

Book Reviews

In Search of Fatima: A Palestinian Story, by Ghada Karmi. London & New York, Verso, 2002. 451 pages.

REVIEWED BY HALA KAMAL

Ghada Karmi opens her autobiography, *In Search of Fatima: A Palestinian Story*, with a Prelude which situates Karmi's text at a point marked by the convergence of a personal story with political history. It begins with the date April 1948, which in itself suggests a diary entry as well as an encyclopaedic one. Written from the perspective of Ghada (this name will be used in this review to refer to the author Ghada Karmi as a narrator in her own autobiography) as a 8 year old girl, these opening pages offer a dynamic picture of a family's escape from the imminent danger of death, merging with the Palestinian people's history of dislocation. The opening lines offer an extended image of forced departure and escape: "Shootings, the bullets whistling around the windows and ricocheting against the walls of the empty house opposite, followed immediately ... Every nerve and fibre of her being raged against her fate, the cruelty of leaving that she was powerless to avert" (pp. 1-2).

In the Epilogue, the closing pages of the book, Karmi gives an account of her childhood house in Qatamon as she found it during her visit to Jerusalem in June 1998, inhabited by its new owners: "And there it was. The one with the brick-red roofed veranda, our house without question ... On the wall a plaque that read Ben Porath" (p. 447). Here again, the house stands as a symbol of dispossession, both personal and national. Karmi recounts the change as she visits the house only to find it rented out by its Israeli owner to an American family: the Karmi house is now taken by the Ben Porath family, a situation reminiscent of the re-labelling of Palestine as Israel. The plaque stands symbolically for the historical process of dispossession.

Despite the harsh reality of the Israeli occupation in the land of her childhood, Karmi ends her book on a politically optimistic note based in her belief in the power of her people. Hearing the call to prayer from the Old City, she thinks of the future; and once again her 'Palestinian story' combines the political with the personal: "The story had not ended, after all – not for them, at least, though they were herded into reservations a fraction of what had been Palestine. They would remain and multiply and one day return and maybe overtake. Their exile was material and temporary. But mine was a different exile, undefined by space or time, and from where I was, there would be no return" (p. 451). Karmi shares the experience of exile with the Palestinian people, though unlike their 'temporary' exile couched in resistance, hers is permanent and lasting, the consequence of personal cultural dislocation.

Between the Prologue and Epilogue, Karmi structures her narrative into three parts: "Palestine", "England", and "In Search of Fatima", reflecting the personal chronology of Ghada's life. At the same time, she employs the multiple perspectives of child and adult, of memory and reality, as well as the Arab 'I' as different from the Western 'eye'. Although the opening lines of 'Part One: Palestine' refer to the experience of landing in London airport, it becomes clear that this situation is used as a means of representing the child's (Ghada's) experience of displacement marked by her awareness of the differences between England and her homeland: "The airport was a daunting

place; it had immense halls with polished floors, vinyl and wood, which was the strangest sight of all. In Palestine, floors were tiled or made of stone” (p. 5). Karmi’s style is marked by merging the perspective of Ghada (the author as a child of nine in 1949) with that of the author at the moment of writing the book.

As the section on Palestine begins, Ghada’s story develops hand in hand with history: “My life began some two months after the start of the Second World War” (p. 6). Although she begins with her birth, Karmi soon moves back in time to explore the turbulent history of Palestine, exemplified by Palestinian resistance to the British Mandate authorities from the mid-thirties onwards, in addition to mounting acts of Jewish terrorism. In her account of the Palestinian stage of her life, Karmi explores her family’s involvement in the Palestinian resistance movement, as well as recounting stories of Palestinian suffering. It is the massacre of Deir Yassin that finally pushes the family to leave Qatamon, in an act of forced migration as experienced by the child: “I wanted to stay here at home, despite Deir Yassin (whatever that was) and however bad the shooting got” (p. 118).

Karmi does not only focus on national crisis but offers as well a glimpse of social and domestic life in the Palestine of her childhood, revealing sensitivity towards the position of women in Palestine, in the light of both class and gender location. Exploring her mother’s female social circle, Karmi points out her mother’s background as a member of a progressive upper middle class (p. 31-32). Her account is marked here by a shift in perspective as she comments on women’s gatherings, and denies the veracity of the Western view point: “A western eye might have seen something erotic in this, but it was nothing of the sort...” (p. 31). Yet, at other times, Karmi seems to address her readership from a Western perspective, almost verging on Orientalism, particularly in relation to the time she spent with her grandparents in Syria, for example in her account of circumcision (pp. 135-136), in her description of Muslim prayer (pp. 137-138), and wearing a head cover (p. 139). In viewing Palestinian women’s lives, Karmi situates her personal experience as a woman within the larger framework of Palestinian women’s history, just as she presents her mother’s socialisation in the context of the limited educational opportunities for women of her generation (p. 133), and in that of national women’s organisations (such as the Palestine Arab Women’s Congress), whose members combined humanitarian work with political activism (pp. 31-33).

Similar to the opening lines of Part One, Part Two titled “England” highlights Ghada’s sense of estrangement. However, her life in England was marked by the mother’s decision “to create Palestine in London” and “a refuge for lonely Palestinians” (pp. 174, 184), a decision that instead of allowing Ghada a smooth integration into English society, leads to an overwhelming struggle “to establish a new identity” (p. 208). One way of asserting this new, conflicted identity was by breaking Arab-Islamic rules: “The taboos about sex, food and drink I had been taught were all part of what I saw as a war on the body ... So extreme were my feelings that I wanted to dissociate myself completely from what my family stood for. I could see no possible compromise between their position and mine. And since I put it all down to their Arabness, I rejected that too and all Arabs along with them” (p. 305). Yet, the schism was incomplete, since Ghada sensed her need for her family. Karmi’s account reflects Ghada’s identity dilemma, particularly during Nasser’s nationalisation of the Suez Canal and the war waged by Britain, France, and Israel against Egypt in 1956. It is here that she adopts and defends the Arab perspective; at this stage her Palestinian identity seems subsumed within the more generalised ‘Arab’. Indeed, from the perspective of the author at the moment of writing, Ghada seems oblivious to “defining moments

in Palestinian history” (p. 367), especially the Palestinian resistance movement of the 1960s. Once again, following the Arab-Israeli Six-Day War of 1967, Ghada finds herself identifying with Arabs: “I started to argue the Arab case passionately, just as I had done before at the time of the Suez crisis” (p. 373).

Karmi suggests that Ghada’s identity dilemma was created not as much by herself but by others: “Even had I wanted their acceptance they would have never given it. Their opposition to my stand on the conflict between Israel and the Arabs meant I could never be one of them. But then, whom was I one of? And could I go back to being the split personality that had caused me so much anguish?” (p. 377). Her marriage to an Englishman, John, comes to an end, symbolically, at this moment, with her realisation that the marriage had been but another attempt “in pursuit of a sense of belonging” (p. 363). And at the moment of lost love, she cannot but connect the personal with the political: “the tortured love affair that waited inescapably for me, as for all Palestinians, was the one with Palestine” (p. 380). Thus, Part Two ends with Karmi’s articulation of Ghada’s dilemma, marked by the development of her identity along the lines of a personal identity forged out of a political reality.

In the last part of the book, Part Three “In Search of Fatima”, the author explores Ghada’s involvement in political activism, and reveals her recovery of a Palestinian identity, again in response to Israeli attitudes denying Palestinian history after the Six-Day War, in addition to the hostility Ghada faces because of being a Palestinian doctor working in England. Ghada undergoes a transformation leading to involvement in Palestinian political activism in which she finds “an inspiration, an identity, a reason for living” (p. 399). In 1972, she establishes “Palestine Action” together with a small group of sympathisers, which included anti-Zionist Jews and non-Palestinians left-wingers. Similar to her earlier attempt at assimilation into English society through marriage to an Englishman, Ghada now is shown seeking a relationship with an Arab through travelling to Arab countries, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan, in search of her roots. Yet, critical of the double standards of Arab men vis-à-vis women, Ghada abandons this idea, and decides to go to the location of her roots in Palestine. And, from the perspective of the author, Karmi comments on Ghada’s condition in the following revealing words: “The truth I could not face as yet was that I was truly displaced, dislocated in both mind and body, straddling two cultures and unable to belong in either” (p. 422).

Karmi concludes this part of her book with an account of her visit to Palestine in 1991 during the first *intifada*. Unlike the rest of the book, this chapter takes the form of a diary, through which we follow Ghada throughout the fourteen days of her stay. The diary covers her impressions from her arrival at Ben-Gurion airport in Tel Aviv to her search for her childhood house in Qatamon. Here the search leads her to “unfamiliar places in an unfamiliar street, filled with strangers” (p. 445); she fails to locate the house. Karmi expresses her search for her childhood symbolically through using in the title the name of her childhood nanny who stayed behind in Palestine, and remains in Ghada’s memory as a reminder of her happy life in Qatamon. Fatima is a metaphor for Ghada’s Palestine, and the search for Fatima stands for Ghada’s search for her own roots. On a second visit in 1998, Ghada manages to find her house, an account of which she gives in her Epilogue.

In Search of Fatima is a work of autobiography and history combined. Photographs of her family accompanying the text illustrate Karmi’s own life but also the historical moments and political contexts in which they were taken. Two maps of Palestine, one dating back to the 1940s, and

the other to 1949, when the Karmis left the country, point to the changes brought about by the establishment of Israel.

To a contemporary Arab reader, this book is controversial in the way it at times adopts a western stereotypical image of Arabs, especially when Karmi writes about Ghada's perception of Arab men and women. But this can be seen as reflecting Ghada's life-story, and witnesses to the possible effect of Western stereotypes of Arabs on an Arab raised in Britain.

Finally, I wish to emphasize that in this particular historical moment (2009), reading Karmi's book reveals the plight of the Palestinian people in a continuum. Her family's flight in 1949 proves to be an experience lived by generations of Palestinians. Reading *In Search of Fatima* while watching the news of the recent Israeli war on Gaza gave me a personal insight of the Gazan people's suffering, and simultaneously offered me a visual equivalent of the destruction lived and described by Ghada Karmi.

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B as in Beirut, Iman Humaydan Younes, translated by Max Weiss. Massachusetts: Interlink Books, 2008, 229 pages. (Original Arabic version published by Al-Massar, Beirut, 1997.)

Wild Mulberries, Iman Humaydan Younes, translated by Michelle Hartman. Massachusetts: Interlink Books, 2008. 129 pages. (Original Arabic version published by Al-Massar, Beirut, 2001.)

REVIEWED BY SALLY BLAND

Iman Humaydan's writing is a delicate synthesis of emotional perceptiveness and socio-historic knowledge. Her two novels, despite being very short, are amazingly multi-layered. In few words, they create vivid images of time and place; they synchronize her character's physical and psychological states in an incisive and decidedly female voice, and simultaneously raise big questions about society, violence, and politics.

Her debut novel, *B as in Beirut*, goes behind the exterior scenes of street violence during the Lebanese civil war and into the interior space of four women living in the same apartment building. While some novels create a surrealist atmosphere to convey the horrors and dislocations of war, Humaydan opts for a different approach. Hers are the characters and images of real life. It is as though war is horrific enough; there is no need to exaggerate. Instead, the women's interlocking narratives show how violence, big and small, penetrates into every crack of daily life, exacerbating pre-existing problems and creating new ones.

Humaydan's second novel, *Wild Mulberries*, might seem to be totally different, focusing on Sarah, a young girl coming of age in the Chouf Mountains during the 30s. The village, which is virtually owned by her father, seems peaceful, even unchanging, yet signs of disruption lurk just below the

surface. An unnamed absence haunts her father's estate, while the silk industry that underpins his prosperity is in rapid decline.

Despite their disparate settings, the two novels have common themes built upon opposing dynamics: disappearance, and the search for lost loved ones; patriarchy and acquiescence to social control, as opposed to the courage to be one's self; and sectarian strife as opposed to diversity. In developing each of these themes, Humaydan implicitly counters false claims about the Lebanese conflict, such as that it was caused by religion, or by the Palestinians or other 'outsiders'.

The experience of disappearance and loss unites the four main women characters in *Bas in Beirut*. Suffering the most is Warda who hasn't seen her daughter Sarah for two years, bringing on psychosomatic reactions which cause strangers to think she is crazy. At first one supposes that Sarah was kidnapped by a militia, but gradually it emerges that Warda's husband took her to America and abandoned Warda – a kidnapping driven by the sexual politics of a loveless marriage, not war.

Lillian suffers another form of loss. Happily married with two children until the war disrupts their lives and blows away her husband's right arm, Lillian is obsessed with the idea of emigrating. With the disappearance of his arm, her husband retreats into himself. He neither speaks to Lillian nor writes, which is his profession – perhaps symbolic of the intellectual's impotence in the face of violence. Lillian no longer knows if she is fleeing the war, her husband's silence, or her alienation from her country as it falls apart.

Maha has lost her lover, a caring younger man, to the war, but is not accorded the status of widow by his conservative relatives or society at large. When Camilia returns to Beirut to film the war, she ends up living in Maha's apartment. Camilia is from a mountain village, raised by her grandmother and aunt after her parents emigrated to Argentina to start a business. She dreams of flying and is exhilarated by motorcycle rides with her first boyfriend, Pierre. When war reaches the area, he is exposed as a Phalangist and killed, while she is branded a whore by her Druze family, leading her to run away to Beirut, and later to go abroad.

Yet, even as war tears apart lives, homes, and the social fabric, it opens up opportunities for friendship and solidarity, especially among women, for those who have the courage to seize the chance. Together, Camilia and Maha find a startling and inventive way to confront the violence that is enveloping the city.

Like the women in *Beirut*, Sarah of *Wild Mulberries* tells her story in first person narrative, creating an intimate immediacy. Like Camilia, she is from a Druze family; her mother disappeared when she was very young, leaving her to be raised by an unloving, repressed, and repressive aunt. Sarah also dreams of flying and is perpetually searching for any clue about her mother, but she keeps running into walls of silence. Her aunt intimates that Sarah's mother, a Christian, was too 'different' to stay with them. It is left to an unrelated woman living on the estate to confide: "She went to search for her soul... If your mother had remained here, she would have suffocated" (p. 23).

Via Sarah's family, Humaydan explores the perils of patriarchal control. The aunt's unkindness is easily traceable to her own frustrations, as her brother, the patriarch, keeps her life on hold by denying her permission to marry. Having apparently stifled Sarah's mother, her father alienates his son from a previous marriage by trying to control his life. Meanwhile, behind his austere

façade, he is still devastated by his wife's flight, but unable to give up his tyrannical control. Ironically, since he won't listen to others, he remains oblivious to the nosedive of the silk industry, once again spelling his own doom. Sarah, for her part, comes into her own after discovering her father's inner weakness, and that her aunt is as much afraid of her own voice as of the patriarch. She also learns that searching for her mother is a dead-end, and she gathers the courage to chart her own course.

To explain why she went back in time to write *Wild Mulberries* after writing about the civil war, Humaydan names the "need to retrieve a balance that had been disturbed during the war and then during writing about the war. In times of war, we suffer but we do not find time to recall. After the war, we have time to count/recount our losses. No wonder that suicides occur after wars much more than during them. It is a lack of reconciliation with the huge loss that war caused. Writing in this sense becomes a manifesto against death, against suicide." (email interview, May 2009).

Exploring family dynamics engendered by patriarchy is one way of arriving at the causes of civil war. As Humaydan says, "The political system based upon patriarchal family culture, clientalism and sectarianism creates people who find their only interest in their narrow family or sect. It creates people who do not have the least notion of what a state is, what citizenship means, what a social contract is. This is a reason but not the only reason for continuous violence." Humaydan believes that it falls to women to understand the reasons for neighbors fighting neighbors, to tell the untold stories and "demystify these sacred crimes" that are taboo to discuss.

The taboo crime that has concerned Humaydan the most, and which links her fiction and non-fiction writing, is disappearance. After obtaining a BA in sociology in 1980, Humaydan returned to the American University of Beirut to earn an MA in anthropology in 2006. Her thesis, entitled "Neither Here Nor There", is based on interviews with families whose loved ones were kidnapped or otherwise 'disappeared' during the war. Her novels include both war-related disappearances and other more personally motivated ones. In her view, the sharp distinction between literary and academic writing – at least in the humanities – is misleading, as the writer as a human being is intimately involved in both, and the two reinforce each other. She tells that while writing her thesis, she often minimized the document in order to open her novel and start writing, and vice versa.

Humaydan doesn't identify her characters by their religious affiliation; this only emerges indirectly via small details, or when war or social transgressions intervene. All four women in *Bas in Beirut* have mixed marriages and/or have meaningful friendships with people from different sects. Several are originally from mixed Christian-Druze villages, and when the war forces one of these communities to flee, it is portrayed not only as a shame but as deeply unnatural. Sarah's village is inhabited by workers, servants, and tenants of diverse ethnic and religious affiliations; the women among them give her the first taste of real life since, in contrast to her aunt, they are happy in their lives and at home with their bodies. In this rendition, diversity was once the norm in Lebanon, and a source of strength.

All the women (and many men) in these two novels had dreams that go unfulfilled because of the war or because of lack of communication and mutual understanding between communities, generations, and the two genders. In the end, the characters who prevail are those who have

the courage to go beyond tradition, to reach out to others across boundaries. Humaydan subtly nudges the reader to do the same. Her prose is evocative but sparse; she doesn't tell everything at once, but forces the reader to think, to actively imagine the characters and events, and to evaluate them as well. In this sense, there is a connection between her style and her anti-war and anti-sectarian commitment. Her novels force a rethinking of received wisdom, and spawn many questions about how people deal with each other, as individuals and as social groups, optimally contributing to a movement for change.

As Maha says on the last page of *B as in Beirut*, "They may say the war has ended but I haven't finished my story yet" (p. 227).

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