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Review: Ethnic Identity of Palestinian Immigrants in the United States: The Role of Cultural Material Artifacts

Ethnic Identity of Palestinian Immigrants in the United States: The Role of Cultural Material Artifacts by Faida N. Abu-Ghazaleh

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Scholarly Publishing LLC, 2011. v + 162 pages. Appendix to p. 187. Bibliography to p. 196. Index to p. 202. n.p.

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In *Ethnic Identity of Palestinian Immigrants in the United States*, Faida N. Abu-Ghazaleh does much to fill crucial gaps in the scholarship of Arab American communities, in particular the study of Palestinians in the United States. This sort of title, one focused on the cultural politics of Palestinian Americans, remains rare despite an increased emphasis among scholars on various practices of the Palestinian diaspora. This book is a welcome addition to the small corpus of scholarship that exists at present.

The scope of the book is both narrow and broad. It is narrow in the sense that the subjects of Abu-Ghazaleh's study reside mainly in Maryland, a small sample size when considering the significant Palestinian populations elsewhere in the United States (Southern California, Chicago, Jacksonville, Washington, DC). On the other hand, Abu-Ghazaleh proffers a broad context of analysis, one that is highly illuminating. Rather than limiting her analysis of Palestinian cultural artifacts to their spatial and symbolic presence in Palestinian American homes, she describes those artifacts relative to the histories that provided them meaning in Palestine. As a result, the cultural material artifacts of the book become metonymical of numerous Palestinian devotions.

To this end, Abu-Ghazaleh begins the book with a broad history of Palestinian dispossession and the subsequent migratory patterns of Palestine's displaced population. The history provides a useful context to the particular symbolic meanings attached to the cultural artifacts displayed in Palestinian American homes in Maryland. According to

## REFUGEE CULTURE

**Ethnic Identity of Palestinian Immigrants in the United States: The Role of Cultural Material Artifacts**, by Faida N. Abu-Ghazaleh. El Paso, TX: LFB

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Abu-Ghazaleh, the artifacts play a specific role in the families' lives: "Despite their struggles, Palestinians inside and outside their country have been able to create, sustain and pass their culture [*sic*] heritage, traditions, memories and oral history to their children wherever they went" (p. 2). The sustainment (and revival) of cultural traditions is facilitated by the possession and display of artifacts with a distinctive connection to Palestine. This is true precisely because of their profound symbolic qualities.

Some of the cultural traditions Abu-Ghazaleh highlights include musical instruments, dance, jewelry, artwork, war mementos, and religious icons. The most important element of Palestinian remembrance, however, is land, an abstract yet concrete phenomenon Abu-Ghazaleh spends considerable time exploring, to productive effect. She argues that, for Palestinians, "loss of their land is the loss of their identity" (p. 10).

This argument is not novel in Palestine studies or in scholarly inquiries into other colonized societies, but the careful manner in which Abu-Ghazaleh connects land as a physical space to the materiality of household artifacts is original and quite well done. Yet, as she illustrates, it is the emotional appeal of land that underlies the power of the artifact in Palestinian American homes. Her approach is essentially semiotic—that is, concerned with the play of signs and symbols with connotations and meanings—but her analysis isn't loaded down with theoretical jargon or performed in the abstract. Like the artifacts she examines, Abu-Ghazaleh's methodology is materialist, focused on the ways people remember and continue to desire Palestine through displays of cultural, religious, and political icons. The methodology works well.

While most of Abu-Ghazaleh's subjects are Muslim Palestinian Americans, she takes care to discuss Christian Palestinian experiences in the United States. Some of her subjects are immigrants, others the children or grandchildren of immigrants. Much of the second half of the book provides interview excerpts, and a lengthy appendix displays dozens of photographs of icons, food, costumes, crafts, and all manner of bric-a-brac. Taken together, the interviews

and photographs create a vivid sense of how Palestinian culture can be conveyed through visual and descriptive markers. They likewise render her central thesis that Palestinian Americans memorialize Palestine through the display of symbolic artifacts more vivid and convincing.

*Ethnic Identity of Palestinian Immigrants in the United States* will be of interest to scholars and students of Palestine and, to a lesser extent, those interested in anthropology and ethnic studies. It is written clearly and will provide a useful bit of knowledge even to the general reader concerned with Palestine or with Arab Americans. Abu-Ghazaleh's broad history of Palestine segues to six focused chapters, each a collection of short analyses, interviews, and descriptions. The book thus reads quickly and contains emotional moments about the intergenerational pain of dispossession. I would recommend it for both libraries and personal collections.