the act of writing. In women writers the physical distance of diasporic condition is often emphasised by the separation from the child. Thus, the trauma of broken maternity generates a space for the text to emerge. In such a context, Sara's final decision to dedicate herself to writing links to Dalia and Amal as well to Abulhawa as an act of fulfilment of the diasporic space.

Throughout different generations, women establish contacts that are strengthened by both a feminine confinement and by their traumatic experiences:

The bond we forged was molded from an unspoken commitment to our collective survival. It reached through history, straddled continents, spanned wars, and held our collective and individual tragedies and triumphs (p. 165).

In the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict, where violence is a constant for Palestinians the ordinary and trivial aspects of life are the ones missed the most. During the 1967 war Huda and Amal hide under the kitchen floor with a little infant, Aisha. The two girls have to witness the death of Aisha, pierced by a shrapnel, together with their neighbours and friends. When the conflict is over, Huda and Amal go to collect their one-armed doll Warda, which was shot by an Israeli soldier and which became their main entertainment in the long afternoons in the refugee camp. When they arrive, they find out that it has disappeared:

They grieved privately in their young hearts, because it seemed infantile now to cry for a doll now that they had buried Aisha, a real baby who cried real tears and bled real blood. But the hurt of losing Warda was worse, and that was a secret each held from the other as they walked on from the Warda house (p. 113).

As death is so common, the loss of the doll symbolises a denied childhood, on the toys is written the same violence that characterises children. The birth of Falasteen produces irrepressible joy in the whole refugee camp, since children represent the future and especially in the Palestinian case, they assure a progeny in a context that tries to remove the natives. In the very name of Falasteen, the Arabic name for Palestine, is inscribed the hope for the future, which is brutally denied in her brutal death. Huda's children literally play with death, ignoring their mother's intimations since their ordinary life cannot be spared from violence:

But they threw rocks at the Israeli tanks anyway, because boys will be boys and the young shall never respect the fragile breath holding them to life. They did not do it for the sake of freedom, for such a concept was too precarious. They did it out of peer pressure, for the nature of small boys that attracts them to the adventures and trials of men. They threw rocks under an umbrella of abstract politics, which they did not understand, because they were bored with nothing left to do after Israel closed their schools (p. 253).



The Palestinian childhood in refugee camps creates a striking contrast with David's childhood, notwithstanding the geographical closeness. Abulhawa enumerates Jolanta's concerns: sleepovers, camping trips, not enough food, injuries while playing football, girls, alcohol. Then, David has to join the army and although he is relatively safe shielded by a well-trained and well-equipped army, his life crosses the same violence that characterises Palestinians in refugee camps. However, as already mentioned, differences and Otherness are overcome in the novel through the all-encompassing love of mothers.

# Chapter 3

## 3.1 Nathalie Handal

Nathalie Handal was born in Haiti in 1969 to a Palestinian family originally from Bethlehem. Her life has been spent across multiple countries and cultures in the US, Latin America, the Caribbean, Europe and the Middle East. She currently teaches creative writing at Columbia University and is involved in numerous activities to support Palestinian as well as women's rights. She is a poet, a writer, a playwright and editor of anthologies. Handal's nomadic displacements are partly accounted for the Palestinian diaspora which scattered her family all around the world. Thus, Bethlehem, Marseilles, Venice, London and all the other cities she inhabited become her home in an attempt to retrace a dismantled rootlessness but also to create a new broader concept of homeliness. In a letter to Lisa Suhair Majaj she wonders whether the concept of displaced identity is not imposed upon the hyphenated selves and if it would not be easier to accept all of them:

I know that sometimes we lose our names as the traveling moves too rapidly and the handwriting on the name tags changes. Our handwriting, we even think, not recognizing the notion of scattered identity so anchored inside of us. I understand that we try so hard to understand that we risk never understanding. But why torture ourselves? (Handal, 1999, p. 139).

Since identity performs such a complex and fluid role in migrants, Handal's primary concern is not to label or define it, but to let it unfold itself through writing. Thus, the dedication of *The Lives of Rain*, "for those who give us voice" and T. S. Eliot's initial quotation "there are some things about which nothing can be said and before which we dare not keep silent", are to be intended as the pivotal role assigned to writing as a form of voicing, while at the same time acknowledging that such a narrative is complicated by politics as well as decades of silenced traumas.

In an article written for *Guernica*, Handal (2017a) declared that she tried to map her family's displacements across the world. Indeed, almost all her family fled after the *nakba* and was scattered in the Arab countries, Europe and America. Thus, the stories of

her relatives came to her in fragments, tiny pieces that she had to reassemble based on old men's memories, changing surnames and the silence of those who were tortured. In Handal's article it is evident how memory plays a fundamental role in Palestinian identity: some of the Palestinians she met could remember by heart thousands of phone numbers and family histories, and they were the only way to retrace migrated family lines. When signs of history are tried to be erased, memory means survival and thus, thanks to these people, she was able to backtrack her family members. In Venice, where Handal found out that some relatives reside, the diffusion of information to find her family similarly spread as it did in Jaffa through Lebanese, Egyptians and Palestinians living in Italy. Thus, Venice becomes one of those cities where exiles find a piece of home that temporarily fills the void of the motherland thanks to the multicultural nexus built on centuries of historical encounters with different people.

Thus, Handal's attempts to reconstitute her family tree and family relations is both a personal need of roots and the general trend of Palestinians scattered all around the world. Indeed, since family networks are usually dispersed in all continents, the family remains one of the few institutions left to Palestinians; other than providing affiliations and stability, they also "function as a social institution which assists in cushioning transformative experiences" and "had an important task to fulfil in constituting the primary source of storytelling" (Lindholm Schultz & Hammer, 2003, p. 172). Both these functions of the family networks echo in Handal's poetry since relatives, and the hope of filling the gaps in the family tree, are a safe net while moving, but in their meeting, they nourish the stories of childhoods that Handal never lived but that she is eager to appropriate. However, it is clearly perceived in Handal's poems that homeliness also lies outside the geographical places, it resides in the liminal and personal space of writing. Hence, every time she writes, she belongs to the marginal space of ethnic groups with whom she shares displacement; in 'Ephratha' by addressing poetry Handal wonders whether

To understand this place must we understand its howls,  
To understand its howls must we understand its verses,  
To understand its verses must we understand agony?

(Handal, *The Lives of Rain*, 2005, p.6)

Notwithstanding the uniqueness of the Palestinian situation, it seems that Handal wants to include in her poetry the liminality inscribed within the ethnic as well as the gender differences. In 2010 Handal started a project called “The City and the Writer” aimed at discovering and recreating metaphorical maps through the testimony of writers from all around the world. The result was the creation of glimpses of cities that had no boundaries nor barriers, so that Erri de Luca’s Naples could stand next to Jumoke Verissimo’s Lagos. Moreover, a specific Palestinian metaphoric cartography was drawn through the portrayal of different cities provided by Palestinian writers such as Salma Khadra Jayyusi, Raja Shehadeh and Ismail Khalidi. Thus, the Palestinian nightmare of national borders is transformed into a creative redefinition of barriers that includes the whole world.

*The Lives of Rain*, which was published in 2005, amplifies the narration of Palestine that had started in 1999 with *The Neverfield*. This is a long poem divided into three sections where memory and a need for belonging accompany the reader into Handal’s childhood and contemporary reflections. The constant presence of Palestinian landscapes and memories of Arabic stories found relevance also in *The Lives of Rain*. The exilic tones of her poetry tell many stories, they humanise and give wise lightness to the tragedy that is emotional but also rationally represented. The collection is divided in three sections: the first is specifically inspired by Palestinian experiences, giving historical as well as personal relevance to dispossession, exile and migrations. The second section intertwines Palestine with New York, Marrakesh, Paris, Mexico, the Balkans, all these geographies “broaden the historical scope and compounds the referent culture with new ones” (Abinader, 2006, p. 256). Having widened the geographical limits of Palestinian sufferings, in the last section Handal brings the reader with her family, in their endless journeys until they reach Mexico; it shows how in the end, people survive and go on despite ordeals, it is the representation of endurance and solidarity.

### 3.2 The narration of Palestine

Palestinian identity initially took strength from its calcification into the mythologized past and into the perennial frustration for the loss of the land. Although this essentialised strategy was propaedeutic to crystallising Palestinian-ness against the attempts of its erasure, it also turned out to be inadequate to deal with the complexity and multiplicity of the Palestinian discourse in the aftermath of the *nakba*. Indeed, Celik (2008) affirms that the first poetical productions after Israeli occupation were the expression of the communal efforts at narrating Palestinian identity through fixed images that, although functional to provide solidity and stability in the initial destabilised identity, ultimately they defied productive articulations of Palestinian discourses. As Palestinian literary productions were subjected to an Israeli scrupulous censorship, poets often made “heavy use of symbolism which gradually became a burden on Palestinian literature, degenerating into clichés and frozen metaphors (Ashrawi, 1978, p. 78). Hence, as the conflict dragged on, it developed into more complex issues such as diasporic identities, women’s rights, gender constructions that could no longer bear the fixity of the *fedayeen*, *fellah*, the woman as the motherland or in terms of what was not Israeli. Thus, Palestinian poets were striving to instil vitality and deviate from the pattern of an identity defined by the loss of the land. Undoubtedly, the first to recognise and address this issue was Mahmoud Darwish. According to him the identity constructions should be separated from their monologic structures since they are not limited to the loss of the land, but he found out to be more productive to think of the geographic part of history rather than the historical part of geography; thus, by putting into perspective the specific case of the Arab-Israeli conflict, history is perceived as a place where different populations had confronted each other and coexisted (Darwish, 2007). Darwish particularly defied the notions of monolithic identity through the process of rewriting the mythic past: the myths that were considered rigid are adapted to suite a more flexible national identity. As the poet acknowledged the presence of different cultures on his homeland’s soil throughout the centuries, he drew from past sources to challenge monologic mythical interpretations. Hence, while Darwish challenged the monolithic perception of Palestine as an immutable entity through the rewriting of the past, new generations of poets preferred to direct their efforts toward the future. Although Darwish’s legacy could hardly lose its influence over the Palestinian as well as Arab literary production, Handal, as well as the

other contemporary poets, carries within herself the multiple selves of migrant, exile, woman, diasporic realities in her Palestinian-ness, Arab-ness, American-ness and so on. As stated by Stuart Hall, since late modernity, identity has undergone a significant process of fragmentation:

We need to situate the debates about identity within all those historically specific developments and practices which have disturbed the relatively 'settled' character of many populations and cultures, above all in relation to the processes of globalization, which I would argue are coterminous with modernity and the processes of forced and 'free' migration which have become a global phenomenon of the so-called 'post-colonial' world. [...] [Identities] relate to the invention of tradition as much as to tradition itself, which they oblige us to read not as an endless reiteration but as 'the changing same': not the so-called return to roots but a coming-to-terms-with our 'routes' (1996, p. 4).

According to this view, identity is not an essentialized construct but rather a process that evolves and identities are temporary stances from where the subject is part of a discourse. While Darwish explores the possibilities of Palestinian identity's mobility in what Hall defined "roots" of the past, Handal pursues the different and multiple "routes" of the polyglot subjects (Cariello, 2012). However, the past remains pivotal for the diasporic subjects: "We long to belong, we need to know that the trees of our country are growing inside of us" (Handal, 2004, cited in Al Maleh, 2009, p.442). As traditional Palestinian experiences of migration, the particular diasporic condition that the poet inhabits generates the common feelings of *ghurba* and unhomeliness. Nonetheless, Handal beautifully reinterprets the frozen metaphors that characterised Palestinian poetry in the aftermath of the *nakba*. Thus, *The Lives of Rain* does not deny the presence of the traditional Palestinian images such as olive trees, *debke*, Arabic food, the land bleeding or the orange blossoms, and yet they find a different harmonic co-existence, melancholic but not pathetic. In the Arab as well as Palestinian literary tradition, poetry embodies the most important genre and the voice of resistance are assigned to its verses. Since Arabs are often more moved by the melody and rhythm of poetry rather than its content, after the *nakba* the poetic production tended to align itself to some stock elements: catchy verses, repetitions, mimesis of Darwish, al-Qasim and Zayyad, the bombastic tone of the speaking "I", self-pity and exhausted images of the land (Ashrawi, 1978). In particular, the emotional attachment to the land sung by the poet appeals the audience by itself, without having to rely on renovated imagery or

sophisticated figures of speech. An example of this kind of poetry is conveyed by some stanzas of al-Khatib's 'I shall Come so We Can Paint together a Rainbow' and of al-Asad's 'Strangers':

O strange heart  
Is mine the right to have a child,  
The remnants of a tent in the shades of a palm tree,  
A lover?  
Do I have the right, my heart?  
Why don't you answer?  
Do I have my right to a smile  
To pride in dignity  
Or a short story  
Whose love the night knows?  
I don't know.

The sun reproaches us  
It came, as usual,  
Asking us to be patient  
To remain like olive branches  
Deep in the soil  
Are the roots of the olive tree  
To remain  
Like the roots of the olive tree.

(cited in Ashrawi, 1978, pp.90-91)

The tone is very melancholic and language is ornamental since it is the essence of poetry, the homeland, that interests the poet. Handal's landscapes do not romantically resist Israeli occupation and in 'Jenin' the typical images of Palestine, the row of olive trees, the field of tulips, the doves, are proposed under a different light: trees and tulips are invoked to obliterate "the maze of intestines, the dried corners / of a soldier's mouth" (p.16). The doves as well are frequently referred to in poems because of their dissemination in Palestine, especially on palm trees where they nestled, and because of their symbolism that includes purity, peace but also sacrifice and migration. The closing lines of 'Jenin' read:

All I want is what we have inherited  
From the doves, a perfect line of white:  
Where are the bodies?  
(p.16)

The image of the dove creates a striking contrast, similar to that of the intestines and dead soldier, with the corpses. Indeed, the title of the poem reveals its interpretation since in Jenin in 2002 hundreds of civilians were killed in the refugee camp by the Israeli soldiers. In such a massacre, Israelis were accused of throwing the corpses in mass graves to hide the actual number of casualties from international observers while claiming that those killed were only rebel fighters. Handal's final question is not contemplative or vague, addressed to the "strange heart", but it demands an answer from the implicit but evident addressee. Differently from the other poems, the words that are repeated are not images of Palestine, but are the anaphoric "all I want", "stop", "someone", "blanket"; thus, these repetitions create a rhythmic pattern that bolsters the poem that climaxes in the last line, rather than propose the same trope. The olive trees mentioned by Handal are not evocative of a nostalgic past since they are not the exclusive representation of Palestine, nor they create pathetic feelings.

Although Handal often defies traditional representations of Palestine and intertwines them with other cultural expressions, exile, wanderings and *ghurba* are persistent elements of her poetry. 'Doors of Exile' stands as a sort of foreword at the beginning of the collection, setting the themes and the tropes of Handal's poetry:

The shadows close a door  
This is loneliness:  
Every time we enter a room we enter a new room  
The hours of morning growing deep into our exile  
Prayers stuck in between two doors  
Waiting for memory to escape  
The breath of cities.

(p.1)

Memory certainly occupies a prominent role since it is both a distinctive trait of Palestinian identity and a personal condition dictated by her family history. Thus, memory is generally symbolised by the recurrent images of loss and exile, described by non-places and images of in-betweenness (Cariello, 2012). Postcolonial and Palestinian discourses in particular deal with liminality, barriers, interruptions and the impression of never arriving, constantly moving because no place is home, and yet it is everywhere. On the one hand, the act of entering new rooms is emblematic of the diasporic condition, which requires to start over again but each time, each experience is different



because it is inherited (Cariello, 2012). Thus, the poem is entitled 'Doors of Exile', plural, because there are multiple layers, multiple narrations, and yet they all find a common denominator in loneliness, memory and mobility. The condition of in-betweenness derives from hyphenated identities, created in the new place of residence as well as from the problematic relationship with time. Many critics emphasised the non-linearity of Palestinian timelines that inevitably refer backward to a serene past, which at the same time is envisaged as the future, thus living the present as the inevitable waiting for a better future (Lindholm Schultz & Hammer, 2003). Another interpretation of the "waiting to leave to enter" condition puts forth the notion of identity which is deeply rooted in exile and loss, but it is also a process that does not have a beginning nor an end (Cariello, 2012). Paradoxically, remembrance is all that is left of Palestinian past, but at the same time Handal is "waiting for memory to escape / the breath of cities", hoping that it will provide a resolution to the conflicting selves. The extreme displacement and exilic tones of 'Doors of Exile' invoke a universal compassion and arouse identification for fragmented identities. Significantly, she uses the first person plural "we", "our exile". Perhaps, the best explanation of Handal's poetic vision is given by the Indian critic and writer Salman Rushdie, proving that postcolonial literature really creates shared spaces:

Our identity is at one plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, that we fall between two stools. But however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be, it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy. If literature is in part the business of finding new angles at which to enter reality, then once again our distance, our long geographical perspectives, may provide us such angles (1991, p. 15).

The issue of hyphenated selves or the general quest for understanding identity entertain a considerable space in postcolonial literature. For all those generations born in exile, there is an attempt to fill a void that is perceived in depth and inherited (Lindholm Schultz & Hammer, 2003).

Perhaps we are not meant to understand everything,  
so we try to understand  
where we are from, where we are going,  
what we look like

(‘The Conflict’, p.7)

Identities move on uncertain grounds and the simplest assumptions become problematic and undergo scrutiny since all attempts to give definitions have to recognise that “anything pertaining to identity is a bag of contradictions” (Handal, 1999, p. 142). Similarly, Said considered the condition of exiles as characterised by “restlessness, movement, constantly being unsettled and unsettling others” (1994b, p. 39). Palestinian identity is certainly burdensome and make wish for a simpler one that would not implicate a constant sense of loss:

When no one is around  
I change my address.  
Can’t change my face  
Give my father freedom  
My brother peace  
So I change my address.  
Change trains  
To keep me going  
Bring me back  
Change lovers  
To keep me coming  
Keep me going...

(‘Conversation with a Soldier when no one is Around’, p.17)

‘Baladna’ begins with a more confident assertion of identity: “we are who we are, / and home is home”, but then sudden doubts insinuate themselves and the poet wonders “we are who we are; / are we who we are?” (p.33). The difficulty even in the articulation of these two lines emphasises the complexity of trying to define identity, but as Handal herself argued (2017), “why torture ourselves?”. The poet can be said to adopt what Lindholm Schultz (2003, p.198) defined “creative ambivalence” as a substitution for the terms assimilation, integration or hybridity. The multicultural environment that influenced Palestinian identities should not be regarded as an addition of different selves, but rather a negotiating process of identities that values each of them. Thus, in gloomy atmospheres of slaughtered bodies, prison-like spaces and incommunicability, points of contacts are created among Handal’s multicultural selves and all cross-border identities. Indeed, the force of Handal’s poetry lies in the refusal of the “ghetto mentality” that would “confine [the selves] within defined cultural frontiers” (Rushdie, 1991, p. 19).

The strategies to cope with exile have multiplied throughout the decades: Barghouti (1998) related to his memories as places, while Turki (1994) argued that exile has transformed into the homeland and that after so many years he felt as if Palestine was not speaking to him anymore. Contrary, Handal's cross-border displacements create a productive crisis that if cannot resolve, at least mitigates her *ghurba*:

Now, my teeth are stained, my English  
Failing me, my Arabic fading  
My Spanish starting to make sense...  
We are in a *finca* now-  
Perhaps we are safe,  
Perhaps we desire nothing else,  
But I can't stop bowing in prayer  
Five times a day,  
My country comes to me, tells me:  
*Compatriota-I will always find you*  
*No matter what language you are speaking.*

(‘Blue Hours’, p.35)

Thus, for Handal, homeland defies borders, native languages, places of residence; sometimes, the desire to abandon Palestine to find refuge into another identity to avoid fear, to achieve wholeness seem to take over. However, Palestine never leaves her. Many Palestinians who have fled felt that they had betrayed their homeland since staying is loaded with the political struggle of fighting the coloniser (Lindholm Schultz & Hammer, 2003). Contrary, Handal does not feel that her homeland resents her, Palestine's reply seems to suggest to defy the nationalistic constructions and embrace a mobile hybrid identity. Nonetheless, it should be worth asking whether the country that Handal mentions has a geographical actualisation in Palestine (or in the US, Latin America, Haiti etc.) or whether it is an ideal sense of homeliness created by her multiple identities: “but even when we are conscious that the absence of home can never be filled, we are also aware that the presence of what's absent can be found in some places” (Handal, 2017a). Moreover, since cultural identity is a fluid process, so is the relationship with the homeland that may change; thus trying to label or confine it into monolithic structures would paradoxically weaken Palestinian discourses.

Indeed, writers with hyphenated identities contributed to renovate and give resonance to the Palestinian cause, creating interesting points of contacts with other cultures instead of rooting it only within the Arab community. This view follows Said's reflections on

the condition of exile since he was persuaded that exile should not be exalted or turned into a local private matter. What the critic envisaged, was to transform exile into a tool through which individuals could be placed in a perspective that would defy dogmas; therefore, any geographically or politically restrictive position would distance the Arab culture from an international debate (Iskandar & Rustom, 2010). Indeed, other postcolonial writers identified themselves with the Arab and Palestinian histories; significantly, the African-American poet June Jordan wrote: “I was born a black woman / and now / I am become a Palestinian” (cited in *Notes* in Majaj, 2001). Especially for women writers who had to fight an additional struggle against gendered oppression together with colonialism, creating intercultural bonds through writing turned out to strengthen their voices. According to Spivak the decolonisation process could not start until women’s voices are heard and not silenced or replaced by other narratives (Landry & MacLean, 1996). In the growing number of postcolonial women writers, countless points of contacts bridged the religious, cultural and ethnic differences of specific experiences of exploitation. Hence, African writers identified with Palestinians as well as with every other colonised subjects. In the second section of *The Lives of Rain*, Handal explores more in depth the communalities that connect her to other ethnic groups and other women. In ‘Dalmatian Coast’, the dialogue with the Balkans naturally unfolds:

We speak of weddings  
You speak of funerals  
We understand each other

Who has survived  
Don’t answer

We tell each other  
Don’t lean backward  
Don’t bend forward

(p.19)

The tragic events that took place in the 1990s in the former Yugoslavian state evoke the ethnic cleansing in the Lebanon civil war as well as the daily violence on women and children in Palestinian refugee camps. Thus, the understanding is mutual and immediate: joy cannot be felt without pain, without the memory of those who have died

and life is lived in the sympathetic attempt of finding a way to cope. Inevitably, dialogic encounters imply sharing the experiences of human losses, but remembrance is dangerous, one may lose the precarious balance and the rebuttal immediately intimates “don’t answer”. In this poem language is essential: no subordinate clauses, no punctuations, elementary lexicon; thus, even speakers of different languages can easily communicate. The plainness of language parallels the immediacy of their understanding since their mutual experiences can bridge over any cultural, linguistic or religious differences. The unornamental language creates directness and recognition in the basic human feelings and rights that are often denied in wars. It is not surprising that Handal finds intimacy with the Dalmatians since their history mirrors the international indifference towards minor ethnic groups. Indeed, in ‘Kolo’ the Srebrenica massacre is mentioned, echoed in ‘Goran’s Whisper’ and ‘Milos Jovanovic’s Dream’. During the Bosnian war, thousands of Muslim Bosniaks were brutally killed by Serbian paramilitary groups, while they were under the protection of UN troops, whose non-intervention is still debated and highly criticised. The 1995 genocide, where women, children and men were put to death under a dubious involvement of the UN clearly recalls the ambiguous international policies that decided the fate of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. However, the political dimension is secondary to human sufferings and daily experiences of coping with traumas. In ‘Kolo’ the first stanza creates a striking difference between the external and the internal:

In the Balkans  
A woman breastfeeds, hums a low tune, combs her hair,  
Laments hanging on the village trees, she tries to forget  
The rapes the refugee camps the slit throats  
Of Srebrenica, tries to remember the blink of her own past passing,  
Days dancing the *kolo*, each torture unsung in that violet swaying.

(p.41)

The first lines evoke a peaceful image of a mother’s daily life, seen from the outside the scene is serene, then it turns into the melancholic laments until in the fourth line the images that haunt the woman are revealed: “the rapes the refugee camps the slit throats”. There is no introduction for the tragedy and the words are separated from the general sentence by two enjambments, thus left in a prominent position. While the woman tries to forget her recent past, she wants to remember the joyful moments of the

*kolo*, of Bosnian dances. Similarly, in 'Jenin' the typical image of Palestinian serenity, the olive trees, were invoked to erase the corpses from the memory. Moreover, the *kolo* inevitably links to the *debke* in an Arabic context, creating implicit similarities among all women who endure pain silently because life after all does not end. Thus, the final stanza reads:

A woman breastfeeds and cooks and hums,  
Crosses fall sideways without a sound,  
The past slips beneath her raised arms,  
The *kolo* whirling on.

The intimacy and delicacy of the image perfectly frames a moment of women's endurance. The internal turmoil has to be carried in silence, there is no time for desperate mourning because there are other children to look after, other people to cook for. However, the dance movement still lingers, hoping to find a place and a time when it will be possible to dance together again. Although the topic is oppressive, Handal's cadence is floating, like a *kolo* dance.

Besides identification with Dalmatians, Handal establishes interactions with a plethora of ethnic groups. According to Said indeed, the case of Palestine reached a universal dimension:

I have found a universal meaning in the experiences on behalf of Palestinian rights, whether because liberal human right discourses, otherwise so eloquent about all other rights, has stood in embarrassed silence before Palestine, looking the other way, or because Palestine provides the test-case for a true universalism on such matters as terror, refugees, and human rights, along with a real moral complexity often bypassed in the rush to various nationalist assertions (Said, 2002, p. 31).

Thus, together with the universal meaning of Palestine, Handal creates points of contact with other women. Inevitably, the Latin American and Caribbean identities are explicitly evoked since they belong to her heritage and present life. Thus, a Caribbean confides that he longs for his homeland although he loves America and understanding comes with Spanish *inmigrantes* who inhabit a similar liminal position in Western and especially US culture. However, in 'Blue Hours' a moment of touching recognition breaks the natural barriers of diffidence with a *negrita*. Since she is crying, the persona initially prefers to hide, but then she is carried toward the other woman by the mutual

understanding of sufferings. Notwithstanding the commonality of experiences, Palestinian-ness stand in a unique position of temporal ambivalences. As already mentioned, time is actually a relationship with place (Barghouti, 1998) and critics define it as frozen because of its inability to hold on to the non-place of the Palestinian state. The impossibility of historicising Palestine generates stasis and a perpetual movement that erases history (Cariello). It has been noted before how Palestinian timelines are often blurred, anchored to a place that is no more. On the other hand, there is also the attempt to give truthfulness to narratives through journal-like descriptions. Handal inserts excessive details that provide the counter-narrative of the silenced narrations of Palestine:

They came as if I was not there-  
Thirty-three, one hundred and twenty-five  
Long hair, brown hair, blue eyes  
Lines on the sides of my mouth  
Yellow skin  
[...]

It is not morning yet-  
Two ambulances, three fire trucks,  
Twenty-four cars passed in eighty-two seconds,  
And they came

(‘The Conflict’, p.7)

If Darwish freed the paradoxical immobility of history through the deconstruction of myths and promoted alternative histories to the hegemonic Israeli narrations, Handal makes use of different languages and their implied geographies and histories not to relegate Palestinian-ness to the loss of the land. Many critics researched the subaltern perspective from where Darwish wrote poetry to oppose the coloniser’s history, since he believed that the refugees were often not taken into account by international historiographies, preferring to give voice to Israeli narratives. Hence, timelines become blurred, the present is imprisoned in the past but also projected towards a future that is envisaged as the mythic past of Palestinian origin. Since the present exists as a temporary condition of a better life and since the past is given voice through the narrations of the elders, Palestinian narratives are entrusted with the crack of memory:

It was Wednesday, I remember. Maybe it was Thursday. [..]

Then they arrived. Announced-she died yesterday, but I heard she died a year ago, later that evening I found out that she will die tomorrow.

(Handal, 2005, p. 11)

Commenting Ghassan Kanafani's novellas, Edward Said (1986) argued that in Palestinian narratives memory and reality often intertwine to the extent that they create temporal ambiguities. Similarly, in *The Lives of Rain* the present condition is problematic, but Handal moves forward contradictions:

[We leave]  
As if we can hold on to everything we pass through,  
As if we can remember our past,  
Think of our future as if it is sure to come.  
Why do we insist  
On disappointing ourselves-  
Past or future  
Suspense or dream  
Instead of hoping the present

(‘Another Sun’, p.62-63)

Thus, the final resolution implies to let go of the crystallisation of Palestinian past and stops perceiving the future as the place where return and idyllic happiness are inscribed. Differently from previous generations, the condition of exiled writers is the present:

We do not know in the past  
Or future tense  
But keep practicing...

(‘Another’, p. 62)

For Handal, it does not necessarily mean that diaspora is lived more peacefully than other writers, but it emphasises that time relationships have changed, and survival in the twentieth-first century implies adapting and mobility. Inevitably, the relationship with the homeland has changed as well. Although Palestine is seldom mentioned in the collection, its resonance is constant: it does not need to be named, but at the same time it allows to become the emblem of all the denied identities as well as diasporas. Significantly, the first section of *The Lives of Rain* opens with a poem entitled ‘Ephratha’, the Canaanite name of Palestine. This choice emphasises Handal's willingness to acknowledge Palestine as a site where different cultures have passed and



keep on passing, she ties her experiences with countless others, all supported and remembered in literature. The last stanza reads:

Poem  
You stand between the dream of two questions  
Awaiting the day you will unfold yourself  
Like prayers unfold themselves from tongues,  
You continue to stand, weep and celebrate  
As if you were written  
Perfectly

(p. 6)

Thus, different narrations of different people converge in literature where they can all speak. Since Palestinian identity cannot be separated from its political discourses, many Palestinian feared that their struggles may decline due to the melting with other cultures while living in exile (Lindholm Schultz & Hammer, 2003). However, in Handal's poem it rather seems that the political fight gains new awareness and resonance thanks to the points of contacts with other cultures created also by literary encounters.

Notwithstanding the changing relationship with History, the impossibility of recreating the story of all her family and more generally, reconstructing Palestinian histories, can become an obsessive and unfruitful process:

I grew up with family spread throughout the world in the *shatat*, the diaspora, with fragments of their stories, and with the looming presence of those we couldn't trace. I craved the details of their exilic routes [...]. Over the years, my family has given me glimpses of what I've asked for: an image by the sea, a group of people behind a large house, endless orange trees, a port, boats. These glimpses keep me coming back for more, but they never tell the whole story. So I remain consumed by the past, with ancestry and connectedness, collecting stories of Palestinians, charting their journeys to understand the people and the place I'm a part of. [...] Mapping the ruins of this country and family is like trying to gather particles after a detonation. (Handal, 2017a).

Given the impossibility of having a whole picture, but only glimpses and fragments of family and Palestinian stories, Handal creates a poetry of interrupted scenes. In 'The Conflict' the Israeli soldiers occupy the village while the persona is out buying bread ignorant that that will be the last time he/she will enter the house. Then, the picture of

the subway ticket and the half bottle of juice, the rapidity of the successions of events leave with suspended reflections, because the questions were not articulated yet:

Perhaps we are not meant to understand everything,  
So we try to understand  
Where we are from, where we are going,  
What we look like.

(p. 7)

In ‘The Uncertainty of Fear’ all the objects that are left behind (a remote control, an ashtray, a pillowcase, a toothpaste) came to represent an interrupted life, they are the physical presence of someone that was there and lived. Objects are loaded with the emotional significance of belonging while they also represent the rights of their owners. However, the objects referred to in the poem should be addressed to as things if taking into account the Thing Theory. Indeed, according to Thing Theory, while the former are just a presence in daily life that does not capture the attention, the latter are “what is excessive in objects, as what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects—their force as a sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence, the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols, and totems” (Brown, 2001, p. 6). Thus, things exceed their materiality and a remote control can become a fetish because its value transcends its physical meaning. Although the rationale may escape at first, leaving an emotional attachment that cannot be comprehended yet, the things are fragments in themselves, a partial and zoomed-in vision of a larger context that is too painful to evoke or too close to be looked at:

Coffee cups full  
Left on the table  
In a radio station  
Beside three corpses.

(‘War’, p.44)

The cups of coffee are the subject, the focus of the stanza is on them, while the corpses are just placed near, as if it is too painstaking to confront them straightforwardly. The coffee not drunk epitomises the interrupted scenes that Handal often lists, quick glimpses of daily life suddenly cut off by violence, but that in their concision multiply the possible lives. Thus, “the messy hair of boys” (p.44), suspended lovers, untold

stories, dialogues interrupted mid-sentence are everything that can be narrated. In ‘The Ballad of Haya’, war leaves only her hand and memories of her life, fragments are also the body parts lacerated from their bodies, from their wholeness.

The possibility of a comprehensive narrative is denied by the very definition of Palestinian identity as well as the hyphenated selves of cross-borders. According to Rushdie, the emigrated “are the one insiders and outsiders in this society. This stereoscopic vision is perhaps what we can offer in place of ‘whole sight’” (1991, p. 19). The stereoscopic view mentioned by Rushdie is translated in a sort of camera eye that records in slow motion and enlarges: “I see the book about / to land on the wet floor / but do not pick it up” (‘Conversation with a Soldier when no one is Around, p.17). Handal fluently plugs in and then emerges from society with pieces that reflect it. The title of the collection is taken from a poem in the second section that epitomises the multiple and fragmented scenes of life:

The old Chinese man  
In the health food shop  
At 98<sup>th</sup> and Broadway tells me  
The rain has many lives.

(p.43)

In a mysterious prophetic encounter, the poet is revealed some truths by a dubious Chinese healer. Although he is given physicality in the specific address, his existence and words seem more ethereal. While the poet asks herself whether she can trust him or whether a special connection is created between them, she cannot avoid creating the multiple scenarios of his life, if they match with hers. Scenes of possible lives are passed through but they do not form a continuative narrative, only glimpses of what could have been. Then, the Chinese old man reveals:

Rain he tells me, carries rumors of the dead,  
Of those with suitcases and epidemics.  
Rain carries the memory of droughts,  
Of house gone, rain like lovers  
Comes and goes, like soldiers go  
And sometimes return to a life  
No longer standing.  
The Chinese man waits for me to ask –  
Who really knows how many lives to come.

(p. 43)

Rain contains the memory of natural disasters as well as of human deaths, but also of History. The reader is not given the final answer, again the narrative is interrupted. Unspoken words and unfinished dialogues linger throughout the whole collection. Although the poem leaves some hope in the life-giving properties of rain and the collection often offers cues of human solidarity that looks “for the tides in our voice” (p.20), incommunicability and fear still haunt relationships. On the one hand they are emblematic of modernity’s fragmented communications as well as the legacy of pain and traumatic experiences: “Then we stop, and *try to tell each other something*” (‘The Uncertainty of Fear, p.20), “What were you going to say / that night when I started traveling? / When I stopped you mid-sentence?” (‘Regrets in Galilee, p. 13). On the other hand, communicability is doomed by politics and secrecy that do not allow to exchange even the simplest information. Indeed, ‘I Never Made it to Café Beirut; Nor, I Heard, Did You’ tells of another fragment of a life, where name, age and nationality are a dangerous burden carried in secrecy probably because the man is part of the Palestinian resistance. A couple should meet at the Lebanese border, but neither of them reach the destination. The six stanzas allude to a love story and yet there is no beginning nor end, only the obstacles that impede their reunion: war, Hezbollah, corpses. Love cannot shield their bodies from warfare nor can protect them from the harrowing sights of death. Yet, there is an urgent insistence to see each other as if some important truth is finally revealed that may unveil not only the man’s identity but also the secrets of Palestine. As the Chinese old man is not given the time to uncover his truth, thus the lovers do not meet, they might be dead, they might have been prevented to cross the border. Their story is unfinished as many others, but according to Handal (2017), it does not matter how painful they are because the desire to know them, to put all the pieces together, is innate in human beings. Thus, her personal story is also made of silences and interrupted encounters. ‘Bethlehem’ tells of her grandparents’ roots and search for filling the gaps in their narrations.

*Secrets live in the space between our footsteps.*  
The words of my grandfather echo in my dream,  
As the years keep his beads and town.  
[...]  
I walk until I reach an old Arab man dressed in a white robe.

*Aren't you the man I saw in my grandfather's stories?*  
He looks at me and leaves. I follow – ask him why he is going?  
He continues. I stop, turn around, realize,  
He has left me secrets between his footsteps.

(p. 9)

Handal's grandfather is the one that keeps the Palestinian past alive through his memory and the poet tries to reach out to that past, to match his stories, but she cannot find them. Thus, the old Arab man's footsteps represent the attempt to give relevance to Palestinian diasporic narratives that too often are silenced by trauma, foreign politics and cracked memory (Cariello, 2012). The need to reconstitute the past is so urgent that its recognition may be forced into the present, idealising reality. Again, the secrets are left unresolved, but the silence is eloquent in itself: it tells of an unspeakable pain, of a denied narration, a silence where every victim can inscribe their story.

Because of war and occupation, fragments are often the only reality left, yet Rushdie also argued that postcolonial writers are "obliged to deal in broken mirrors, some of whose fragments have been irretrievably lost" (1991, p. 11). However, he adds that the fragmented objects notwithstanding their triviality, are all that is left, all that remains from a lost past; therefore, they are turned into symbols. Ghassan Kanafani's *Returning to Haifa* similarly deals with objects; the novella is about a Palestinian family escaped during the Israeli occupation of Haifa, but in the hurry and fear they left their little son behind. The boy was found and adopted by the Jewish family that settled in their house. After many years, the Palestinian couple decides to go back to their house in Haifa and see what has happened of their son Khaldun. The moment they enter the house there is a fixation with the objects that are still at their place despite all those years: the Syrian carpet, photos on the wall and a wooden vase with five peacock feathers that used to be seven. The almost absurd presence of the objects after more than twenty years and the insistence on the new objects in the house such as the curtains, but especially the memory of the seven feathers instead of five convey the sense of a cracked completeness, of a life lived in-between. Then, Said, the Palestinian father, after meeting his lost son who has become a Jewish soldier, reflects:

What is a homeland? Is these two chairs that remained in this room for twenty years? Peacock feathers? The picture of Jerusalem on the wall? The copper lock? The oak tree? The balcony? What is a homeland?

Khaldun? Our illusions about him? Fathers? Their sons? What is a homeland? (Kanafani, 2000, p. 184).

Thus, the “things” suddenly lose their emotional attachment and become “objects”, since the relation with the human subject has evolved (Brown, 2001). Handal came to a similar conclusion after incessantly looking for details about an uncle who was living in Venice, but that she could not meet:

And I realized, for the first time, that it’s not the details that are most important to me in my search in the *shatat* [diaspora], it’s the act of listening; that in listening we understand what we aren’t able to say, and we become aware of the ways the heart resists (2017a).

In the same article, she also reflected that those fragments of her family’s stories she was desperately chasing represented the hope for wholeness, and that is why she could not stop searching to put them all together. They are not Palestine nor her family, but nonetheless they disclosed truths that were worth discovering.

According to Khalidi (2003) what is peculiar about Palestinian identity is that it is perceived and built on other contradictory and solid identities that have always been present in Palestine: Islamic, Christian, Ottoman, Arab and others. Although some elements are constant, Palestinian-ness is to be understood as a narration within all the other different narrations. Drawing from postcolonial studies of formation of identity, it is generally acknowledged that identity is shaped in response to a threatening or competing Other, whose features change depending on the functional representations that are needed to be addressed to (Said, 1994a). In Handal’s poems all the different narrations find a co-existence, but together with the traditional Other that intertwines with Palestinian identity, the poet has her personal stories derived from her family diaspora. Thus, the different layers of Palestinian-ness are complicated and multiplied, so that there is no easy identification with a singular “enemy”. In this sense, Israelis or Jews are not mentioned explicitly, there is a feeling of a threatening universal other that haunts Palestinians as well as Dalmatians and Latinos. Moreover, a dialogue with the other is not denied. Drawing from Darwish, who paved the way for a humane understanding of the other, Handal similarly gives peace a chance. In ‘The Conflict’ there seems to be no possibilities for a dialogue:

They came to tell me that

I do not understand the place I inherited  
So they will help me leave,  
And I realize-we are far from each other,  
And grow farther still, smaller still  
Like broken glass shattered in our throats,  
Our breath abandoning God.

(p.19)

Although anger cannot be suppressed for the usurpation of Palestinian rights, there is the awareness that such a resentment would go to the detriment of both Israelis and Palestinians. According to Said (2002) a Zionist discourse could not abide to coexist with stories of dispossession akin to theirs and thus they hastened to expel as many Palestinians as possible. Whereas Handal claims “I look for the eyes, only see the dust / at the corner of their hearts” (‘Twelve Deaths at Noon’, p.15), she also envisages a space for the recognition of mutual sufferings outside history and politics. In “Conversation with a Soldier when no one is Around”, it seems possible to drop the façade that forces people to stand on the opposite sides fighting each other. In the first stanza the persona has to hide, has become a restless being escaping from the past. Similarly, the soldier has to deceive himself/herself to keep on killing:

When no one is around  
And a child is shot dead,  
What will the fighter  
Or the soldier do, what did you do?  
Who cares but the mother  
And the father, who are dead  
Who died yesterday, a while ago,  
Who knows, no one was around...  
Were you around?

When no one is around  
Who will answer your questions –  
Take your time, don't answer right away,  
No one is around to hear you,  
I am no longer here  
No one is around  
You know that.

(p.17-18)

The dialogic setting forces the soldier to drop his/her ideological assumptions in order to focus on humanity, on the death of a child. When the soldier is not bolstered by the

comrades or political faith that had driven him/her to act and to alleviate the guilt, then the pure act remains to be dealt with. Both the coloniser and the colonised are dying and they both want to live.

Corpses follow gunmen in their sleep, remind them  
That today they have killed a tiny child,  
A woman trying to say, *Stop, please...*

Listen, how many should die before we start counting,  
Listen, who is listening, there is no one here, there is nothing left,  
There is nothing left after war, only other wars.

(‘War’, pp. 44-45)

Despite the tendency of antagonising the other, Handal recognises its being a human, and to that she tries to appeal. As in Darwish’s *State of Siege* the initial opposition with the enemy “ends with an embarrassing encounter: / ‘Me and him’” (2014, p. 68). Darwish certainly paved the way for an understanding of the Israelis both as belonging to a determined society, but at the same time as individuals separated from ideologies. One of the best example is a poem he wrote for a Jewish friend of his, who promised to protect each other and not be separated by the conflict; eventually the friend left since he could not bear the conflicting tensions within himself (Darwish, 2007). Their relationship was recorded in ‘A Soldier Dreams of White Tulips’, which was highly criticised when it first came out because Darwish expressed the sense of guilt, or worse the denied sense of guilt that Israeli soldiers felt: “Mahmoud, my friend, / sadness is a white bird that does not come near to a battlefield. / Soldiers commit a sin when they feel sad” (Darwish, 2003, p. 167). The dialogical mode operated by Darwish to voice the Other and give an insight of its consciousness finds an echo in Handal’s poem. The repetition of the imperative “listen” forces the other to a confront, to a reflection that otherwise would not be possible. Handal is also interested in reversing the myth of Palestinians as passive victims of Israeli violence. Thus, in ‘The Hanging Hours’ Palestinians who had to leave their house to Jews come back to haunt them:

The bed I leave will be warm  
The other body will not know I am missing  
Until the very next day when the hours hang  
And he finds himself,  
In a mild season, in a wild place  
Where breaths crowd the bedroom.



(p. 24)

The fact that Israelis inhabited Palestinian houses was one of the most explored themes in literature and many Palestinians went back to their old hometowns years after they had to flee to see what had happened to their houses. Many had even kept the key, as if their departure was only temporary. In Kanafani's *Returning to Haifa*, visiting the house and finding Khaldun seem to represent the answers of all the questions, the only way of providing some kind of closure. However, the contrary is proved. Palestinian-ness does not reside in furniture nor in the sense of homeliness that houses provide, but it takes a conflicting struggle with the self to come to such a resolution, and expropriation is still one of the most evident sources of resentment. Handal powerfully conveys this never-ending bitterness that seems to never find repose, but while she does not deny anger, she is also aware of the need to move forward. In the poem 'Tonight' a Palestinian village is hit by Israeli violence; the first stanza reads:

Water will reach  
The rim of the glass but will not  
Allow itself to leave the glass

(p.52)

The powerful image of the water that bends the laws of nature to its will beautifully describes Palestinian efforts not to lose their humanity, to find a self-containment that otherwise would not allow them to go on; the final line says: "tonight love will be difficult". Yet, love is still possible. Despite death and loss, those who survived have to go on with their lives:

Now we keep hoping we might hear  
What we want to hear,  
Live the way we should live...  
The lemon trees keep disappearing  
And the weather keeps changing,  
We keep aging  
Keep coming back  
But never on time  
To see those who keep living.

('Haifa, Haifa', p.23)

Similarly to 'Kolo', Handal highlights human endurance, the course of life that incorporates triviality as well as tragedy. Thus, although life continues while people die and Palestinian identity is being erased, there is an element of rupture that does not allow to simply reduce death to fatality: timing is wrong, something is broken that "keep coming back / but never on time".

### 3.3 Feminine returns

Return for Palestinians has become one of the most longed and romanticised tropes, especially after the 1993 Oslo Accords, when it became clear that refugees and Palestinians' rights were not a primary concern for the international powers. Since a definite return appears to be politically impossible, but also entering Israel is a threatening and often unsuccessful attempt, going back to the homeland is loaded with different layers of meaning. In many cases, the diasporic condition has originated in the second-generation Palestinians an urgent need of the homeland while creating comfortable settlements in the new places of residence. Thus, Palestine is nothing but an abstraction, a symbol, yet the distance becomes somehow more difficult to bear because its affiliations are romanticised, recreated in the minds to fit a particular disposition. Many critics, Said as well as Turki, recognised that it was the condition of exile rather than the homeland that created identification with Palestinian-ness: "after twenty-five years of living in the *ghourba*, of growing up perpetually reminded of my status as an exile, the diaspora for me, for a whole generation of Palestinians, becomes *the* homeland" (Turki, 1972, p. 175). Thus, as the concrete idea of return or mobility declines, Palestine is distant and vivid only in dreams and symbols. Moreover, another aspect of Palestinian exile that was emphasised in Abulhawa's *Mornings in Jenin* is that where family resides becomes the homeland, or at least the place where settling is not too painful. Given Handal's geographical displacements of family networks, it results on the one hand that a sense of homeliness is always with her, while home is assigned a role that blurs space and time and whose contradictions resolve in poetry: "being Palestinian is always living in between skylines [...] except in our land of poetry, poetry as a homeland". Notwithstanding this awareness, exile cannot be borne lightly:

Poem  
Is exile  
A guest made of stones  
A thin line between our voice and heaven's throat?

('Ephratha', p.6)

Exile is a burden and, although Handal calls it "a guest", its presence seems to be permanent, *ghurba* is latent but "like broken glass shattered in our throats" ('The Conflict', p.8), it reappears at every breath. Together with the political implications that mark Palestinian returns, female narratives take into account the gendered constructions of identities as well as the struggle for human rights. According to Lisa Suhair Majaj (2001), all these struggles (political, feminist, humanitarian) became inextricably part of the same discourse for women writers. In an interview with the Palestinian critic, Handal explained the overlapping of political issues in her life as woman and as Palestinian:

I live in the United States and cannot escape the experience of being held between the crack of a half opened door – on one side the view of high-rises, on the other side the view of disappearing olive trees. And I am reminded everyday that I am a woman, reminded everyday that I have to fight for something, anything (Majaj, 2006).

Thus, women writers who have to negotiate with multiple identities, also have to fight a double liminality, cultural as well as gendered. Moreover, the diasporic condition and the exile establish a problematic relationship with the idea of returning, often attempted through the act of writing. Indeed, return is the ultimate dream, whether idealised or concrete hope. Famously, Salman Rushdie (1991), after having looked at a picture of an old house where he had lived several years after that the photo was taken, reflected that for emigrated and exiles, the present is still an uncharted territory, alienating for many, while the past always connects to home although this home is often inherited, imagined instead of lived. In the specific case of Palestine, many critics reflected on the condition of exile, especially regarding to the younger generations who inherited the homeland from their parents and lived in hyphenated identities:

The occupation has created generations of Palestinians who are strangers to Palestine, generations who are familiar with every alleyway of their places of exile, but who are ignorant of their

homeland. [...] These generations are condemned to love an unseen lover, a distant, difficult lover separated from them by guards and fences and sleek terror. The occupation has transformed us from the sons of Palestine into the sons of the Idea of Palestine (Barghouti, 1998, p. 60).

Undoubtedly, Handal belongs to the generation that lived through the inherited stories of Palestine and thus she feels a sense of loss towards her homeland: “I was present in my absence, an absence which was in itself absent [...]. Palestine was so present in my memory, or rather in the memories of others that I borrowed” (Handal, 1999, p. 140). This feeling of antinomic co-existences is epitomised by Darwish’s *In the Presence of Absence*, where opposites converge, where alongside with stories of life there is also the awareness of the imminent death. The condition of “present absence” characterises all those had to live in exile but always came back to their homeland until it became a physical presence. In ‘Bethlehem’ Handal invokes the ancestors’ past that she cannot find, thus she fantasises about her homeland because a solid past is needed in order to be able to still count on the possibility of return (Cariello, 2012). If there is not an attainable crystallised past to return to, then no fantasies of return are possible.

*Secrets live in the space between our footsteps.*  
The words of my grandfather echo in my dream,  
As the years keep his beads and town.  
I see Bethlehem, all in dust, empty  
A torn piece of newspaper lost in its narrow streets.  
Where is everyone? Graffiti and stones answer.  
Where is the real Bethlehem-the one my grandfather came from?

(p.9)

Handal’s grandfather embodies the past, the roots from where she belongs in the common association of tradition with elderly people, the guardians of Palestinian history. However, the evocation of the homeland is problematic: it has an oneiric dimension that clashes with the contemporary Bethlehem; on the one hand Bethlehem belongs to her grandfather’s words and that image is crystallised, maintained throughout the decades (“the years keep his beads and town”) and that is “the real Bethlehem” for the poet. Handal commented that “it seemed so right to all those stories my grandfather spoke about. I even forgot they weren’t moments I had lived”. Thus, as the town does not meet her expectations, it becomes a desolate place, where the graffiti create a

striking contrast with the glories of stones and history. Not only has the city changed as the consequence of the Israeli occupation, but no representation could ever meet the emotional attachment created by exiles' stories. Thus, this recognition reaches an unspeakable pain that hurts the whole body:

Handkerchiefs dry the pain from my hands.  
Olive trees and tears continue to remember.  
I walk until I reach an old Arab man dressed in a white robe.  
*Aren't you the man I saw in my grandfather's stories?*  
He looks at me and leaves. I follow-ask him why he is going?  
He continues. I stop, turn around, realize,  
He has left me secrets between his footsteps.

(p.9)

However, notwithstanding the realisation that the grandfathers' memories do not correspond to reality anymore, the poet cannot avoid looking for their signs. The role of memory is assigned to olive trees and tears, to their narration that cannot speak but is always perceived. The mythical past of 'the true Bethlehem' invigorates Palestinian identity, but the silence footsteps of the old Arab man bring forth the grief for thousands silenced narrations. Transfiguring reality, or forcing a memory on reality, is a typical process for those who had to flee their homeland:

It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge-which gives rise to profound uncertainties-that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind (Rushdie, 1991, p. 10).

Rushdie's creation of imaginary Indias finds echoes in many postcolonial writers since it is an unavoidable psychological process. Darwish beautifully describes this process by mirroring it in love: "I used to invent love when necessary. When I walked alone on the riverbank. Or whenever the level of salt would rise in my body, I would invent the river" (2011, p.72). The *nakba* certainly caused an undeletable presence of the homeland, but Darwish and Handal also highlights in very humane tones that inventing is also a natural mechanism of survival. 'Baladna' is the poem that mostly epitomises

the return through the imagination and the transfiguration of reality. “Balad” means “country” while the suffix “na” stands for the possessive adjective “our”, thus translated from Arabic the title means “our country”.

We are who we are,  
And home is home  
To keep the seasons dreaming  
To remind us of  
*Ahweh, zaatar, khoubiz, kaak-*  
The common things

(p. 33)

Frequently Handal’s poems prefer to intertwine her personal experience with the collectiveness, showing a sense of belonging to the Palestinian community that is even stronger in exile. There is a sort of inevitability of the Palestinian fate (“home is home”), different experiences that find each other respectively in the Arabic coffee, spices, the typical flat bread and Arabic sweets. Sibilio (2015) points out that in the aftermath of the *nakba* coffee and food become visual reminders of Palestinian-ness; especially in Darwish’s poems, a constant evocation of coffee is perceived as a stable element for the affirmation of domesticity, familiarity and therefore also the homeland. Thus, also for Handal coffee draws an olfactory memory, a sensorial evocation of the homeland:

Handsome gentleman drink coffee  
From small cups, an aroma mapping  
Their homeland, stones and ceramics  
Dark blue, light blue, turquoise...

(Une Seule Nuite à Marrakech, p.29)

Smells are the “mnemonic markers which reactivate the trauma of exodus and map the affective experience” (Sibilio, 2015, p.112) and Palestinian-ness articulates itself in the perpetual dichotomy of presence and absence prompted by the *nakba*. However, together with a collective memory of Palestine in the tropes of coffee and food, according to Lindholm Schulz & Hammer (2003) the condition of exiles is characterised by both a strengthening of the bonds with other Palestinians and by the preserving of a jealous loneliness that is difficultly shared. Thus, Handal, after being

drawn closer to her homeland and to her people, is also aware of the solitude of her position:

I am no longer sure of what I see:  
A field of wheat or a field of olive trees,  
A herd of sheep or a burning mountain,  
Not sure if it matters  
Now that I stand alone  
At the corner of a small road  
Somewhere between my grandfather  
And what seems to be my present...

(‘Baladna’, p.33)

In this poem Handal echoes Salman Rushdie, who in *Imaginary Homelands* stated that “it is [the] present that is foreign, and that the past is home, albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time” (1991, p.9). Thus, the present “seems” to be rather than is and it is conditioned by the past, which emerges unexpectedly. Past and present keep on crossing the poet’s path, prompting an identity crisis that questions “the common things” of the first stanza:

Am I as old, as young,  
As sad, as torn, as strange, as sorry  
As those I have lost?  
I try to remember all that has been offered to me:  
Winkled bed sheets, library passes, old passports,  
Ports we stopped at for an hour...  
We are who we are; are we who we are?

Thus, the “we are who we are” of the first line is turned into a question and the personal experience compares itself with the other Palestinian stories, wondering what it means to be Palestinians, if it only means being dispossessed or if it may include the privilege of a good education and a passport. The last stanza reconnects with the first but, the tone is more uncertain, more nostalgic:

We write a ballad to celebrate ourselves, *baladna*  
And wonder, is that what it’s like  
To dance in Arabic...

Again, the past is tried to be remembered and glorified through writing, but the very Palestinian experience is inevitably inherited and it is only possible to ask whether that is the essence of Palestinian-ness. Moreover, “to dance in Arabic” evokes the

physicality of the language that many poets record to be perceived as a bodily presence. Even Abulhawa expresses the same metaphor of Arabic as “calls and responses that dance in the air” (2011, p. 185). Since the physical return to the homeland is often denied or only fantasized about, writing came to represent the attempt to return; however, the homeland that hyphenated identities try to return to is built on history as well as imagination, and particularly on future. Moreover, Majaj (2001) argues that the return to the homeland through writing is also a return to self and ‘Baladna’ embodies the attempt to chart a map towards the homeland that inevitably makes emerge identity issues. ‘Strangers Inside Me’ explicitly declares: “Outside, strangers looking for themselves / in the silent motion of my handwriting” (p.36). Thus, not only does the poet recreate the homeland and investigate the self through writing, but also “strangers” benefit from the quest. However, this is not a coherent and organised discourse, but rather a whirl of feelings, of impressions that hits the poet: “I stand at the corners of night / hoping that violets will remain purple in winter” (p.36). In the following stanza, Handal emphasises the confusion that arises from such an understanding:

There is a country on my tongue  
 A small world between my heartbeats.  
 Strangers inside me that understand  
 The strangeness of strange things,  
 That understand they are not strangers  
 To each other but it seems strange to  
 Others that they belong together, as if  
 We can refuse ourselves ourselves.

The repetitions of “understand”, “other”, “ourselves”, “strange” but especially the polyptoton, the repetition of different words with the same roots, such as “strangers”, “strangeness”, “strange”, create a sense of alienation, reason is clouded by the perception of unknown consciousness that converge into her writing. Hence, the return to the self and to the homeland is never rationally resolved but it involves uncertainty and tentative confrontations. The Palestinian critic Majaj also suggests that especially for women writers “return” does not mean to go back, but to move forward in order to “create a new future from the fragments of a reclaimed past” (Majaj, 2001, p. 116). Thus, contemporary women writers negotiating multiple identities explore the different “routes”, in Stuart Hall’s term, that direct them towards the future, grounding the self in their roots, but without locking it in the past, they open up to the different languages and



cultures that mediate their present. It may be considered as reactivating time from the Palestinian crystallisation. Moreover, Majaj also emphasised that returning does not imply going back to patriarchal structures of Arab society. Indeed, many critics (Majaj, 2006; Lindholm Schultz & Hammer, 2003; Tahboub 2009) recorded that women, both in exile and in Palestine, are assigned the role of preserving traditions, defending them from multiculturalism and Israeli infiltrations. Thus, women have to recreate the home in exile but in doing so, they are denied the social advantages they could benefit in the host community, such as independence and liberation from patriarchal structures. Maintaining food traditions and social behaviours became ways of preserving memory while prevented women to achieve a future (Majaj, 2006). In literature as well, especially before the first *intifada*, women were crystallised into the symbol of the motherland, the mothers of martyrs, the guardians of family. Given this static perception of gender relations, contemporary writers envisage a return to the homeland in terms of renovated structures that, if cannot achieve complete independence, are at least a move forward. Indeed, according to Handal: “in our journeys to finding this identity that we think can be settled we confuse ourselves, for I have come to believe that we will travel in margins. But margins of our own” (1999, p.141). The response to political, cultural as well as gender marginalisation cannot be but writing, trying to defy what Spivak called “epistemic violence”, the intrinsic colonial violence that makes colonised women doubt about themselves (Landry & MacLean, 1996). According to Handal, in the interview with Majaj (2006), women can be empowered by dealing with issues that are normally taboos, such as violence and sexuality. In ‘In Search of Midnight’ Handal shows how politics can influence lovers’ encounters, the extent to which the very possibility of love is complicated by international policies and ideologies. While in the first stanza a woman is being undressed by a man, in the second stanza she abruptly holds back since he has mispronounced her name. Her attitude is emblematic of the political discourse that affects every Palestinian relation. Indeed, she goes on listing the daily actions that Palestinians have to endure: moving and never arriving, robbing for surviving, being imprisoned. To some extent, names are held dear because they contrast Israeli policies which renamed and changed the spellings of Arabic places (Rushdie, 1991). However, the man’s reply rejects these assumptions and shows how easy it is to rush to

conclusions, since he himself was tortured and exiled because he did not pronounce his name correctly, so he concludes:

You see. A heart in search of midnight  
In only a heart, everything else is the same,  
Except what the other is expecting.

(p.38)

Political discourses also influence Palestinian relationship in more pragmatic ways. Handal creates poems that are concise portraits of human encounters, characterised by fragmentation and uncertainty, she investigates how relationships can develop when they are threatened by fear of death and fences. 'The Combatant and I' shows the traumatised identities that fight not to be overwhelmed by hatred and annihilation:

I can't breathe at night, can't feel my legs.  
Dreamed I stopped seeing.  
Are you lost?  
Are you returning? Am I returning?  
I suppose you would say,  
*I should be happy that I can still love.*

(p.12)

Similarly, love may carry a sort of protection to hatred, but it is also evoked as if it may become a physical shield for the lover. The promise of a long-desired encounter assures "not to fear the Hezbollah, the gunshots, / the missiles or grenades" (p.25), but the title of the poem confirms that 'I Never Made it to Café Beirut; Nor, I Heard, Did You'. On the other hand, in 'Regrets in Galilee' identities are too painful to be genuine and they borrow from others "like a woman wearing another woman's heels" (p.13); in 'Twelve Deaths at Noon', love making is stained by the search of the guns and dreams of death. Handal also inverts the traditional representation of Palestine as a female sexualised lover, thus, Palestine takes the shape of men, women, children and the poet writes from the perspective of a "human soul fighting for another soul who has been mistreated for over fifty years" (Majaj, 2006, p. 5).

### 3.4 Polyglossia

As mentioned before, Palestinian women write from a unique position of cultural as well as gendered liminality; in order to overcome and redefine this liminality, language and writing are two powerful tools. As stated by the Mexican writer Gloria Anzaldua (1987, p.81), “Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity-I am my language”. Thus, following this assumption, Handal’s identities include at least Arabic, English, Spanish, French, but references to Kreyol and Serbo-Croatian are also present in the collection and Handal is familiar with Italian and Russian as well. In her poetry it is perceived an intrinsic need to speak and to use the language that instinctively flows out: “and I think, how do you tame a wild tongue, train it to be quiet, how do you bridle and saddle it? How do you make it lie down? [...] Wild tongues can’t be tamed, they can only be cut out” (Anzaldua, 1987, p. 76). This is particularly evident in the third section of *The Lives of Rain*, where Handal retraces her journeys as well as her family’s throughout the continents, from the Arab countries to France, Latin America, England and the US. According to Cariello (2012), multilingualism is part of a strategic process that serves to deconstruct the gendered structures that force Arab women into univocal narratives. Thus, English, French, Arabic and Spanish intertwine to create a fluid narrative where there is not a hegemonic language, but they switch in accordance with different sensations:

Now, my teeth are stained, my English  
Failing me, my Arabic fading  
My Spanish starting to make sense...

(‘Blue Hours’, p.35)

On the one hand, a linguistic as well as cultural translation for Westerners is necessary for mediating Arabness, but Majaj also insists that although it is part of literary endeavors, it should not restrict cultural assertions of identity. Arabness is still perceived as a threat in the West and to some extent the Arabic language has a liminal position:

Poem  
I ask you, why  
Does the street have a name I can’t pronounce?

Does our vocabulary invent us, our accents  
Resent us?

(‘Ephratha’, p.5)

For Palestinians, the Arabic language carries the implications of their history and thus, being “comfortable in other tongues” (‘Opening’, p.61) is a mechanism of defense. According to Al Maleh (2009), Palestinian-American tended to drop the hyphen of their identities and try to merge into US mainstream culture, but after 9/11 Arab-origin émigrés became suddenly visible to the Westerners, arousing suspicion and mistrust. Thus, the relationship with the homeland is complicated by the place of residence that resents Palestine; in-betweenness marks every experience and at times one of the hyphenated halves becomes more prominent than the others:

The years behind a broken door  
My father’s grief –  
I understand nothing –  
Only later do I hear the Arabic  
In his footsteps

(‘Opening’, p.60)

This time her father’s footsteps resonate of the Arabic language, while in ‘Bethlehem’ her grandfather’s remained silent. Thus, language is the signifier of the denied homeland, while her polyglot identity establishes an active process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization (Cariello, 2012). Drawing from Deleuze and Guattari (2000), deterritorialization and reterritorialization are processes that take place when within a society some cultural elements are removed and replaced by others that have undergone a process of foreignization. Thus, Handal’s poetry re-appropriates the signs of her lost homeland while mediating them with American and English culture:

The mist, a room I could disappear in,  
The odd colors found in Portobello Market  
A way into – a small muse in London

Where I came to know  
The silent rain inside of me  
As the Thames had come  
To the rhythm of my breathing.

(‘Incantations’, p.63)

Handal creates “impossible equations” between the Hudson River and Ibn Arabi, Said and Twain, Abdel Halim and Nina Simone, while waiting to see a “New York *debke*”. In ‘Tyranny of Distance’ Handal underlines how a process of othering is forced upon multilingual identities, while for hyphenated subjects such differences are not embedded:

Wonder why we are obsessed  
With difference,  
Our need to change the other?

(p.64)

For Handal, polyglossia is innate, inscribed within her condition of border-crosser and diasporic heritage, and trying to separate languages would imply an annihilation of the self, because they are all intertwined with each other in a dialogic tangle (Majaj, 1999). According to Cariello (2012) Handal’s multivocality is a form of resistance against patriarchal structures and Western logos, by refusing to be translated languages suggest a fluidity and spontaneity of an ongoing cultural negotiation. The Italian critic adds that a dialogic structure is preferred to translation, languages “refuse” to be translated or stay in between cultures. This attitude suggests Kristeva (1991)’s notion of an “*écriture feminine*”, a language that denies gendered constructions, but that naturally surfaces when not repressed by male narratives:

How does one begin to understand the difference  
Between *Sabaah el khayr* and *bonjour*,  
The difference between the city of lights and black-outs.

(‘The Tyranny of Distance’, p.58)

The final section of *The Lives of Rain* is composed by a long poem, ‘Amrika’, divided into shorter fragments that testify displacements from different countries. The word “Amrika” is the Arabic transliteration of “America”, but in the context of the Palestinian diaspora, “amrikans”, “returnees” or “Tunisians” were attributed to those who returned to Palestine by those who had stayed, living in the West Bank or Gaza (Lindholm Schultz & Hammer, 2003). Fractures between these groups contributed to weaken Palestinian-ness since “real Palestinians” accused those who had returned of not having fought and suffered as they did. Notwithstanding these definitions, Handal’s “Amrika”

is a place where the different narrations find co-existence without rankings of suffering, her unique position of Palestinian among other identities epitomises contemporary wide-spread migrations. Moreover, Cariello (2012) underlines that Handal entertains a particular point of view that allows her to break through the mainly male Palestinian literature while dealing with the political implications of Palestinian-ness. After an initial moment of Arab history in the West, when Palestinians only needed to be able to represent themselves and to make themselves available to the world, now contemporary writers have to step forward and investigate identities in depth, even in the less appealing aspects. According to Majaj (1999), this is the only way to develop a new consciousness and step away from the monolithic assumptions of the past.

Language is strongly linked to the place of origin, but modern geographies resist clear-cut definitions due to the impact of technology. Postmodernist theorists emphasised that geography and borders would disappear with the advent of globalisation. Notwithstanding a general criticism, Fukuyama (1989), in his essay “The End of History” claimed that Western liberal democracy would put an end to any other form of government, thus implying that international conflicts would be resolved differently from the state of warfare that characterised the previous centuries. Friedman (2005) similarly implies that globalization created the conditions for a free market where geographies affect less and less the possibilities for economical enterprises. However, borders and geographical boundaries do not seem to have disappeared nor they have an irrelevant role in contemporary society. On the contrary, they keep on multiplying, creating divisions even within groups that could have been considered homogeneous. Khalidi (2003) emphasised that Palestinian identity is described in negative terms at borders, when the process of othering comes to define Palestinian-ness. Although Anzaldua refers to the specific context of Mexican society and the condition of *mestizas*, her reflections can be applied to any postcolonial experience of hyphenated identity or migrating subjects:

The borders and walls that are supposed to keep the undesirable ideas out are entrenched habits and patterns of behavior; these habits and patterns are the enemy within. Rigidity means death. Only by remaining flexible is she able to stretch the psyche horizontally and vertically. La *mestiza* constantly has to shift out of habitual

formations; from convergent thinking, [...] to divergent thinking, characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals and toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes. The new *mestiza* copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity (Anzaldúa, 1987, p. 79).

Thus, sticking to borders and geographies imply “death”; Handal deals with a similar fluidity of ethnicity refusing to label identities: “can anything really be defined and remain fixed? Isn’t everything always changing? Even as I claim to be an Arab-American that definition is changing as I write” (1999, p. 142). Thus, borders do not define identity, but they can provide new angles depending on where one looks at them. The foreword to Handal’s latest collection of poetry reads:

A young man at the border  
Facing Haiti, told me:  
*Here galaxies are  
Our unknown faces.*  
And here-  
Facing the Dominican Republic-  
*The twilight witnesses what  
We will never be able to humiliate.*

(Handal, 2015)

Borders are not only problematic for Palestinians, since territorial demarcations and barriers are often the site for prejudices and othering. Moreover, most of the times borders develop invisible lines that hinder relationships, while favour those who have similar experiences. Thus, ‘In Orphans of the Night’ even the doorframe of a café can become a border that separates or that brings together different parts of the same narration. However, the Palestinian diaspora is the most emblematic representation of Palestinians in contemporary society; Handal explained that for her being Palestinian implied “being from somewhere where I constantly have extra luggage, constantly live on the edges of what I believe and I think I believe” (1999, p.141). Thus, oppressive representations never stop following exiles across different countries:

Without water or prayer, we continue  
Walking to all the borders we can reach  
Somewhere – different each time.  
We are neither breath nor death,  
We are body of holes

(‘The Curfews of History, p.57)

Although borders resist dissolution, Handal offers her personal experience of open frontiers in the multilingual atmosphere of family gatherings in a small Mexican town. In ‘El Almuerzo de Tia Habiba’, while aunts hasten to prepare food at six in the morning, the poet looks at them, seeing no difference between Tia Habiba and Tia Juanita of Indian origin. The domesticity of the scene resonates of other family lunches that take place all over the world, but in the poem the Arab jilbab mingles with Mexican sombreros, the Spanish language responds to Arabic questions. From the top of the staircase, all those people and all those different experiences are transfigured into the Old City of Jerusalem that somehow links them all. Yet, the flux of thoughts is interrupted, but the resolution that linguistic barriers can be overcome, that borders can be torn down still lingers on the page.



# Conclusion

Palestinian fiction and poetry comprehend a wide range of themes: love, personal quests and collective memory, the struggle for women's rights, but they rarely can overshadow the burdensome presence of Israeli occupation. Due to the 1948 *nakba*, the Seven Day War and the daily violence, thousands of Palestinians have fled their homeland to find refuge all over the world. Given the historical and geographical extension of diaspora, Palestinian writers use different languages, ranging from English and Arabic to French, Swedish and other idioms. Thus, a consistent amount of Palestinian literature is produced abroad, connecting different experiences of the same discourse. Nathalie Handal and Susan Abulhawa are only two among the rising Palestine narrators, both committed to give voice to identities that have historically been silenced or misrepresented. There is a common awareness that writers with multiple identities are valuable sources for mediating the dialogue and the representations of Palestinian culture. Said often supported a visibility for Palestinians that would crack static hegemonic representations and similarly Handal argued: "as Arabs and Muslims living or born outside the Arab world, we are the ones that the West has most access to, we play an important role in the way others define us, the image we project is vital and our voices an important force of change" (Majaj, 2006, p.4). Together with Palestinian discourses, women writers also address the issue of female liminality and silencing both within the Arab and the Western context. Handal insisted that "women have a way of arriving at a magic sky and understanding what its possibilities are" (Majaj, 2006, p.4) and Abulhawa uses the same metaphor of a non-place between the sky and the sea that would preserve peacefulness and Palestinian-ness, and this space mainly belongs to women. Thus, female narratives of endurance are portrayed in two different ways: on the one hand, Abulhawa mainly focuses on one character, Amal, although her other relatives and friends stand as different points of view on the same subject. Amal's life is representative of a recurrent pattern in Palestinian stories: born in a refugee camp, she lives through death and dispossession until she moves to the US without being able to find peace. While Abulhawa presents a character that stands for Palestinian-ness, Handal works on the other way round, by condensing global experiences into an explicit Palestinian discourse. From a similar standpoint they tackle the theme of *ghurba*, the

nostalgic and alienating feeling perceived by exiles in the host society. While for Amal the *ghurba* is strictly personal, Handal extends this concept also to non-Palestinians. Although Abulhawa traces some parallels between Palestinian identity and the black minority living in Philadelphia, it is in *The Lives of Rain* that it takes universal connotations: human beings are united by similar sufferings, by the longing of different homelands and by the belief that “there is nothing left after war, only other wars” (p.45). According to Said indeed, the Palestinian cause stands as universal meaning of dispossession which allows Palestinians to be recognised and recognised themselves into other testimonies of usurpations. Basic human needs also establish an emotional connection with Western readers unknown to ordeals or Palestinian events. Journal-like qualities of both works frame Palestine into History, providing a realistic truthfulness to what is being narrated. However, Handal and Abulhawa demonstrate that it is literature that can reach out to people the most. In *Mornings in Jenin* the same scene, the death of Fatima and Falasteen, is conveyed by a war photographer and by Amal’s accounts. The first version is the one assigned to History and although it is not detached, it bears the cool rationality of people accustomed to wars. Amal on the contrary infuses her words with love and despair that cling to the reader, the density of her version is far more difficult to be borne. The mechanical act of the photographer pressing his fingers becomes a poetical “scarlet of darkness” (p.226) for Amal. As far as Handal is concerned, poetry often captures images like a photographer would, words record scenes as a camera-eye. In ‘War’ this mechanism is particularly evident since every stanza portrays a different scene of violence in tiny shreds. Partial visions are a leitmotif of *The Lives of Rain*, the title itself evokes the plurality and the fragmentation instead of a whole picture. To some extent, this attitude is emblematic of hyphenated identities and exiles, but for Handal “we are body of holes” (p.57), still living but deeply mangled. Thus, drawing from the American poet Mark Strand fragments and incommunicability epitomise the condition of exiles who wanders from one country to another in the attempt to “move, and be whole” (p.36).

From a stylistic point of view, notwithstanding the different literary genres, Abulhawa and Handal have a sensuous writing, but while Abulhawa tends to lyricism, Handal often turns to prose poems. In *Mornings in Jenin* the English language seems to be bended to the richness sinuosity of the Arabic and it is embroidered by highly evocative

poetical frameworks. Handal's writings is unornamental, plain, effective: different idioms converge in her poems, resisting the process of translation in order not to comply to Western male logos that imposed silence on women as well as on colonised subjects. Drawing from feminist and postcolonial theories, all the languages operated by Handal charge polyglossia with the political implications of liminality. Thus, English is not the language of the coloniser, but the natural offspring of particular situations; writing in English with so many linguistic influences actually creates another language: in 'Blue Hours' when Spanish becomes the tongue more suitable to express the emotional closeness with a "negrita", Handal is still writing in English. According to Kristeva, linguistic dissemination fights dogmatic impositions and allows Handal to fill her poems with lines that do not want to be translated and with images that remain mysteriously unresolved: "my linguistic plurality has inspired me to look beyond the surface of words, to seek beyond the language of politics and the politics of language, beyond misconceptions; to be conscious of the incomplete translations of other people" (Handal, 2017b). Handal creates spaces where feminine identities meet outside linguistic constraints, bound by the chronicles of history and solidarity. In this spaces silence and unfinished sentences are a language in themselves, a language that speaks of traumas and that is left open to acknowledge different narratives. In *Mornings in Jenin*, silence belongs to traumatized identities: Huda's son Mansur becomes mute after he is tortured by Israeli soldiers, Dalia wrapped herself in an obstinate laconism and Amal refused to speak of her Palestinian past. Moreover, at certain points the voice of the narrator or of the characters keeps quiet as well, letting the narrative unfold itself or inserting passages taken from other books. Narratives belong to women, in the simple solidarity naturally created by the similarities of their circumstances, whether they are Palestinians or not.

The poet Samih al-Qasim wrote that for Palestinians "ink has the smell of blood" (cited in Ashrawi, 1978, p.87) and more than ever, Arab writers are aware of the political implications of their writing. Although Abulhawa always insisted that her novel was not political, every attempt to write about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict brings into question ideologies, the Oslo Accords, the condition of refugees and so forth. As in *Mornings in Jenin* Amal initially perceives the encounter with her lost brother as a battleground of Palestinian-ness against Israeli-ness, so Abulhawa creates an instant

identification with her characters that defies Western dichotomization of Palestinians as either passive victims or terrorists. Although the confrontation with the Jewish brother ultimately is the source of Amal's humanism and the resolution to her identity crisis, the novel initially places the characters as strong-willed victims of History, whose touching humanity cannot leave the reader indifferent to Palestinian sufferings and simultaneously warns them against the Israelis. The broken love-stories and the denial of the perfect happy endings emphasise the frustration of the reader: lovers do not reunite, families are destroyed and children separated from their parents. The force of the novel is indeed in the ability to establish an emotional bond with the characters, prompted by the touching human needs of Palestinians, in the simple desires of little Amal and Huda. Handal similarly deals with humanity within a political context which is not only relegated to Palestinian-ness, but also to Latin American immigrants, the victims of genocide. Their daily endurance is portrayed through a striking contrast between the appearance of normality from the outside and the images that scream inwardly. Thus, the language mirrors this aspect and is not embroidered by poetical lyricism, but it is sharp-edged, nude. The insistence of Palestinian narratives on the interior is both an invitation to identification and an inevitable need to voice their own experiences. Indeed, Edward Said, in a conversation with Salman Rushdie emphasised that foreign narratives, whether Israeli or Egyptian, constantly intrude into Palestinian space to narrate their own story (Rushdie, 1991). However, speaking for themselves does not exclude speaking with others, since *The Lives of Rain* dialogically questions other experiences and the result empowers rather than weakens Palestinian discourses.

Bhabha (1994) emphasised that in postcolonial analyses, subjects carry the signs of History written on their bodies, bounding the time of alternative histories to their geographical presence and tying their personal experience with the global. In *Mornings in Jenin* the equation of time-space and personal-collective is evident in Dalia's loss of Ismael that froze the time in 1948 both in her life and in Palestinian history: "Dalia stopped and so did time" (p.33). Moreover, while Amal lives in the US, she recreates the geography of Palestine as chronicles of time, when memories of places start to fade, she gives them new visibility by bounding them to isles of times, such as Hajj Salem's stories and Arabic poetry; similarly, Amal's experiences of loss and trauma are charged with the "deafening crescendo of a two-thousand years-old lineage" (p.223). Hajj Salem

and Yehya perform the same role of Handal's grandfather in rooting the self into history, the echo of their stories provides the discourse of the mythologised past that is inherited and therefore charged with additional layers of distress. Thus, the footsteps of Handal's grandfather are silent as the emblem of the denied Palestinian narratives by foreign authorities, but also because they are cracked by memory and the passing of time. Fragments are all that is left and the poet desperately tries to keep them together, to make them survive for her sake as well as for preserving Palestinian-ness. In this sense, the excessive work of memory which calls for wholeness mirrors Derrida's notion of hypermnesia as a psychic process where the past is tried to be retraced beyond memory and beyond any possible information. Another interesting element resonates in Handal's as well as Abulhawa's work, namely the need of reconstituting the family tree. In *Mornings in Jenin*, this attempt is evident since Abulhawa places the Abulheja's family tree before the beginning of the novel and Amal is deeply affected by her relatives' stories, to the extent that she has to shut them out in order to survive. The suppression of her Palestinian-ness produces the opposite effect, Bhabha's uncanniness, where past events are reproduced in the present under different shapes, such as Amal's ghosts or the transfiguration of the Philadelphian house into Jenin. *The Lives of Rain* portrays a similar transfiguration of reality, where the past of olive trees and burning mountains seems more real than the present she is living in, where her grandfather's memories of Bethlehem overshadow the corporality of the city; but the reasons that lay behind these distortions are opposite. While Amal cannot negotiate with the hyphenated identity of Palestinian-American, Handal has to embrace all her multicultural identities, they cannot be separated as they exist intertwined with each other. Although Amal's attempt proves to be impossible, since cultural identity is a process, a flux of divergent currents tangled with each other (Said, 1999), her attitudes demonstrates that Palestinian-ness is too painful to be borne alone as it carries personal traumas together with a heritage of dispossession. On the contrary, Handal finds her burden liberating when it is shared with the other halves of her identity, where the Thames is synchronised with her breathing, Palestinian-ness is mirrored in the eyes of a "negrita" and global endurance is inscribed in her family's diaspora in different countries. Contradictions created by different languages, religions and cultures are overcome by focusing on the extent to which all the experiences are connected to each other; the process of othering is forced

from the external society rather than coming from the inside: “is it really you who doesn’t know or others who make you think that you do not know who you are-Arab or American, American or Palestinian, both or neither?” (Handal, 1999, p. 139).

Although there are moments where the languages resent her, where exile seems too heavy and people never arrive as in Amal’s experience, Handal’s poetry craves roots and stability in itself: “Outside, strangers looking for themselves / in the silent motion of my handwriting” (p.36). Identities are inscribed within a contrapuntal rather than essentialised discourse: although in both literary works the past inherited is a primary source of Palestinian-ness, neither of them consign a univocal vision to the reader. In *Mornings in Jenin* the possibility of future is created by the past, but it is assigned to a future where Said’s concept of humanism reigns. According to Said (2004) humanism requires an act of strength of identification with the Other that envisages a sharable future; Amal is endowed with such a feeling after a journey into the self and a forced confrontation with David. The Jewish characters trigger a powerful feeling of solidarity epitomised by motherly love that crumbles the strong walls of hostilities created in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Amal learns to reconcile with her hyphenated identity by mediating with cultures rather than looking backwards to the petrified symbols of 1948. In *The Lives of Rain* the discourse on humanism is already embedded in the general envision of the world as characterised by mobility and by the incessant encounters with other cultures. In the poem that gives the title to the collection, a Chinese man holds the secrets for all humanity in the regenerating power of the rain: it washes away epidemics as well as it brings destruction, there is a sort of circularity of life and death that creates a balance. Thus, Handal moves away from the mythization of Palestinian identity by exploring the different paths that disclosed themselves in the present through a multicultural all-encompassing orientation:

We do we insist  
On disappointing ourselves –  
Past or future  
Suspense or dream  
Instead of hoping the present.

(‘Another Sun’, p.62-63)

Traditionally, meaning is given to past and future because the present, in order to be tolerable, is to be intended as a temporary condition of occupation. Yet, they also cause bitterness since they are only “suspense or dream”; thus, Handal capitalises the attention on the present where it is possible to build a future that is not mere illusion. Similarly, Abulhawa insists on the pragmatic aspects of the present: Palestinian women are not allowed the benefit of fantasising about the future, but they have to carry on building spaces of stoic endurance. The complicated temporary relationships of Palestinians affect the *Lives of the Rain* as well as *Mornings in Jenin*. Abulhawa takes on herself to represent Palestinian history following chronology so that Western readers can understand its implications, yet there is also the need to define Palestine throughout the course of History since the past was tried to be erased. Thus, despite the overall chronological unfolding of events, frequent flashbacks and flashforwards blur the timeline. Handal internalises the temporal ambiguities into contradictions and unrest: thus, people who died are not yet dead, “hearts [are] stopping time” (p.57) and people move but never arrive. Palestinian narratives are particularly arduous to deal with for the discontinuities of the experiences that diverge in Lebanon, Gaza, Sweden, America and in all the other countries where exiles found refuge. Said highlighted the difficulty of writing in a way that could incorporate all these different narratives and few writers, only Habibi and Kanafani, reached “formless” structures in their works that allow them to portray multiplicity and temporal ambiguities, typical of Palestinian-ness (Rushdie, 1991).

Thus, geographies become blurred and borders are demolished, because homeland is not a place nor a language, but the space created through writing that mainly belongs to women. Both writers arrive to a non-place, where return is possible, where they recreate the homeland; for Handal this space is poetry, while for Abulhawa it is a shade of blue in the lover’s eye, in the sky, the promise of happiness in daily life that defies politics and pain: “never I have been so aware of life or so grateful to live. To have a sense of blue” (p.204).

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