

# Home Away from the Homeland: Palestinian Women and the Re-construction of Home Two Tales from Shatila

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## I Am There

*I come from there and remember,  
I was born like everyone is born, I have a mother  
and a house with many windows,  
I have brothers, friends and a prison.  
I have a wave that sea-gulls snatched away.  
I have a view of my own and an extra blade of grass.  
I have a moon past the peak of words.  
I have the godsent food of birds and olive tree beyond the kent of time.  
I have traversed the land before swords turned bodies into banquets.  
I come from there. I return the sky to its mother when for its mother the sky  
cries, and I weep for a returning cloud to know me.  
I have learned the words of blood-stained courts in order to break the rules.  
I have learned and dismantled all the words to construct a single one:  
Home*

- Mahmoud Darwish

Darwish's words echo those of millions of Palestinian refugees whose loss of a Home has led them to a lifelong struggle for the reconstruction of the concept. They resonate with thoughts of Palestinians everywhere who find themselves, after 60 years of displacement, locked in an endless search for the requisition of a Home, a process that is gradually becoming more of a symbol than a political end. Scores of academic essays have examined the right of return, the peace process and the conditions inside refugee camps in Lebanon and elsewhere; yet few have successfully dealt with the way in which Palestinian refugees have coped with the difficulties of those very conditions and actively sought to find meaning to the experience of displacement. Despite the fact that the situation of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon remains bleak,

refugees refuse to be seen merely as victims, given up to a life of hopelessness and despair. Instead, the sense of loss, resulting from the absence of a conventional nation state combined with the problems of resettlement, has led them to erect new homes in the diaspora. This article seeks – through the use of oral narratives – to give a voice to Palestinian refugee women and to highlight the human dimension of the process through which a Palestinian refugee woman seeks to construct an alternative image of a very personal Home away from the homeland. This article draws on the narratives of two remarkable women from Shatila whom I interviewed for this article.

The connection between narration and self in a collective crisis must be considered when

documenting the history of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. Even more critical is the role of women in the refugee camps. Women's personal narratives "whether written or oral, mono- or polyphonic, structured story or fragmentary testimony, have value in illuminating this contested subjective domain that national and social movements repress" (Sayigh, 1981, p. 3). The existing literature regarding the Palestinian right of return lacks a gendered perspective and does not provide a detailed or comprehensive account of women and their views, thus maintaining the marginalization of women in this sphere. Women are "communal witnesses, a sort of oral archive, or repository of experiential, historical lore, and tellers of suffering" (Peteet, 1997, p. 123). This article adds to the existing discourse and hopes to illuminate the importance of Palestinian refugee women

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the Shatila refugee camp, I have been introduced to the ways in which Palestinian women have carved a Home in the refugee camp by exercising control over their surroundings and playing an active role beyond the sphere of hollow slogans and empty promises. They have accepted the reality of their daily lives in a host-country that has never welcomed their presence and have overcome it to found a Home. Both women noted that the problem for the younger generations of Palestinian refugees, like themselves, is that they do not have a firsthand experience of Palestine as their Home and hence have grown up with a feeling of homelessness and uprootedness. This sense of homelessness is intensified in states such as Lebanon where they have felt that their host-country was repulsed by

as recorders of history. During their life, they have experienced the worst of refugee-hood – uprooting, exile, and trauma.

By listening to Farida and Amira, two young Palestinian sisters and mothers in

their presence. This has led them to cling even more strongly to memories of the homeland, which has come to represent freedom, dignity, warmth, and stability. Unlike their predecessors who have seen Palestine, the memories of Palestine for Farida and Amira's generation are based on interaction with the older generation. Inevitably, the search for Home for them became the centre of their Palestinian experience.

As children, they absorbed images of olive trees, the national flag, music, food, and scents of Palestine from their elders. As exiled Palestinians in Lebanon, they had to "turn to memory as compensation for loss and a source of renewed self-knowledge" (Porter, 2001, p. 304). Clutching to memories, they have managed to keep alive an idealized image of Home in order to maintain the will to fight for the right of return. The camps in Lebanon – such as Shatila where Farida and Amira grew up – remain an attempt "to create a symbolic continuity with the past, the refugees have organized space so that the camps' quarters carry the names of the villages they left behind. This serves two purposes: it keeps the memory of the past alive and inscribes this imagery into the daily lives of the residents" (Knudsen, 2005, p. 220). Farida fervently explained that Palestine has always been more than just a homeland; it's an all encompassing way of life. She still maintains the Palestinian dialect, cooks Palestinian food, and possesses the traditional Palestinian ornaments and clothing, even though she had never visited Palestine.

### Amira

Amira was among a generation of Palestinian refugees who grew up during the Lebanese civil war and the 'camp wars' and whose teenage years were spent with an extended communal family in Shatila. This living arrangement was a cause of stress for Amira; she had to care for the elderly of the camps, make sure the children stayed safe, carry water from place to place, and provide food, all the while knowing that she was only playing a minor part in a national struggle for return. While she relived moments of childhood happiness during our interview and fondly recalled stories of being

spoiled by her parents, brothers, and sisters, Amira repeatedly referred to how suffocated she had felt: “There were always too many people, very small rooms, too many neighbors and especially after marriage and having the kids, I never had time to be alone with myself.” She spent the early years of her life moving around the camp, in bomb shelters, dodging bombs and bullets and hiding in different areas of Beirut. As a mother, however, Amira realized that she had other choices. She chose not to let her identity, a Palestinian refugee in an inhospitable host-state, decide her fate. Being a Palestinian refugee implied being constrained by unfair laws regarding employment, housing, and

education, and she realized that these laws might never change. She explained that accepting reality was not the same as commending or embracing it. As a result, Amira decided to use the existing circumstances to her favor.

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While still having to live the daily struggles that many of her national compatriots are exposed to, Amira came to believe that a Home could still be constructed for her and her family in Lebanon.

Amira's realization came a few years ago when she started to work as a baby-sitter for a Lebanese woman. For the first time, she had the chance to have some time for herself. It was not the financial aspect of her job which liberated her but rather the act of getting to work. Every day she would walk by the sea to reach her employers' house. In this simple act, she felt she was able to 'rearrange her thoughts', schedule the housework and get rid of her troubles: “All I wanted was a place with a sense of privacy and walking by the sea gave me that.”

But when the war launched by the Israelis against Lebanon started in July 2006, Amira relived it all again: the loss of Home and security. This time

Amira decided to teach her own children a lesson. She refused to follow her parents' example, taking her children to shelters, and moving where the government declared it was safe. She taught them that their security and their stability is a mental state. Her children slept in the same beds they slept in before the war. “It was dangerous but you can not spend your life running away from death.” When the war was over, Amira says she understood that even though Shatila has been the only place where she has ever had a house and while she would never give up the need and desire to return to Palestine, her Home remained a state of mind that she can delve into to find peace and serenity in her state of displacement.

### Farida

For Farida, ten years older than her sister, the reconstruction of Home has a different meaning. At an early age, she started to take responsibility for caring for her family by working as a typist and doing handicrafts, in which she excelled. Her desire to share the burden of the family was translated on a national (Palestinian) level. Farida witnessed national losses and sacrifices, one after the other, and believed that the restlessness that overshadowed her life in Shatila could only be surmounted by return. In the seventies, the passion and militancy expressed by Palestinian leaders and youth led her to mistakenly believe that “they stood on the doorstep of freedom”. This feeling encouraged her to lead a life of activism, assisting the *fedayeens* and standing against apathy and indifference. She remembers with sadness, however, that things only went from bad to worse for the Palestinians in Lebanon.

Farida met her husband during the 'camp wars' at the hospital where she volunteered as a nurse. He occupied a bed next to her wounded brother-in-law. She recalls that long before she met him, she had felt that she should play a bigger part in the national struggle for return. She was constantly feeling dissatisfied with the news coming from the homeland, the stagnation of the political situation, the failings of the peace process, and the deceit in the promises delivered to the refugees. Farida says

that she embraced her reality-check: “It does not look like things will change for the better in my lifetime, but I can at least prepare my children for a better future and teach them how to fight for it.” While her belief in activism has not faltered, it has taken a different shape.

Farida became part of a leading NGO in Shatila which provides different services for the residents of the camps. Farida recounts that the most difficult moments she had were not those of war and bloodshed but rather the moments when she had to face the questions of her oldest son. When he asks her about his future, she finds herself having to face the questions of her past. She had believed that with hard work, belief and passion, justice can be achieved. Instead, she is still faced with the uncertainty of her and her family’s future. The only way she could come to peace with his questions was to encourage him to honorably struggle for the return to Palestine because she believes that he can only find a life worth living by trying to regain the homeland.

Farida’s reconstruction of Home is found in her work through which she relieves the pain, resolves problems, leads, inspires, and helps keep hope alive among fellow Palestinians. She reiterates that she continues to remind her children and all the youth of Shatila to resist and fight – in the midst of the current state of despair – for the right of return and all what it stands for, namely justice, freedom, and a better life. Her belief in activism has been rekindled. When she is able to transfer her passion to the youth, she feels she is closer to Home.

According to Farida and Amira, women in Shatila have always developed their own unique methods of depending on each other and facing political troubles. Farida mentioned that when young male *fedayeens* were targeted and captured by Lebanese security officials, it was the women who negotiated their release. Farida noted that she recently encountered a man in Shatila who reminded her that she had saved his life more than 20 years ago when he was threatened by a Lebanese guard. Women have succeeded in adapting to the difficulties of life in the camps. Tired of the

political situation, discontent with being ignored in the peace process, and wanting to be treated like human beings, they started to challenge traditional gender roles. The reconstruction of a Home in the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon is only one of the ways in which Palestinian women have embraced their roles in the national resistance.

As part of their role in the national resistance movement, both women were adamant in explaining that an attempt to reconstruct an idea of Home in the camps in Lebanon does not in any way question their belief in the right of return. When asked, for example, how she would react to being offered the chance to return to Palestine, Amira responded:

Yes, as a Palestinian I have been wronged, it would have been much better had I lived on my land the whole time but instead it was robbed even before I was born. But I have never seen Palestine. Shatila is where I grew up and where my kids got to know life. Does that mean I don’t want the right to return? No, I want it. I want justice to be served. I would go back to see Palestine because I have heard so much about it from my mother and father. But no, I might not return. I want a better life with my children and my family wherever that would be.

Experience in living and working in the camps has illustrated to me that for Palestinian refugees the right to return carries with it visions of justice, dignity, and motivation for life. Farida sought passionately to explain that the life of Palestinian women is an endeavour to maintain the belief in the right of return while simultaneously seeking peace in the camps and building dreams that enable them, their children, and families to survive in the current conditions. Ilana Feldman’s (2000) analysis commends the efforts of these women whose “continued focus ... on their memories of Home has [not] obstructed their ability both to cope with the reality of the present and to acquiesce to resolutions to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict” (p. 40). On the contrary, in their quest to keep Palestine alive they have in fact “helped to keep the tragic realities of Palestinian history from utterly destroying Palestinian community and political life” (Feldman, 2000, p. 40).

## Conclusion

For Palestinian refugee women in Shatila, Home in the refugee camp is in the conflict zone. There is no separation between the private and the public in the refugee camps. Home is a location of battle, shootings, demolitions, and trainings. The massacres at homes in Shatila destroyed any notion that the refugees had a Home which was separate from the conflict. For the Palestinian refugees Home is a place of refuge and battle. Both the narratives of Farida and Amira expressed an unwavering desire for the right of return but unlike the dominant representation in literature and the

political slogans that routinely idealize Palestine, they have remained alert to the more important difficulties, obstacles, and disruptions embedded in their daily lives. The day-to-day life of the women in the camps reflects a unique struggle through which Palestinian women have been able to take part in and keep alive the national resistance.

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