



## WHAT ROSEMARY SAW: REFLECTIONS ON PALESTINIAN WOMEN AS TELLERS OF THE PALESTINIAN PRESENT

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*Referencing the “stereotypes of self” identified by Rosemary Sayigh in the life stories of Palestinian camp women in Lebanon who had lived through the Palestinian resistance, the author focuses on the narratives of two women in Ramallah’s Am’ari refugee camp since the outbreak of the al-Aqsa intifada to reflect on the Palestinian present. Though the women—and their goals and struggles—could not be more different, their narratives reveal significant shifts in self-representation that reflect both the impact of post-Oslo political realities and the new (unattainable) aspirations fueled by satellite television images and Ramallah café culture. The narratives also reflect, in very different ways, the national crisis, the impotence of Palestinian political groups and institutions, and the erosion of solidarities.*

IN A BRIEF 1991 ARTICLE, Rosemary Sayigh discusses her attempt to have a structured interview with her old friend, Umm Khalid, as part of a project on women’s control over economic resources. Umm Khalid, usually a dynamo engaged in a whirlwind of activities, answers in a “small dutiful voice,” and Sayigh realizes that the interview is about as “personal as a party manifesto.”<sup>1</sup> The interview, ostensibly focused on Umm Khalid’s “self,” had far less self-expression than when Umm Khalid was making bread, slapping her *shaytan* (devilish) son, telling a neighbor how to apply for a scholarship, or telling her own zestful story about a family quarrel replete with flying pans of macaroni and a mobilization of family members who belonged to the resistance.

This small vignette is perhaps insubstantial compared with Sayigh’s other writings on the self in camp women’s life stories, which contain both theoretical insights and grounded narratives of Palestinian life.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, I have continued to reflect on this brief intervention, which acutely conveys the importance of situating women’s selves in their social and political practices as critical to understanding them as “tellers of Palestinian history”<sup>3</sup> and of the Palestinian present. It also warns researchers to question their assumptions about what is important and to be attentive to other kinds of knowledge. This

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warning is particularly apt when considering narratives of the highly complex Palestinian present in order to locate what is new, as well as what is continuous, in comparison with the past.

I aim to bring these insights, as well as Sayigh's other analyses of representations of self among Palestinian refugee camp women in Lebanon, to bear in reflecting on two women's narratives of their lives in the occupied Palestinian territories since the outbreak of the second Palestinian intifada—years of profound collective and individual insecurity characterized by a deep rupture in the national project, social fragmentation, and economic deterioration. The links among these last three are significant: other periods of national crisis and struggle against Israeli colonialism accompanied by worsening economic conditions (such as the first intifada) generated cross-class solidarities based on a common assumption that everyone was suffering. In the present period, by contrast, divisions and differences are acutely felt.

The two women whose stories I will compare are neighbors in Am'ari refugee camp near Ramallah.<sup>4</sup> Umm Taysir tells her story of extraordinary events—the martyrdom of her fifteen-year-old son and the subsequent imprisonment of four other sons—as an almost ordinary part of her life, while Zaynab pursues a more ordinary project—the marriage of her son—in the extraordinary circumstances that surround her. As the mother of a martyr, Umm Taysir represents one of the most powerful of Palestinian symbols. Zaynab is both a Palestinian and a universal stereotype—the mother relentlessly pursuing a bride for her son. One story is necessarily tragic, the other inevitably comic. But both Palestinian icon and universal stereotype, and the selves that constitute them, are unsettled by the fragmented circumstances of the Palestinian present. As mothers, both women have all-consuming projects. Both projects fail, and in various ways are haunted by national crisis, the incapacities of Palestinian political groups, the erosion of solidarities, the weakness of Palestinian institutions, the insecurities of daily life, and the restrictions on public space and mobility. For both, husbands play decidedly minor roles as witnesses to their wives' ceaseless activities. Significantly, these activities are almost solely on behalf of immediate family members, without noticeable extension to the wider community. This represents a marked difference from the extension of the maternal role to community activism and resistance, common in the first intifada through the claim that “all children are my sons.”<sup>5</sup> Umm Taysir's maternal mobilization is solely for her sons, and she is on her own in a way that is, I will argue, different than in the past.

#### SAYIGH'S STEREOTYPES OF SELF

In two articles built around life stories of women recorded in Shatila camp in Lebanon between 1990 and 1992,<sup>6</sup> Sayigh develops three “self stereotypes,” or representations of self. She identifies the dominant stereotype among these women as the “struggle personality,” characterized by “strength, courage, and resourcefulness”<sup>7</sup> in struggling against the enemy and adverse circumstances,

even while being conservative in gender norms. Sayigh traces this personality, with its peasant roots, through three generations of speakers. Her second stereotype, the “challenge” or “confrontation personality,” adds the dimension of challenging gender norms and is most identified with the “generation of the revolution” (from the early 1970s to 1982, when the PLO exited Lebanon). The “all our life is tragedy” or “witness to tragedy” stereotype is a personality whose life story is dominated by tales of loss and destruction. More than a decade later, in 2007, Sayigh elaborates a “latent” stereotype: the “*sitt fil-bayt*” (lady of the house) or “an urban, middle class Arab ideal of adult womanhood.”<sup>8</sup> While some of the women who conform to this “housewife model” no longer live in the politicized milieu of the refugee camp, others who remain there nonetheless tell stories that focus on the domestic and individual rather than on collective trajectories. They are thus, as some activist women note, “far from the revolution.” In the fractured Palestinian present of Am’ari refugee camp, it is the revolution itself that is at a distance in the two narratives we will consider.

Umm Taysir’s representation of self in her narrative falls squarely into that of the struggle personality, but her struggles are inflected by the new and isolating realities around her. Zaynab, struggling to survive in one of Am’ari camp’s poorer households, manifests aspects of an “all our life is tragedy” personality as she reviews her life of unremitting poverty, debt, and conflict. In my view, however, she is haunted by the increasingly dominant *sitt fil-bayt* ideal that emerged in the post-Oslo (and globalized) times as a more generalized, if unreachable, aspiration, whether fuelled by Arab satellite images or the globalized lifestyles of the Ramallah middle class.

Sayigh observes that for women in refugee camps in Lebanon who lived through the period of the revolution:

National crisis dominates their life stories not as a cataclysmic event coming from outside, shattering normality as with most of the older narrators, but as a core element of identity, a mode of perceiving the world and of acting toward it.<sup>9</sup>

The changing relationship between national crisis and “normality” (associated in the current period with a stable domestic life and public mobility) is of particular concern in examining shifts in how selves and subjectivities are constituted inside (or outside) national crisis. National crisis in present-day narratives is configured differently from what it was in the period of the revolution discussed by Sayigh. Despite its omnipresence, crisis today is frequently configured as an external threat rather than a producer of collective identities and solidarities. The twin everyday refrains of the al-Aqsa intifada—“this is not life” and “we only want to live”—speak to this sense of a “cataclysmic event” shattering ordinary life. Another striking difference is that crisis today is often seen as never-ending. In a 2005 discussion with girls in the eighth and ninth grade in Am’ari camp, for example, all nodded in agreement when a lively girl—whose ambition was to be a pilot, even though, as she observed, “there is no airport”—explained that the struggle with Israel will persist until the Day

of Resurrection (*yawm al-qiyama*). At the same time, “ordinary” (*‘adi*) is often used in everyday discourse as a deflationary tactic to describe painful events—from checkpoint crossings to the Israeli invasion of 2002—as if ordinary can only be ironic.<sup>10</sup> Yet unrealized hopes for another kind of ordinary life are evident in both Umm Taysir’s and Zaynab’s narratives, which could be called

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dreams of the domestic. These dreams too are part of the telling of the Palestinian present, which, to be sure, is shaped by unending struggle, but also by normative visions from sources as diverse as satellite television, Ramallah café culture, and growing social and economic inequalities.

These varying constitutions of self in relation to national crisis as identified by Sayigh underline a lacuna in Palestinian studies in general, which has only tangentially considered the theoretical debate on subaltern agency that has enriched other historiographies of colonialism, resistance, and colonized peoples.<sup>11</sup> Although Sayigh does not directly engage with these discussions, her work contests the “narrowing of the nationalist imagination.”<sup>12</sup> In an observation apt to women’s telling of the Palestinian present, she notes that the opening up to “women’s recollections as rich sources of *national* history” helps explain how “in spite of everything the Palestinian people’s struggle has persisted.”<sup>13</sup> In the fragmented circumstances of the present, however, this persistence also requires explanation.

To claim that an examination of two women’s narratives could yield an understanding of the complex and ongoing crisis in the Palestinian national project and Palestinian lives unfurling in the al-Aqsa intifada—and indeed since the signing of the 1995 Interim Agreement (Oslo II) and the beginning of the post-Oslo period—might seem too ambitious and methodologically suspect. However, these stories offer an opportunity to reflect on the shape of the Palestinian present through the selves that emerge in women’s telling of that present, as well as on the changes and continuities with the stereotypes of selves detected by Sayigh in her work. The selves projected by Umm Taysir and Zaynab—and the events they narrate—give us insight into the troubled times in which Palestinians, Palestinian communities, and the Palestinian national project find themselves.

### **MOTHER OF THE MARTYR: SHIFTS IN MEANING?**

Few images are as iconic in the Palestinian national struggle as the mother of the martyr, but the layers of meaning attached to it—and the selves of the women who bear these meanings—may shift according to historical circumstances. Changes in external representation are most striking in the wave of crude (and cruel) Western and pro-Israeli media depictions during the second intifada, where martyrs have been seen almost exclusively as suicide bombers and their mothers as instigators of the act.<sup>14</sup>

This is not to say that the icon does not retain real resonance. Sayigh and Julie Peteet acutely observe that “maternal sacrifice has become a symbol of the extent of Palestinian loss and suffering.”<sup>15</sup> This is an extremely powerful but essentially passive identification; maternal sacrifice at times of heightened resistance was once seen more actively and politically as bringing national liberation closer. In the first intifada, the communiqué celebrating the Palestinian Declaration of Independence (15 November 1988) read: “Congratulations to the mother of the martyr, for she has celebrated [ululated] only twice: when she gave her son and when the state was declared.”<sup>16</sup>

The link between sacrifice and liberation—frequently mediated through the figure of the mother of the martyr—has strong historic roots, yet it appears to have eroded in the Palestinian present. One mother of a youth shot dead by an Israeli soldier as he participated in a stone-throwing demonstration during the al-Aqsa intifada expresses conflicting sentiments:

I feel pride that he is a martyr and that he did the best he could in fighting for his country even though it is a stone, but I feel sorry for all of these youths that are being killed just for throwing stones that does not do any good.<sup>17</sup>

Her doubts are echoed in other mothers’ words, where expressible pride and inexpressible anguish also contend.<sup>18</sup> These doubts are, of course, not universal. Hamas member and Gaza parliamentarian Umm Nidal (Maryam Farhat), the mother of three martyrs, projects a message of willingness to “sacrifice them all” (referring to her seven remaining sons) in numerous media interviews.<sup>19</sup> But as a political figure rather than a maternal prototype, she embodies a shift that is very much part of contemporary Palestinian transformations, including the projection of politics to Arab audiences via satellite television. Her struggle personality has taken the form of public representation. In contrast, Umm Taysir in Am’ari camp struggles almost daily for public assistance to care for her remaining sons in prison, but hopes against hope that no more sacrifices face her family.

### LOSING A SON

“Don’t make me do this again,” said one of our interviewers from the Institute of Women’s Studies at Birzeit University as we left Umm Taysir’s house on the outskirts of Am’ari refugee camp. It had been difficult for all three interviewers to hear Abu Taysir’s story of his teenage son’s death and Umm Taysir’s quest to get medicine for one of her imprisoned sons, Hamadi, who had lost a leg and suffered a severe eye injury during an Israeli assault. Their fifteen-year-old son Saber had been killed by a rubber-coated steel bullet to his chest, fired by an Israeli sniper during a Palestinian demonstration in November 2000. He was the fifty-sixth Palestinian child under eighteen to be killed by Israeli gunfire since the eruption of the al-Aqsa intifada less than two months earlier. Subsequently, four other sons were imprisoned and remain there, including Hamadi.

We had also had practical difficulties conducting our interview. Locating Umm Taysir was not easy. Despite a barrage of phone calls to her household, we received the same message from various family members: "Umm Taysir is out." We finally found Abu Taysir manning a makeshift fruit stand piled with bananas in front of his house. He said he was "always there" and we could come anytime. Abu Taysir, it seemed, had more time on his hands than his wife. Suffering from chronic arthritis, he had long been without salaried work, not uncommon among men his age living in refugee camps, where a disproportionate number suffer from chronic illnesses and a relatively early exit from employment. When we entered the stairwell of his house, we found more bananas, representing a two-thousand-shekel investment by Abu Taysir, that seemed on the point of decay.

Abu Taysir shook everyone's hand and ushered us into the salon. Umm Taysir arrived presently and greeted us warmly. She was dressed in a pretty patterned *bijab* with headcap and pin and a brown *jilbab* (ankle-length coat dress). A woman in her late forties, she had a pleasant, unlined, round face, a frequent smile, and bright light brown eyes. She was barefoot. Umm Taysir said simply: "I had eight sons and a daughter. Now I have seven sons." Umm Taysir almost immediately plunged into a description of her fruitless visit to Ofer prison camp near Ramallah the day before, where she waited for a permit for a prison visit until late at night. Indeed, the most frequent words throughout the interview were "I went out" and "I asked," reflecting her routine of visits to Israeli, Red Cross, and Palestinian offices. Her endless motion is met by unmoving obstacles: she has been consistently denied visit permits for reasons of "security."<sup>20</sup> "Security?" says Umm Taysir, "What security did I do?"

Significantly, she regrets having taken her young grandchild along in the hope that she would be able to visit her father. "The child did not go to school, this is a mistake and we added it to another mistake." Here another powerful theme enters her conversation: that ordinary life must continue and that it is a "mistake" not to recognize when conditions are hopeless. Umm Taysir will continue with her "mission impossible," but she tries to protect other members of her family and to allow them a measure of normality.

When she paused in her chronicle of the present, Abu Taysir recounted the story of the loss of Saber. Although both parents wipe away tears during his narrative, Abu Taysir's sorrow is particularly affecting, probably because he is more bewildered and immobilized than his wife, who has channeled much of her grief into action. It is Abu Taysir who acts as the "witness to tragedy" as he tells how he was unable to save his son on the fateful day.

Abu Taysir recounts how Saber eluded his father's repeated attempts to pull him away from the confrontation and send him home the day he was killed at the City Inn checkpoint on the outskirts of Ramallah. Abu Taysir's failure to protect his son was a common experience for both fathers and mothers in the first months of the al-Aqsa intifada (and beyond), perhaps best symbolized by Muhammad al-Durra's father in Gaza, futilely trying to shelter his son from the barrage of gunfire that finally took the little boy's life. This failure in paternal

protection is amplified by the greater failure of the Palestinian Authority (PA) to protect its civilian population. These linked failures constitute a “crisis in paternity”<sup>21</sup> that the militarization of the intifada tried unsuccessfully to resolve. For Abu Taysir, the crisis unfolds with the inevitability of tragedy:

That day was the Day of Independence. I was at ‘Abd al-Nasir mosque and then went on a march with my son from the mosque to the Balu’a area near City Inn. I told my son to go home but he said he wanted to stay in the march. I went with the *shabab* (young men) and looked for him and couldn’t find him. One of the *shabab* said that my son was at the checkpoint throwing stones so I went there immediately and found him with stones behind his back. I took him and we went to the Palestinian checkpoint about five hundred meters away from the battle (*darb*). I began to talk to a Palestinian policeman who was a friend of mine—I looked and my son was gone. I thought he had gone home. . . . so I went to the coffeehouse. Two *shabab* came in and looked at me strangely. Then there was a telephone call for me. The man handed it to me saying “O uncle, let God be your help.” I said, “For good, *inshallah*.” It was my cousin, he told me, Saber—no he didn’t say Saber, he said that someone from my kin is wounded in the hand. But I felt then that one of my children is martyred. . . . I went out and found another cousin who thought I knew and said “God will reward you.” We went to the hospital . . . they were taking him out of the operating room to the refrigerator. I don’t know how much tragedy is embodied in our people.

Abu Taysir’s use of the word “tragedy” (*ma’sa*) was affecting. He did not question that Saber was a martyr, but there was no air of celebration about the boy’s sacrifice, which was linked to a people’s ceaseless suffering rather than to their eventual liberation. Indeed, some Palestinian writers have objected to the term “martyr” when children are killed, arguing that the term assumes that “the victim is aware of the meaning of war and knows what it means to die for a cause.”<sup>22</sup>

In the family salon, a heart-shaped picture of Saber surrounded by a paper rose hung on one wall. On another wall was a collage of five photos—one of Saber and the others of the four sons in prison. In the center was Hamadi, who was disabled in what Umm Taysir describes as an Israeli missile strike near Qalandia in 2001 and currently awaits trial. In the upper corner was Riyadh, dressed in a suit, who was arrested at the time of his wedding celebration and who, like Hamadi, is awaiting trial. The oldest son, Taysir, and another son are both serving four-year sentences. Umm Taysir affirms that before Saber’s death none of their sons had been involved in organized political activity (the *tanzim*). When asked if they knew of their children’s activities, Umm Taysir

says, “We were surprised. We bear our children in our house and don’t tell them to go, we don’t allow them [to engage in dangerous activities].”

Like her husband at the checkpoint, Umm Taysir’s futile attempts to keep her sons at home are typical. In the heated and dangerous first years of the *intifada*, mothers described using all means to keep their children away from the checkpoint clashes and demonstrations that claimed so many lives. They hid schoolbags, moved house, locked up their sons, and feigned illness.<sup>23</sup> For Umm Taysir, responsible now for grandchildren as well as her remaining sons, “Four sons are enough.” Her struggle—and the focus of her struggle personality—is grounded in everyday survival and family responsibility rather than hopes for liberation. Indeed, her relentless responsibilities of maternal care can be seen as a response to the failures of the public world around her.

### FROM COLLAPSE TO MOBILIZATION

Umm Taysir is still angered by the false story of her son Hamadi’s martyrdom that was broadcast as “breaking news” on al-Jazeera in 2001:

How could they have written he was martyred? I lost consciousness [and then] I went out running to the street barefoot and my relatives were passing in a car. He is martyred . . . they shouldn’t have written that. . . . We bore burden on top of burden.

In fact, her son Hamadi had been severely wounded and Umm Taysir’s initial collapse on hearing the false news quickly changed to mobilization on his behalf. Hopping into her relative’s car, Umm Taysir arrived at the hospital to find Hamadi in the operating room. She described his leg, which was full of shrapnel and later amputated, as “dying” because blood could not reach it. His eye had also been wounded, necessitating a cornea transplant. Upon his release from hospital, Hamadi risked arrest by staying at home so his mother could care for him; his eye needed constant care—“washing every half hour.” Her maternal knowledge and concern for her son’s body are found in numerous accounts from mothers of martyrs: “It is amazing how these mothers went into detail on the effect that the bullets caused on their children’s bodies.”<sup>24</sup> Some researchers have suggested that the mothers’ detailed and loving attention to the physical violation of their sons’ bodies is both a response and a contrast to the routinization of violence against Palestinian bodies and a seeming global indifference to their death and mutilation.<sup>25</sup>

Hamadi was arrested at his mother’s house, and Umm Taysir’s concern took the form of a determined quest to get him medicine and treatment in prison: “You know the *zinzazin* [solitary cells], there is no care there,” she explained. Her quest began the night of Hamadi’s arrest with a call to Captain Audeh, an Israeli army officer in the Ramallah district, and then proceeded to the Red Cross (in Ramallah and in Tel Aviv), to Palestinian prisoners’ organizations in Ramallah, and to a series of lawyers, one of whom finally visited Hamadi in prison. No treatment, however, followed, and no family visits were permitted.



Like so many others, Umm Taysir found some solace in the fact that her son's travail was witnessed through the virtual world of the Internet: "You can open the page and read about him," she told us. "The day [of the lawyer's visit] was icy and his bed was wet. . . . He is suffering in the solitary cells and she [the lawyer] wrote about it."

Abu Taysir urges his wife to show us the school copybook containing the telephone numbers of all the organizations to which she has appealed for help. As her trek from organization to organization bears no fruit, she finds herself appealing to the world through the global media: "I didn't leave any door or any way [untried] and I went on al-Jazeera television and Nasr television and also al-Quds open television and I went on European stations and I spoke." Abu Taysir reminds her, a note of pride in his voice: "You also had Japanese and Algerian television."

However, her media exposure is a poor substitute for the assistance she needs on the ground, reflecting the contradictions of the present, where endless images of Palestinian suffering circulate on satellite television without noticeably affecting efforts to alleviate that suffering. When we asked if the political organization (*tanzim*) to which her sons were affiliated, or other political or social organizations, offered solidarity and assistance, she said decisively:

No. No solidarity with us. I went to the prisoners club and asked for an interview with K. [a member of parliament]. I said to him that my son needs treatment. . . . [that] getting treatment is the least you can do. I didn't come to ask for work, or money or food or anything else. I just ask you for treatment for my son. He didn't answer and I left and talked to Z. [a Fatah figure] and he was the same and didn't answer me as well.

In fact, the Palestinian government officials, political parties, and civil society institutions approached by Umm Taysir have little ability to intercede with Israel on behalf of Palestinian prisoners. The institutions that should be responsible for and to her—whether as a "protected" person under occupation (the international community, most immediately the Red Cross), a colonial subject whose occupier should be bound by international law (Israel), a refugee (the United Nations Relief and Works Agency [UNRWA], the international community), a "citizen" (the PA), a member of an important social target group as family of a prisoner (civil society organizations, political factions)—are unresponsive or incapable.

When asked about the more ordinary solidarity of neighbors and the camp community, Umm Taysir says simply: "Of course. They come. They come and visit. *Haram*, all of them come. But the people cannot do anything. It's all just agreeable talk if the big ones cannot do anything."

Indeed, the feeling that "the big ones cannot do anything" permeates Palestinian daily life, whether among "illegal" workers from West Bank villages who dash silently each dawn across the roads forbidden to them in an effort

to find uncertain and often hazardous work in Israel, among Gazans with no relief or exit, or among residents of East Jerusalem neighborhoods trapped behind the Wall. The December 2008/January 2009 Israeli assault on Gaza is the most drastic example of the multiple failures of “the big ones.” Umm Taysir’s recounting of the Palestinian present recognizes communal solidarity but denies its effectiveness in a political landscape where leaders are incapable of protecting the population.

### ASSESSING THE FUTURE

During our visit, we were served coffee by the young bride of Umm Taysir’s son Riyadh. Although the young woman is living with her parents in a nearby village, Umm Taysir says it is “like she has entered our house.” Her views of this new bride’s situation say a great deal about how she sees the Palestinian present. Because the marriage had not yet been consummated when Riyadh was arrested, making annulment possible, Umm Taysir gave her a chance to leave the marriage, saying “*Haram*, she is with a man where we don’t know what will happen.” Had it been a question of three or four years in prison, Umm Taysir indicated she might have felt differently, but Riyadh seems likely to receive three life sentences.

The teenage bride, a slender young woman dressed rather elegantly in her ‘*Id* clothes of white *bijab*, bellbottom pants decorated with sequins, and fashionably pointed shoes, is adamant, however. She visits Riyadh regularly in prison. When asked if her family had pressured her to leave, remarry, and have children, she said: “No, praise be to God, Lord of the Two Worlds, my family does not pressure me . . . no. I decide what I want to do.” Nonetheless, Umm Taysir comments about her son: “He has been unfair to her, *baram*.” She has both a sense of the bare minimum that a “normal” life should offer (in this case a viable marriage and children) and a bleak realism about future prospects.

This practical pessimism informs but does not dampen her own activities. Taysir, her oldest son, was arrested while helping to cook a collective Ramadan *iftar* for the families of prisoners at a local hall. Umm Taysir describes taking his young daughter to that same hall for a *bafla zafaf* [a wedding—literally clapping—party]. The granddaughter snuggled into her lap and seemed to fall asleep, but was in fact pretending because of her fright to be in the place of her father’s arrest. She told her grandmother, “I am scared. I am afraid that they will take Papa,” to which Umm Taysir replied, “*Habibti*, Papa was taken a long time ago.” Umm Taysir is a “struggler,” and her courage and resourcefulness do not flag, but she struggles to cope with the aftermath of events that happened “a long time ago” and cannot be changed.

### THE MARRIAGE PROJECTS OF ZAYNAB

It is the quest for the normal—a viable marriage and bride for her son—that dominates the life of Umm Taysir’s neighbor Zaynab. Although this quest is initially cast as a struggle to improve family survival in adverse circumstances,

Zaynab's narrative reveals both its intersection with public and political realities and her vision of the normative domesticity (as a *sitt fil-bayt*) that eludes her.

The third time we visited Zaynab, in June 2005, the house across from hers was newly whitewashed in preparation for the return of the family's son from Israeli prison, one of four hundred scheduled to be released the next day in an Israeli "gesture" to PA president Mahmud Abbas. Somewhere nearby, a sheep awaited slaughter for this joyous occasion. Previous visits to Zaynab had not been marked by such festivity: the last visit in September 2004 had been "interrupted" by the killing of a collaborator by Palestinian militants at a nearby mosque. The visit before came on the heels of Israel's assassination of two young activists in the camp. Although our subjects of inquiry were primarily domestic—family relations, family economic and social strategies for survival and mobility, and marriages and childrearing—Zaynab and her family were never far from public events.

On this third visit, we had come to catch up on family news. At the time of our last visit, Zaynab's oldest son Muhammad and a young woman from a northern West Bank village had signed a marriage contract but, like Umm Taysir's imprisoned son and his bride, had not yet completed and consummated their marriage. The situation had been at an impasse, with Zaynab's family unable to muster the resources to meet the bride's demand for an independent house. Now, we learned, Muhammad and his bride from the north had parted ways after a series of interventions and meetings between the two sides failed to reach an agreement. "They returned the gold and everything but the clothes she had already worn. We lost the expenses of the party," Zaynab said with a resigned smile. Peering into a concrete block hallway that divided the two sections of Zaynab's small house, we saw the evidence of the failed marriage project and the launching of a new project: a concrete staircase leading to an open roof, where construction was barely under way on a floor for Muhammad when he finds a new partner.

Zaynab, a sturdy middle-aged woman with six children, sits in an unfinished concrete room surrounded by her daughters. Dressed in a cheerful pink house coat, she pushes henna-tinted strands of hair back into her loosely tied scarf while energetically recounting her story. She had been the driving force behind the failed marriage project, overcoming her son's initial reluctance and her husband's apathy and negativity. Despite her rationale for this marriage as materially beneficial, the "self" that emerges from Zaynab's narrative is less a practical striver for economic betterment than a dreamer of beautiful brides and ideal domesticity at odds with her bleak circumstances. Zaynab's life has been dominated by uncertainty. Her husband works only irregularly; her current small dwelling (the family's main resource) is legally owned by an uncle; school expenses for her daughters are met by borrowing from her sister;

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her income-generating schemes have led to more debt. Such circumstances do not allow for the middle-class *sitt fil-bayt* stereotype of self that increasingly dominates Arab and Palestinian ideal images. Indeed, it was the bride's expectations, shaped by these same images, that foiled the project. Still, Zaynab stubbornly pursues her dream of a suitable marriage for her son, a "work of the imagination," in Appadurai's sense of the expansion of the domain of the imagination and its entry into the "logic of ordinary life."<sup>26</sup>

In three extended interviews with Zaynab, marriages and marriage projects emerged at the center of her concerns. This is perhaps not surprising; mothers in Palestinian society are often key to marriage arrangements. What is intriguing here is the centrality of marriage to Zaynab's strategies for family welfare, the obvious limits of its material benefits, and, despite this, her insistence on continuing on this path.

### AUSTEN IN AM'ARI

In thinking of stereotypes of self, it is enlightening—if somewhat unorthodox—to compare Zaynab's narrative (and real) preoccupation with the marriage-obsessed characters of the nineteenth-century novel, that quintessential form for exploring marriage and domestic life. Emboldened by Deniz Kandiyoti's evocation of Tolstoy, where she uses Natasha's "passionate espousal of domesticity" after her marriage to Pierre in *War and Peace* to introduce some of the contradictions of modernist reformers in the Middle East,<sup>27</sup> I turn briefly to a seemingly unlikely author, Jane Austen, and to the character Mrs. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, with whom Zaynab shares a certain impulsiveness as well as a maternal obsession with arranging marriages for her children. Indeed, both Mrs. Bennet and Zaynab see marriage as a way of escaping unfair economic arrangements and regaining their entitlements. One might well object that Austen's domestic and sheltered world is far removed from the insecurity and warlike conditions of Am'ari refugee camp. But as Doris Lessing has astutely observed, Austen wrote as an insecure and poor unmarried woman with four brothers fighting in the Napoleonic wars.<sup>28</sup> Marriage in Austen's world, a site of both acute social comedy and primordial fairy tale, can be seen as a force opposing unnamed war and insecurity, and it is in this sense that Austen has some relevance to Zaynab's highly insecure life in Am'ari.

Zaynab's insistence on marriage as the primary avenue to family wellbeing runs counter to all evidence. Marriage expenditures, such as the elusive independent dwelling sought by Muhammad's fiancée, can overwhelm family income and savings and incur a string of debts.<sup>29</sup> In post-Oslo Palestine, marriage arrangements and wedding celebrations became markedly more lavish, reflecting trends in the Arab world. And in contrast to the first intifada, the costs of marriage and the requirements of celebration have not been substantially lowered during the second.<sup>30</sup> Given her keen sense of material costs and benefits, Zaynab is clearly propelled by other dynamics. Of course she is

concerned with the bride's characteristics for her son's sake, and for the social status of her family, but she is especially captivated by the symbolic power of marriage and the beauty of brides. She is also the central character—the self—of her tale.

Zaynab, who was engaged at fifteen, sees her own marriage as prompted by her family's poor economic conditions and as decidedly un festive: "I got married on the day of the Sabra and Shatila massacre." Like the family of Abu Taysir, Zaynab's family, refugees originally from the Lydda region, came to Am'ari from Gaza in 1967 in search of better work and economic conditions. However, her father, who had been an orange-picker in Gaza, could only find work in Am'ari "carrying flour sacks for UNRWA." She left school at the time of her engagement and worked in a sewing factory. Said, her husband, also quit school to marry, she told us, and his lack of education contributed to his low-income jobs. His steady work in an Israeli bakery ended long ago with his arrest during the first intifada; his work as a porter in the vegetable market and a cleaner is unstable and poorly paid. Muhammad has joined his father in the vegetable market and also works in a restaurant for very low wages (forty shekels, or about ten dollars per day). Another son, depressed since a leg injury acquired during the first year of the intifada, works only erratically despite his degree from the Qalandia Vocational Training Center. Neither son contributes to family income, and Muhammad's debts mount incessantly.

### THE MARRIAGE OF MUHAMMAD

In Zaynab's strategies to find a bride for her oldest son, poor economic conditions are both the rationale and the obstacle. Her stated goal in pursuing the marriage project was to regain the family's UNRWA ration card (*bataqa mu'an*) revoked when Muhammad turned eighteen and became a prospective breadwinner.<sup>31</sup> UNRWA's assistance would have continued if Muhammad, now twenty-one, had remained in school, but his grades were too low to get into Jerusalem Open University. Rather than contribute to the family income, Muhammad was putting his small funds into a savings association for a future marriage (for which he also borrowed) when Zaynab disrupted these plans by presenting him with a bride. As she had described in an earlier interview, this was the result of her having met a woman from a village near Tulkarm at a wedding party in the camp.

I asked her if there are pretty girls [in her village] and she spoke to me about her daughter. I asked how we could visit them and she gave me her telephone number and address. We went, me and my sister, on a first trip and looked at her and she pleased us. Afterward, we went and wrote the book [the marriage contract] and we began to make the *jibaz* [trousseau].

In a separate interview, Muhammad commented that “the idea of marriage was not in his head” at the time. Zaynab acknowledged as much: “Muhammad did not want to get engaged but I convinced him because of the ration card and I put pressure on him.”<sup>32</sup> It was not, one could observe, the most well thought out marriage strategy: indeed, the card was not returned when Muhammad got engaged, and even if it had been, it would have been revoked again when another son turned eighteen.

Zaynab’s persistence in the face of advice and opposition cannot be attributed solely to her impulsiveness and lack of judgment. It also flows from the state of unending insecurity that propels people to grasp at straws in an effort to better their lot—what Michel de Certeau calls a “tactic” where the weak “continually turn to their own ends forces alien to them.”<sup>33</sup> Beyond virtually wishing the marriage into being, she also seems to have wishfully projected the already crowded conditions of their house into an adequate dwelling for the young couple. Zaynab says that the bride initially agreed to live with them in the family house. And because “Muhammad cannot afford to open a house,” she planned to expel her own daughters from the room they shared as a bedroom and television room, explaining that their four-thousand-dinar bank loan would cover only wedding expenses and bedroom furniture, not the cost of renting a new house.

In Zaynab’s account of the efforts to save and complete Muhammad’s marriage, she is again the central figure. Despite his initial reluctance, Zaynab asserts—with some truth, as confirmed by Muhammad—that after the marriage contract was signed, Muhammad didn’t want to separate. Still, Zaynab seemed to conflate her own wishes with Muhammad’s, saying that the girl is “beautiful and young and I don’t want to lose her as a wife for my son.” In an interview before the couple separated for good, she was still full of schemes for an independent house, noting that the saving association in which Muhammad was participating might yield ten thousand shekels (a sum that bears no relation to real estate prices).

Various intermediaries, some in political organizations, then tried to solve the young couple’s problems. After the bride’s family stopped speaking to Muhammad’s family (despite their apologies conveyed through an uncle), communication continued through the young woman’s sister’s fiancé, who was from the *tanzim*, and sometimes through his friend, a *shab* (young man) from the *tanzim* in Anata camp. Although Zaynab later blamed the sister’s fiancé for making things worse, she herself brought representatives from Am’ari’s Youth Center, which is strongly affiliated to Fatah, to the bride’s village to strengthen her claims. Marriage problems are just as subject to political negotiation, resolution, and intervention by factions or politicized community institutions as any other conflicts in Am’ari’s community life. When the marriage project nonetheless ended, the once reluctant Muhammad was angry and depressed for a number of months, but then rallied to take out more loans to build “the floor,” as a more long-term marriage project commenced.

**ALTERNATIVE PROJECTS: WORK AND EDUCATION?**

Whether it was the failure of this first marriage project or in anticipation of the new one, Zaynab during this third visit expressed views that diverged significantly from the ones we heard earlier. Whereas once she would not contemplate paid work outside the house, now she boasted of months of work in an emergency job creation program and of plans for more paid work. Whereas previously she had questioned the value of continuing education for her sixteen-year-old daughter, now she supported the girl's wish to finish high school (the al-Bireh Girls School) and even plans for higher education.

If she gets a good average and goes, why not? After two years, she will be able to help a bit and begin to work. If she doesn't want to help us, she will help her children. A degree is good, *yareet* I had a degree.

Zaynab's newfound interest in education was perhaps shaped by her new involvement in the labor market. With the family deeply in debt and her husband in low-paying and irregular work, she first took a temporary cleaning job with UNRWA in late 2004 as part of an emergency job creation program. Just before our visit, a friend had dropped in to tell her there was work at the new building of the Medical Relief Committees, and she told us: "I am going tomorrow to register." She described the work in some detail: "Mopping. Making coffee and tea and wiping the desks, and—*ba'id 'anak* ['far from you,' an expression distancing the listener from the subject]—throwing out the garbage."

Zaynab's conversation during this visit showed some evidence of longer-term planning. She noted that it would take six or seven years before they could pay off their debts and build Muhammad's "floor" on the roof so he could be ready for marriage.

The next time we don't want to make the same mistake. The home should be complete. We don't want to delay like last time. We delayed [between the engagement and marriage] and the time we delayed, people spoiled everything and made a mess.

But Zaynab's impulsiveness and matchmaking instincts may be difficult to suppress. When we asked whether she would eventually look for a bride for Muhammad among the girls in the camp, she replied:

*Walabi*, I don't know. Today I went to Ramallah [and saw] a beautiful girl—how lovely she was! I stopped her, I was so taken with her [*bamut 'aleeba*, literally 'I died for her']. I asked her if she was engaged. She said no. I asked her how

old she was. She said eighteen. I asked her whose daughter she was and wrote down the name of her home and her village. How beautiful her eyes were, so blue, and *bayda*, *bayda*, *badya* [white, white, white, referring to the color of her skin], so beautiful. I even showed her a picture of Muhammad.

In this fairy tale in-the-making, Zaynab seems to take the place of a young suitor struck with love at the first sight of his bride's beauty, of her fair white skin (*bayda*, *bayda*, *bayda*). She is, quite literally, enchanted with beauty. Clearly, her highly expressive description of the girl's beauty provides a sense of self and involvement that a job mopping floors at the Medical Relief offices would be unable to match. We can see this beauty, if we wish, as a form of symbolic capital that Zaynab claims for herself and her son as the "lady of the house" (*sitt fil-bayt*) who arranges the perfect marriage. The fact that the claim may be as evanescent as beauty itself recasts "the marriages of Zaynab" as versions of the fluid tactics of everyday life, which are always on shifting (and losing) ground.

#### TELLING THE PRESENT

In the uneasy conditions of Am'ari refugee camp during the second Palestinian intifada, two mothers expend their selves in pursuing projects for their sons' welfare. Courageous and resourceful, Umm Taysir, the iconic mother of a martyr and of prisoners, seems to be the epitome of a struggle personality. Yet the erosion of solidarities, of trust in the Palestinian national project, and of the capacities of its leadership narrows her field of action to her own family and constricts her abilities even there. Her resulting pessimism generates an everyday pragmatism that overrides notions of eternal sacrifice. As Sayigh has noted, the struggle personality can be traced back to the roles (and indeed the repertoire of protest) of peasant women in the Great Revolt of 1936–39. The shift in Umm Taysir's self-representation thus tells much about the Palestinian present and signals a disturbing weakening of the link between everyday struggles for family and community survival and political resistance, a link that has been crucial for the Palestinian national (and women's) movement.

Zaynab's "stereotype of self," the *sitt fil-bayt*, exists perhaps only in her imagination, but it is precisely the "work of the imagination" unleashed by post-Oslo local and regional developments that bears careful attention in delineating another new direction in the Palestinian present. Surrounded by hardship and crisis, Zaynab's dreams of self and of a normative beautiful bride for her son contradict the life circumstances that seem impervious to change.

Both the hard necessity of public struggle and dreams of domesticity sit uneasily in the selves of these two neighbors, and whatever gains they make seem always to slip away. Their stories of the Palestinian present share with Sayigh's narratives "a view of the interpenetration of the 'public' and



‘domestic’” and “how national tragedy is reflected at the family and personal level in refugee camps.”<sup>34</sup> But for both, the public is deeply troubled and the domestic highly threatened. What remains is persistence, a crucial element of Palestinian survival but one inflected by contradiction and marked by a deep uncertainty about the future.

## NOTES

1. Rosemary Sayigh, “Resources, Researchers, and Power: Recording ‘Real Life’ in Wadi Zeineh,” *Middle East Report* 173 (November–December 1991), pp. 23–25.
2. See, for example, Rosemary Sayigh, “Product and Producer of Palestinian History: Stereotypes of ‘Self’ in Camp Women’s Life Stories,” *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies* 3, no. 1 (Winter 2007), pp. 86–105.
3. See Rosemary Sayigh, “Palestinian Women as Tellers of History,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 27, no. 2 (Winter 1998), pp. 42–58.
4. Zaynab and her family were interviewed in a series of interviews between 24 August and 17 September 2004 by Amira Silmi. The final interview on 1 June 2005 was conducted by Silmi and the author. Umm Taysir and her family were interviewed on 27 January 2005 by Rula Abu Duhu, Jamil Hilal, and the author. These interviews were conducted in the context of the Institute of Women Studies at Birzeit University’s “Three Communities in Wartime” research project, which investigated changing dynamics in families, communities, and community institutions in the warlike conditions of the second Palestinian intifada. Names have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals interviewed.
5. See Rita Giacaman and Penny Johnson, “Palestinian Women: Building Barricades and Breaking Barriers,” in Zachary Lockman and Joel Beinin, eds., *Intifada: The Palestinian Uprising against Israeli Occupation* (Boston: South End Press, 1989), pp. 155–69.
6. Sayigh, “Stereotypes of ‘Self’” and Sayigh, “Tellers of History.”
7. Sayigh sees these qualities in the light of “gender and class connotations,” since they are “pre-eminently those of peasant women.” Sayigh, “Tellers of History,” p. 92.
8. Sayigh, “Stereotypes of ‘Self,’” p. 103.
9. Sayigh, “Tellers of History,” p. 49.
10. See Penny Johnson, “Tales of Strength and Danger: Sahar and the Tactics of Everyday Life in Amari Refugee Camp, Palestine,” *Signs* 32, no. 3 (Spring 2007), pp. 611–12.
11. A new generation of scholars in Palestinian studies has begun to grapple with these questions.
12. Sayigh, “Tellers of History,” p. 57.
13. Sayigh, “Tellers of History,” p. 57.
14. Opening up a pro-Zionist website, for example, an arrow points to an illegible portion of a picture with a caption reading “Umm Muhammed helps her twelve year old son Abu Ali with a toy suicide belt he fashioned on his own.”
15. Rosemary Sayigh and Julie Peteet, “Between Two Fires: Palestinian Women in Lebanon,” in Rosemary Ridd and Helen Callaway, eds., *Caught Up in Conflict: Women’s Response to Political Strife* (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 1986), p. 123.
16. See Lockman and Beinin, eds., *Intifada*, p. 391.
17. Nahed Habiballah, “Interviews with Mothers of Martyrs in the al Aqsa Intifada,” *Arab Studies Quarterly* 27, no. 1 (Winter 2004), pp. 15–30.
18. Mothers of martyrs are proscribed from showing grief; one shaykh told a mother that her tears made her son “restless in his grave.” See Habiballah, “Interviews with Mothers,” p. 30. See also Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian, “Liberating Voices: The Political Implications of Palestinian Mothers Narrating Their Loss,” *Women’s Studies International Forum* 26, no. 5 (September–October 2003), pp. 391–407.
19. See interview on Egypt Dream Television, 21 December 2005, translated by Middle East Media Research Institute, a

pro-Israeli group, and circulated by numerous websites.

20. See B'Tselem, "Barred from Contact: Violation of the Right to Visit Palestinians Held in Israeli Prisons" (Jerusalem: B'Tselem, September 2006), pp. 14-16.

21. For a more in-depth argument applying Elizabeth Thompson's concept of "crisis in paternity" to the al-Aqsa intifada, see Penny Johnson and Eileen Kuttub, "Where Have All the Women (and Men) Gone? Reflections on Gender and the Second Palestinian Intifada," *Feminist Review* 69 (Winter 2001), pp. 21-43.

22. Zakaria Muhamed, "The Boy, the Symbol, the Tank," *News from Within* 16, no. 8 (November 2000), pp. 8-9.

23. See Shalhoub-Kervorkian, "Liberating Voices."

24. See Habiballah, "Interviews with Mothers," p. 3.

25. For a relevant discussion of state violence against "marginal" and disposable bodies, see Nancy Scheper-Hughes, "Bodies, Death, and Silence," in Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois, eds., *Violence in War and Peace: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 175-185.

26. See Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Oxford and Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 5.

27. Deniz Kandiyoti, "Some Awkward Questions on Women and Modernity in Turkey," in Lila Abu-Lughod, ed., *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East* (Princeton:

Princeton University Press, 1998), pp. 270-71.

28. Doris Lessing, *Time Bites: Views and Reviews* (London: Harper Perennial, 2005), pp. 1-12.

29. See, for example, Diane Singerman and Barbara Ibrahim, "The Costs of Marriage in Egypt: A Hidden Dimension in the New Arab Demography," in Nicholas Hopkins, ed., *The New Arab Family*, Cairo Papers in Social Science, vol. 24, nos. 1 and 2 (Cairo: American University of Cairo Press, 2003).

30. See Penny Johnson, Lamis Abu Nahleh, and Annelies Moors, "Weddings and War: Marriage Arrangements and Celebrations in Two Palestinian Intifadas," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 5, no. 3 (Autumn 2009), pp. 11-35.

31. UNRWA regulations, like those of the Ministry of Social Affairs, generally deny special hardship assistance to households with able-bodied men over eighteen, unless they have student status.

32. *Sbu'un* marriages, as they are called after the term for social services (*sbu'un ijtimaiyya*), are a phenomenon in refugee camps, particularly when male unemployment is pervasive and the meager allowances from UNRWA become crucial to family welfare.

33. See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. xii. For a longer explication of tactics of everyday life in Am'ari refugee camp, see Penny Johnson, "Tales of Strength and Danger."

34. Sayigh, "Stereotypes of 'Self,'" p. 104.

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