Palestine: The Nomadic Condition

Abdul-Rahim Al-Shaikh

Palestine
The Nomadic Condition

Abdul-Rahim Al-Shaikh

The vast majority of our people are now thoroughly sick of the misfortunes that have befallen us. On the other hand, I have never met a Palestinian who is tired enough of being a Palestinian to give up entirely.

Edward Said, *After the Last Sky*

Between one beat of a wounded heart and the next we ask: how long will we carry on cheering as Christ ascends to Golgotha?

Mahmoud Darwish, *A War for War's Sake*

Throughout the modern history of Palestine, every Kafkaesque event that Palestinians have endured is the result of the Nakba of 1948, the nightmare of the Palestinians and the beginning of their ceaseless search for a dream that would bring it to an end. Upon the establishment of the state of Israel on 14 May 1948, after the termination of the two-decade-long British Mandate over Palestine, an entire nation became subject to some of the harshest colonial conditions ever imposed. This archetypal colonial alteration of colonialism represented the threshold of a long-standing amalgamation between the Euro-American colonial enterprise and Zionism. Since then, the *idea of America* and the *idea of Israel* have merged to form the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) hegemony that realised the Zionist myth by invading the land, replacing its aboriginals with immigrant settlers and constructing a fabricated history and culture forcefully to replace that of the natives.[1] The systematic ethnic cleansing and expulsion of more than half of the Palestinian population from historic Palestine then added a permanent exilic condition to the Palestinian plight that metamorphosed into a nomadic condition. The wisdom of Aristophanes, stinging the prey to death to take the life of the wasp, has coloured every aspect of Palestinian life under Israeli occupation with fear and uncertainty for more than sixty-one years. Palestinian art certainly was no exception. Art underwent the same struggle, faced the same challenges, witnessed the varied conditions of the Palestinian plight, but, most importantly, it managed to avoid eradication as a significant component of Palestinian culture.

1. For further exploration of the placental connection between the two ideas of America and Israel, and the analogy between the Palestinian plight and that of the native Americans, see: Munir Akash, *The Right to Sacrifice the Other: The American Genocides*, Riad El-Rayyes Books, Beirut, 2002 (Arabic); and *The Talmud According to Uncle Sam: On the Founding Hebrew Myths of America*, Riad El-Rayyes Books, Beirut, 2004, (Arabic).

THE GENESIS OF THE TUNNEL CONDITION

In spite of the fact that Palestine was an Arab country 'before it was subjected to a drawn out process of armed robbery in broad daylight in the twentieth century',[2] the primacy of ideas in the advancement of a secular history enticed Edward Said to identify the question of Palestine as a conflict over an 'idea' – for Palestine itself is a much debated, even contested notion – between Palestinians and Zionism. To challenge the Zionist idea and the knowledge nexus of its Euro-American warden, Said draws a connection between the project of Orientalism and that of Zionism, especially in the realm of the 'ideas' that paved the way for the establishment of Israel. Said lamented the Arab failure to perceive Zionism not only as a colonial movement that occupied the *land* of Palestine, but also as a fully articulated antithetical *idea* in opposition to that of the Palestinians with regard to the land and its ownership. It was crucial to:

> … understand the struggle between Palestinians and Zionism as a struggle between a presence and an interpretation, the former constantly appearing to be overpowered and eradicated by the latter. What was this presence? No matter how backward, uncivilised and silent they were, the Palestinian Arabs were on the land.[3]

Given this, at the heart of the struggle against Zionism was a struggle against the exclusivity of the Zionist narrative and the hegemonic material instruments Zionism used to realise it. The aim of this struggle is precisely to synthesise a counter-narrative, stemming from the Palestinian presence on the land in a diverse and inclusive manner. Through this perception, Said's neologism of 'Palestinianism' not only became his compass for defending 'Palestinian presence' vs 'Zionist interpretation', but also stood for the only possible and relatively fair solution to the Palestinian plight through a binational state brought about by 'a political movement that is being built out of the reassertion of Palestine's multicultural and multireligious history'.[4]

This assertion aimed to transcend chauvinistic nationalism and install a defensive one, so that Palestinians would not produce a replica of the Zionist dream, and remain merely the opponents and victims of Zionism; it represented an alternative:

> This was what they embodied in fighting for the idea of Palestine, a non-exclusivist, secular, democratic, tolerant, and generally progressive ideology, not about colonising and dispossessing people but about liberating them.[5]

Palestinianism, then, is presented not only as a counter-narrative of the Zionist Oriental idea, but also as an antithetical political programme from which the rhetoric of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) benefited a great deal; it articulated what was to become the post-1967 political agenda as a secular democratic state in all of liberated Palestine. Any conversion or departure from the realm of Palestinianism, with the implications presented herewith, will be identified with the Zionist Oriental enterprise – that is, taking part in what I call the 'Palestinian Orientalism' that has coloured mainstream Palestinian politics and culture in the post-Oslo era.

2. Azmi Bishara, 'Searching for Meaning of Nakba', *Al-Ahram Weekly*, no 690, pp 13–19, May 2004, available at: http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2004/690/sc4.htm

3. Edward Said, *The Question of Palestine*, Vintage Books, New York, 1979, pp 8–9

4. Edward Said, *The Politics of Dispossession: The Struggle for Palestinian Self-Determination 1969–1994*, Pantheon Books, New York, 1994, p 3

5. Ibid, p xix

Based on such a programme, the ideal solution for the question of Palestine was a state in which all individual and communal rights are based on citizenship as a secular concept with no supremacy granted to anyone on the basis of religion or ethnicity.[6] This programme resonates with the Palestinian National Charter of 1968 that identified its goal as the creation of 'a secular democratic state in Palestine' in which Muslims, Christians and Jews would enjoy equal rights and duties. It seemed to promise Palestine, rather than Israel, as a 'state for all its citizens', in addition to challenging the Zionist idea of creating Israel as a state for Jews, for it could be either democratic or Jewish, but not both. Alas, this challenge did not last for more than six years. After Yasser Arafat's landmark speech, 'The Gun and the Olive Branch', at the United Nations General Assembly in 1974 the PLO gained vast international solidarity and recognition as 'the sole and legitimate representative of the Palestinian people'. However, this moment marked the most dramatic shift towards Palestinian Orientalism when the PLO dropped its secular democratic strategy in favour of the Palestinian National Authority programme. This, I argue, was the first step in abandoning Said's Palestinianism. The signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993 and the abrogation of the Palestinian National Charter by the Palestinian National Council held in Gaza in 1995 can be seen as the final dominos to fall, given the implications of the adoption of the 'Palestinian National Authority' programme in 1974 and the Declaration of Independence of 1988.

This fourfold process that de-Palestinianised the cause lasted almost two decades and led to five devastating consequences that currently define what I term the 'tunnel condition' by:[7] (1) transforming the national movement from an inclusive resistance and liberation movement to a deviant nationalism that acquired all the evils of post-colonial nationalism without transforming the cause it fought for into a conventional post-colonial condition; (2) altering the spirit of the Palestinian imagined community by excluding three groups from the demographic make-up of the future state of Palestine: Arab Jews who have been used and abused to give Israel part of its 'Jewish character', the Palestinian citizens of Israel, and the Palestinian refugees who were ethnically cleansed during the Nakba and never enjoyed their right of return granted by UN Resolution 194; (3) transforming the nascent Palestinian civil society, where once it was part of an anti-colonial national movement, into a de-colonisation movement mediating between the wronged Palestinian people and their new oppressors in the quasi-state controlled by a segment of the 'historical leadership' who serve as a proxy for Israel; (4) shifting concern, on the cultural level, away from preserving the Palestinian collective memory by fostering cultural politics directed towards achieving collective amnesia; and (5) leaving the door indiscriminately open to any political and cultural solution to the question of Palestine, such as 'the state for all its citizens' advocated by Azmi Bishara, and the 'one state solution' advocated by Joseph Massad among others.

THE GENESIS OF THE NOMADIC CONDITION

In addition to the condition of exile that was created by the Nakba and its fallout, the transformations of the idea of Palestine intensified

6. Said, *The Question of Palestine*, op cit, p 53

7. The 'tunnel condition' is the term I coined after the fascinating novella *The Martyrs Are Returning This Week* by Taher Wattar. It not only sets out a panorama of the postcolonial Algerian condition, but also offers a brilliant and subtle treatment of the Palestinian condition in the post-Oslo era, during which there has been an attempt to bring the national memory of the Palestinians and the 'idea of Palestine' into the mainstream. It asserts that the Palestinian condition is not pre-colonial, colonial or post-colonial, but rather a 'tunnel condition' that seems to combine the evils of all three. For further details, see Abdul-Rahim Al-Shaikh, 'Palästina: Leben im Tunnel', in *Di/Visions – Kultur und Politik des Nahen Ostens*, eds Catherine David, Georges Khalil and Bernd M Scherer, Wallstein Verlag, Goettingen, 2009, pp 191–214.

8. For further information on the Kantian praise of 'dogmatist legitimate despotism of reason', lamentation of 'illegitimate reason of the barbaric nomads', and the lethal politics of the nation-state in achieving its master allegiance against any antagonism, see Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans and eds Paul Guyer and Allen W Wood, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998, p 99; and Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans and intro George Schwarb, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1996.

9. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans Paul Patton, Athlone Press, London, 1994, p 37

10. The root (n-m-s) in the lexical tradition of Semitic languages, especially Arabic and Hebrew, denotes the meaning of gradual and concealed change, be it positive or negative, in matter, behaviour, or law. The Greek origins from which *nomos* emerged resonate with this meaning. For more details, see Ibn Mandhur, *Lisan al-Arab*, Dar Sader, Beirut, 1994, vol 6, pp 243–4; Even-Shoshan, *Ha-Milon Ha-Hadash*, Kiryat Sefer, Jerusalem, 1977, pp 3674–5, 3708.

11. For further information, see Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans Brian Massumi, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1987, pp 479, 494, 500; Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', *Diacritics*, 16:1, pp 22–7; Jeremy W Crampton and Stuart Elden, eds, *Space, Knowledge and Power: Foucault and Geography*, Ashgate, Burlington, 2007.

12. There is a difference between this type of 'nomadic citizenship' practised within the

nomadic trends in all aspects of life, and art certainly was no exception. In the presence of a dormant quasi-official establishment – the Palestinian Authority – and the cancerous presence of NGOs, it is helpful to use a Deleuzean approach to nomadism as a means to understand the complicated, and often absurd, osmosis between politics and art in Palestine. As paradoxical as it might seem, it is worthwhile to use the framework of the avowed empiricist Gilles Deleuze to underline Said's idealist account of the rise and fall of Palestinianism.

Engaging the ideas put forward by Carl Schmitt in *The Concept of the Political*, Deleuze refutes the Kantian denunciation of 'barbarism that allowed for a kind of nomad who abhors all permanent cultivation of the soil'.[8] Instead, he derives his definition of nomadism from the opposition between *nomos* and *logos*, or between immanent and transcendental criteria, that divides, distributes or hierarchises space and controls modes of subjectivity within it.[9] Three dichotomies of spaces, cities/citizenships and modes of knowledge can be derived from this opposition.

First: While the *logos*/non-nomadic law dictates an order that is outside, or rather above, what is distributed, the *nomos*/nomadic law derives its own principle of distribution within itself, and so becomes a self-referential system of poetics and politics.[10] In this sense, the non-nomadic space is a striated space that primordially has intrinsic boundaries that serve as well as maintain it as a sedentary space that inherits its properties from the prelapsarian realm. The nomadic space, however, is a 'smooth space' that temporality creates within its extrinsic boundaries, converts into an oceanic heterotopia, and so endows it with partial immunity as a place of implemented power.[11]

Second: The nomadic space is a radical one in both poetics and politics. The heterotopian nature of the nomadic smooth space endows it with an anarchic distribution that makes conformity a tasteless joke where temporality and movement are the only ruling principles. On the contrary to the relation that might be drawn between the *logos* and the *polis* that produces a structured command over citizens in the city, the two defining principles of the act of nomadism – temporality and movement – suggest that the 'modern' nomad – whether living on the periphery of the city, passing through it, or dwelling in a non-structured smooth space outside it, is a defiant citizen *par excellence*.[12] Nomadic citizenship, then, should be the only natural mode of allegiance exempt from the lethal nature of national citizenships lamented by each and every intellectual from Schmitt to Said. Their lament was not a utopian yearning to make the nomad a non-nationalist nationalist, but rather a natural attempt to cast off the spell of the national myths of existence and their ruling values.

Third: Through their monumental impact in creating certain types of spaces, and dwellers with certain attributes who inhabit these spaces, the politics of *logos* and *nomos* produce two modes of knowledge: 'royal science' and 'nomad science'. What concerns us here is the Deleuzean usage of these two modes of science in the sociopolitical context. Royal science denotes a meaning to the mode of knowledge produced by the transcendental distribution of the elements, and is extracted from invariant, that is to say, universal laws and values that will most certainly lead to the Truth and become the State's knowledge. Nomad science, by

aboriginal space of the individual, and the concept of 'nomadic identity' presented by May Joseph as a conditional citizenship in modern migrancy and transnational spaces encompassing the complexities of immigrants' legal and cultural allegiances. For further information, see Eugene W Holland, 'Nomad Citizenship and Global Democracy', in *Deleuze and the Social*, eds Martin Fuglsang and Bent Meier Sørensen, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2006, pp 191–206; 'Affective Citizenship and the Death-State', in *Deleuze and the Contemporary World*, eds Adrian Parr and Ian Buchanan, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2006, pp 161–74; and May Joseph, *Nomadic Identities: The Performance of Citizenship*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1999.

13. See Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, op cit, pp 40–5, 66–7, 108, 142–3

14. See Holy Quran, 18:65–82. In addition, this trend in Arab philosophy was founded and institutionalised by both Al-Farabi (Alpharabius, 872–950) who was the founder of the *mashshai* (peripatetic) school, and the author of *Ara' Ahl al-Madina al-Fadhila* (The Perfect State); and Ibn Baja (Avempace, 1085–1139) who drafted the first manifesto of nomadology in Arab philosophy in his treatise *Tadbir al-Mutawahhid* (Governance of the Solitary Being). For further information, see: Al-Farabi Al-Farabion, *The Perfect State*, New York, Clarendon Press, 1985; Ibn Baja, *Governance of the Solitary (Being)*, Institute for the History of Arabic and Islamic Science, Frankfurt, Islamic Philosophy 77, Frankfurt am Main, 1999.

contrast, is an ambulant science that gradually evolves as a result of engaging with life and participating in *creating* the pedestrian truth instead of *receiving* it as universal presuppositions.[13] The political radicality of 'nomad science' could be associated with the gnostic knowledge attained by Saint Al-Khadir in his encounter with Moses, while royal science could be associated with the ethical reasoning practised by Moses himself as an all-knowing prophet who is inspired by God.[14]

In other words, if 'royal science' serves to guard the meaning of invariant universalities of space by revolving around the binary of 'matter' and 'form', 'nomad science' achieves the contrary: it apprehends space by 'exhausting its meaning', dismantling the rigid binary between 'matter' and 'form' by bringing to reflection the distinction between 'content' and 'expression', 'form' and 'substance', and never ceasing to give voice to each and every singularity to be manifested as a substance of expression. This aesthetic radicality of 'nomad knowledge' was praised by Deleuze in his work on Marcel Proust in which he demonstrated that art should be more than a medium of expression through mimetic means, but rather a non-descriptive, progressive vehicle of inquiry that examines aspects of temporality, desire and memory within the *espace quelconque*.[15] At this point, the artist becomes a creative manipulator who dreams of being an Avempace *mutawahhid*, a Baudelairean flâneur, a Deleuzean nomad, and a Foucauldian intellectual:

> … destroyer of evidence and universalities, the one who, in the inertias and constraints of the present, locates and marks the weak points, the openings, the lines of power, who incessantly displaces himself, doesn't know exactly where he is heading nor what he'll think tomorrow because he is too attentive to the present; who, in passing, contributes the raising of the question of knowing whether the revolution is worth it, and what kind (of revolution and what effort), it being understood that they alone who are willing to risk their lives to bring it about can answer the question.[16]

PALESTINE AS A SITE FOR NOMADIC ART

As an occupied country that has suffered under Zionist colonialism for more than six decades, Palestine is a place in which the three dichotomies explained here form a nomadic condition for art, especially in the post-Oslo era. It might seem frivolous to compare Palestine to the Roman Empire. However, as a political, social and cultural assemblage, Palestine still conforms to the trilogy of lines that divide each and every state-like assemblage: the moral line, the molecular line and the line of flight. In their archetypal summary of the warring coexistence between these three lines, Deleuze and Félix Guattari considered the Roman Empire exemplary of the rigid segmentary nature of the moral line. On the other hand, they took the Barbarian tribes that raided the frontiers of the Empire, and re-territorialised the fixed relations in a way that allowed them to be assimilated with the native communities on the frontiers, to represent the agile segmentary of the molecular line. But they praised the pastoral nomads for being the representatives of the aesthetic and political radicality of the line of flight by their defiant refusal to be

15. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell, University of Columbia Press, New York, 1994, p 166; Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans Daniel W Smith and Michael A Greco, University of Minnesota Press, New York–Minniapolis,1997, p 63

16. Michel Foucault, 'End of the Monarchy of Sex', in Sylvre Lotringer, *Foucault Live: Collected Interviews, 1961–1984*, trans Lysa Hochroth and John Johnson, Semiotext(e), 1996, New York, p 225

17. Deleuze and Guattari, op cit, *A Thousand Plateaus*, pp 222–3

18. For further information regarding the difference between different modes of de-territorialisation and re-territorialisation, see Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, pp 508–10.

19. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, Robert Hurley, trans Mark Seem and Helen R Lane, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1983, p 322

20. Jawad Ibrahim was born in 1953 in Ya'bad – a main town in Jenin district. He received his BA in psychology from Jordan University in 1977. Besides participating in group exhibitions in Palestine and around the world, he has had more than twelve solo exhibitions. He has participated in different international conferences, seminars and art symposia, and has supervised many art workshops in Palestine and abroad. Jawad Ibrahim lives and works in Ramallah, and uses his house as a workshop and a gallery.

territorialised.[17] That is when the nomads formed a new category within the assemblage that is neither Roman nor Barbarian.

Palestine is no Roman Empire, and yet a thorough analysis of post-Oslo Palestine, as an idea and as a reality, shows that the tunnel condition of Palestine closely parallels these lines of division. On the one hand, the Palestinian national movement has been drastically transformed from an inclusive resistance and liberation movement to a deviant nationalism that serves as a proxy for the Zionist colonial regime in Israel and its Euro-American warden. On the other hand, and as outrageous at it might sound, most of the nascent Palestinian civil society that was once part of an anti-colonial national movement has become a collection of mere de-colonised mediators between the wronged Palestinian people and their new oppressors in the quasi-state that is controlled by a segment of the 'historical leadership'. This suffocating reality has turned most of civil society into a side effect of the creation of the Palestinian Authority where people and state both became fully immersed in the 'wars of position' after losing their 'wars of movement'. The Palestinian Authority has become another corrupt tool that claims to advocate democratic transition, given that nothing but a pseudo-transition, or a faded form of a democratised colony, could ever be achieved under occupation.

The molecular line of Palestinian civil society has merged with the moral line of the Palestinian Authority producing a certain type of 'royal knowledge', or what I described earlier as a local Orientalism that de-Palestinianised the cause and fostered a cultural politics of collective amnesia. This relative, and most certainly negative, re-territorialisation has climaxed not only to trigger the creation of a new space for creativity, but also to give birth to a new breed of Palestinian nomads who are neither deluded by the fake dreams of the little empire, nor tainted by the opportunism of the new barbarians.[18] This is where what I call the *nomadic condition* emerges as a line of flight that brings about both absolute and relative positive de-territorialisation while procuring a unique meaning of nomadic knowledge and nomadic citizenship in the absence of a nation-state that would endow all its citizens, on the ground and in exile, with a dignified citizenship.

Within this nomadic condition, art seems to be a perfect medium for de-territorialisation as 'a coming undone'.[19] Since very few artists in Palestine have not been affected by 'royal knowledge' and the norms of the tunnel condition in post-Oslo Palestine, bringing their work to light is a moral imperative. Jawad Ibrahim is one of the most prominent artists among those who personify the nomadic condition.[20] He is the Palestinian flâneur par excellence who takes every opportunity to create his own lines of flight to break with both the official Palestinian establishment and the NGO community. Ibrahim works in a multiplicity of techniques and media, including, but not limited to: caricature, installation, sculpture and painting. Within each of these domains, he seeks to free himself and his milieu from physical, mental and spiritual confinement.

THE SCARECROW PRESIDENT

Ibrahim distributed some of his political cartoons underground in Ramallah immediately after the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1994.

Some of these cartoons saw light through the leftist bimonthly magazine *Shams* published in Baqa Al-Sharqiyya – a Palestinian town near Jenin. The main character in Ibrahim's cartoon is a scarecrow that mimics and mocks the figure of the late Palestinian president Yasser Arafat, often also depicted as a new Christ ascending to Golgotha. In conversation, Ibrahim explained that the scarecrow figure was inspired by a Palestinian proverb. It reads: 'Your presence is a mere shadow. I thought you were something. Your rope-circlet (atop your *keffiyeh*) looks like a flower! Your mouth is a nest for flies... you frameless sieve!' This mockery of a clueless Palestinian president who does not enjoy any sort of sovereignty or immunity under occupation, yet wields an iron fist in local Palestinian politics, brings to mind the Japanese myth of the scarecrow deity Kuebiko who cannot walk, yet knows everything on earth and in the heavens! Ibrahim's scarecrow always appears with a newspaper in his left hand and an owl (Ibrahim's signature, and a bad omen in Arab Palestinian culture) on his right hand. Ibrahim quotes current disturbing news, legible on the newspaper, and also adds a scornful proverb in a speech-balloon behind the fold-mouthed scarecrow's head.

This cartoon, however, has some different features. The newspaper headline reads: 'Ya'bad: Al-Qassam 19/11/35; Ammar 13/4/94', the

The Scarecrow President, 1994, 20 × 14 cm

proverb reads: 'Who gives birth never dies'. In addition, Ibrahim's owl signature on the scarecrow's right hand disappears and in its place grows two anemone flowers – a Palestinian symbol of continuous martyrdoms. The cartoon refers to a military operation carried out by the Al Qassam Brigades member Ammar Amarina (1973–1994) on 13 April 1994 in Al-Khudayrah settlement. The operation came in retaliation for the Mosque of Abraham massacre on 25 February 1994 in which twenty-nine Muslim worshippers were murdered by the Jewish extremist settler Baruch Goldstein during Morning Prayer in the holy month of Ramadan. Amarina was a fellow villager from Ibrahim's hometown of Ya'bad where Shaikh Izzidin Al-Qassam – the semi-legendary fighter – was martyred on 19 November 1935. While he may celebrate his home-town martyr, Ibrahim certainly does not advocate suicide bombs as a means to liberate Palestine. However, he echoes Edward Said's words, saying:

> Palestinian violence, the response of a desperate and horridly oppressed people, has been stripped of its context and the terrible suffering from which it arises: a failure to see that is a failure in humanity, and that context doesn't make it any less terrible but at least situates it in a real history and real geography.[21]

The intensity of the cartoon in affirming the righteousness of resistance by the downtrodden Palestinians echoes the radical nature of political cartoons. It is a means of deconstructing the ugly realities of Israeli colonialism through a unique combination of pictorial, editorial and creative commentary which takes political, cultural and social criticism beyond the written word.[22] Almost two decades before Edward Said paid heed to the political radicality and historicity of cartoons in the Palestinian context, Faysal Darraj coined the term *al-Hamishi al-Markazi* (the central pedestrian) to describe the most prominent Palestinian cartoonist Naji Al-Ali, assassinated in London in 1987. Basing his argument on the Gramscian analysis of the osmosis between politics and art, and Walter Benjamin's concept of ritual that gives the original work of art its unique value,[23] Darraj asserts that Al-Ali was the prototype of the most evocative central-pedestrian. He was:

> … the Arab Palestinian brigand who observes the Arab and Palestinian tragedy. He, as a marginal brigand, becomes a living reality at the centre of history and its meaning. Here, Al-Ali constructs the image of Palestinian truth and authenticity. Without him justice seems disfigured and legitimacies seem fake.[24]

This idea, also applicable to Ibrahim's scarecrow president, reveals a genial creation of a unique line of flight that, according to Deleuze, blows apart strata, cuts roots and makes a new connection with(in) reality, while escaping its forces of repression and stratification.

THE CITY IN-OUT

In the first phase of the Al-Aqsa Intifada of 2000, before it became a militarised response to Israel's use of its full-scale war arsenal against

21. Edward Said, 'Dignity, Solidarity and the Penal Colony', *Counter Punch*, 25 September 2003, available at: http://www.counterpunch.org/said09252003.html

22. For further information see Edward Said, 'Homage to Joe Sacco', in Joe Sacco, *Palestine*, Fantagraphics Books, Seattle, 2002; Abdul-Rahim Al-Shaikh, 'Historiographies of Laughter: Poetics of Deformation in Palestinian Political Cartoon', *Third Text*, 21:1, January 2007, pp 65–78.

23. Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in *Illuminations*, ed Hannah Arendt, trans Harry Zohn, Schocken Books, New York, 1969, pp 217–51

24. Faysal Darraj, *The Misery of Culture in the Palestinian Institution*, Dar Al-Adab, Beirut, 1996, p 150, (Arabic)

Palestinians, the national struggle used different modes of resistance as practised during the Intifada of 1987. This included demonstrations, rock throwing and tyre burning to shut down the streets as symbols of disobedience. Violent confrontations took place at the northern entrance of Ramallah, at the junction with the Beit El settlement that hosts a military base and intelligence headquarters. The City Inn Hotel located on this junction went out of business as a result of the confrontations and was eventually seized by the Israeli Occupation Forces (IOF).

Ibrahim regularly participated in demonstrations that began as a march from the city centre, and then turned into violent confrontations when the IOF intervened to disperse the crowds. The ashes and remnants of burning tyres on the asphalt captured Ibrahim's imagination and before long he started collecting and taking them home. He created his black-and-white series using these remnants mixed with black ink on paper and called it *Between the Bullet and Stone* in outrage against the brutality and destruction he had witnessed. His mode of expression provokes the spectator to interrogate these effaced death gazes, the shrouded bodies of disfigured martyrs, to testify, with the dust of the battle-field, to the barbarity of the IOF.

In *Dark Cry*, we feel a breathless desire to diffuse the phantasmagoric events in this painting as witnessed by Ibrahim himself. This desire is intensified by the elements of horror and resistance preserved in the body of this art. The magnitude, intensity and dynamics of de-territorialisation, sorrowful and suffocating as it is, bring to mind the musical works of Olivier Messiaen. Messiaen was fascinated by birdsong since composing early works such as *La Nativité* (1935), and his flute and piano piece *Le Merle Noir* (1952), which were composed entirely of birdsong.[25] They were not mere imitations or simple transcriptions of birdsong but a brilliant mode of de-territorialisation, for they transformed the inner relations between the two assemblages of nature and art in a totally new creation. In the same way that Messiaen's compositions can be described as 'bird be-coming-flute and piano', Ibrahim's *Dark Cry* achieves a positive de-territorialisation by which the remnants of 'dust and ashes be-coming-martyr', also portrays 'martyr be-coming-tyre, rock or fire'.

PREGNANT… WITH ROCKS

Ibrahim is no chronicler of modern Palestinian history, and yet the subversive nature, haunting themes, embittered sense of life and temporality in his black-and-white paintings bear a strong resemblance to Francisco de Goya's 'Black Paintings' and *The Disasters of War* that depicted Spain's Peninsular wars. The same enraged consciousness manifested itself in Ibrahim's most intimate medium, sculpture. He chose the figure of an elderly woman – Um Na'il from Al-Jalazoun refugee camp, located about two miles north of the front at the City Inn junction. Um Na'il used to work in Al-Muqata'a compound so as to be close to the Palestinian president Yasser Arafat. Since her sons were in Israeli prisons, her way of contributing to the struggle was to collect stones and prepare them for youngsters to throw at the IOF. So she

25. For further information, see: Christopher Dingle, *The Life of Messiaen*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007, and David Kraft, *Birdsong in the Music of Olivier Messiaen*, University of Middlesex, London, 2000 (doctoral dissertation).

A Dark Cry, 2000, 25 × 25 cm

appears in Ibrahim's sculpture. After each 'wave' of rock-throwing, Um Na'il would collect the rocks and bring them back to be thrown again at the IOF. Ibrahim took the rock from which the work was sculpted from a demolished house near the historical site of the Ottoman court in downtown Ramallah.

Since art is measured by its ability to experiment and mutate, to form and deform, to evoke and invoke, the shift in mode of subject in Ibrahim's sculpture is a stroke of genius. While rock-throwing is chiefly a young male activity, collecting rocks seems a rather secondary, if not inferior, one. However, the social dynamic of Ibrahim's sculpture allows for potentially new connections of meaning. First, rock-throwing male agency seems to rely on rock re-collection. Second, while the mobility of the male youths permits them to 'raid' without being captured by the IOF, the sedentary permanent presence of Um Na'il signals a deep attachment to the land and the 'line defended'. Third, the youths who gather and disperse are like the rocks embraced by Um Na'il, yet completely detached from the actual mass of the sculpture. Um Na'il's super agency, then, stems from her transversality between the natural and social fields of meaning, the womb that breeds rocks and youths, collects and re-collects, gathers and disperses within the bold line of flight sculpted by Ibrahim.
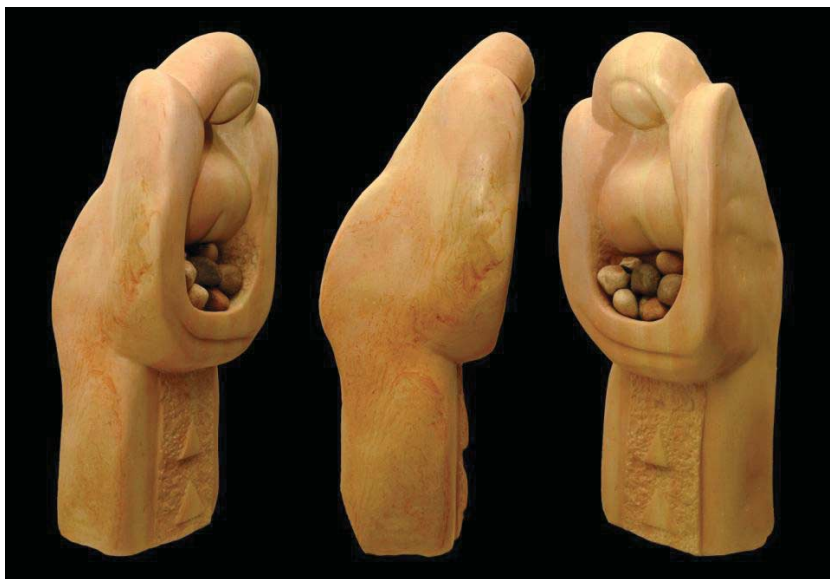
Um Na'il, 2004, 80 × 30 × 32 cm

A WINDOW ON THE LIBRARY STREET

As they made their way to South Africa to participate in the celebrations at the end of the apartheid regime, and prior to the establishment of Palestinian Authority in 1994, Yasser Arafat tried to entice Mahmoud Darwish to head the Ministry of Culture in the nascent Palestinian government. When Darwish refused, Arafat inquired: 'What harm was there in Malraux becoming a minister in Charles De Gaulle's cabinet?' Without hesitation, Darwish replied:

> There are at least three differences: first, France is not the West Bank and Gaza Strip; second, the stature of Charles De Gaulle is not that of Yasser Arafat; and third, Mahmoud Darwish is no André Malraux. These, you may say, are small differences, but if the state of Palestine becomes as mighty as France, Yasser Arafat becomes De Gaulle, and I reach the stature of Malraux, then I would prefer to be Jean-Paul Sartre![26]

This anecdote testifies to the persistence of the illusion of Ramallah becoming Paris, or at least a modest Parisian boulevard. Yet, Ramallah is at once a war zone, in antithetical confrontation between David and Goliath during the Intifada, and a 'peace zone'! In the aftermath of the Al-Aqsa Intifada, Ramallah became a pseudo-'democratised' colony. It appears as a dwarf *badauderie* with an area of 16.3 km² full of ineffable groups of bureaucrats, unofficial officials, retired veterans, retarded intellectuals, activists from the ever-growing NGO industry, normalisers, spies, Palestinian *gauche caviar*, foreign experts in broad fields of expertise from security trainers to art curators… but you rarely meet a nomadic artist.

Walter Benjamin asserted that the flâneur met his destiny in the triumph of consumer culture.[27] However, I might add that a synthesis of

26. See *Mahmoud Darwish – As the Land is the Language*, 60 minutes, a documentary produced by French TV directed by French-Israeli director Simone Bitton in 1997; Akram Hanieh, 'Huston Desert: The Poet in His Last Journey', *Al-Karmel*, vol 90, 2009, pp 123–50 (in Arabic).

27. Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans Harry Zohn and Quintin Hoare, Verso, London, 1997

28. Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, ed and trans Jonathan Mayne, Phaidon Press, London, 1995, p 9

29. An extensive literature has been written on the *Flâneur – Badaud* phenomena of Paris in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; however, the difference between these two emblematic figures, if we are to omit the outward resemblance in strolling and curiosity, stems from their relation to the masses. For more information, see Gregory Shaya, 'The Flâneur, the Badaud, and the Making of a Mass Public in France, circa 1860–1910', *American Historical Review*, 109:1, February 2004; Edmund

similar socioeconomic conditions, albeit on a micro level, to those existing in Paris at the beginning of the twentieth century would produce another type of flâneur. The conditions and qualities that made Constantin Guys the perfect flâneur for Charles Baudelaire[28] would allow Ibrahim to be *the* Palestinian flâneur within the present tunnel condition in Palestine. However, Ibrahim is a non-aristocratic flâneur, not a *badaud* but close enough to Baudelaire's trash collector.[29] *A Window on the Library Street* serves as a good example of this phenomenon. While walking to his house on the Library Street – a street of cafés, restaurants, embassies, NGOs, cultural foundations and ministries – Ibrahim spotted a small abandoned window in the garden of a deserted house. He took the cast-off window and turned it into a piece of art depicting images of a boy and a girl from a nearby school.

Given the nature of the groups I have mentioned in Ramallah, any trivial thing can become an event if the corrupted taste of the crowd decides to make it so, while any noble thing might not. In such a milieu, Ibrahim believes in and produces the 'art of the poor' as he puts it, 'for in the times of commodification one should be cautious not to slip into the market of commodities'. Faysal Darraj also believes that during such times:

A Window on the Library Street, 2006, 65 × 70 cm

> … all things are equal within the Baudelairean metaphor. The artist's subjects become his own mirror as much as he is theirs. The *flâneur*, who is forced out of the elysium of allies to the hell of the boulevard, is nothing but a metaphor within which merge different subjects that are transformed into commodities at the hands of the capitalist regime. These transformations make out of the *flaneur* yet another prostitute to hunt stories instead of men; hire him as secret agent within the crowd before alienating him to become a trash collector who distinguishes between what can be sold and what cannot be.[30]

The flâneur has a higher status than the proletarian for economic and social reasons. Under the conditions of the capitalist mode of production, the artist stands no chance of supporting his or her creative work, and simultaneously suffers the fragmentation and estrangement of becoming a cog in a machine. This leads to a:

> … unique and unprecedented experience built on the irony that the modern individual fulfils himself while giving fulfilment away, and produces commodities he cannot buy. Everything pours outwards like the prostitute who corrupts 'love' by selling it after being fragmented into a woman, a commodity, and a sales pimp all at once.[31]

Many Palestinian values, including art, have sunk into 'commodity prostitution' through a dominant tendency to equate selves and things. The challenge facing Ibrahim, like any other Palestinian nomad artist, was to survive these social, economic and political conditions within Palestine's tunnel condition.

The 'trash collector' was 'the hero' for both Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin, because his heroism, according to Darraj, stems from his ability to challenge the myths of enlightenment and progress, to strip down all the masks of the industrial mode of production, and to confront the experience of industrial society with the metaphor that commodities are useless. Ibrahim seems also to have survived challenges and other kinds of enticement in the times of normalisation and opportunism. He challenged Palestinian *gauche caviar* art displayed in the prestigious exhibitions with the 'art of the poor': battlefield dust, tyre ash, the rock of a demolished house, an abandoned window, a rusty piece of metal, dirt.

THE MIRROR'S CODE: AZIZA AND IQBAL

Palestine, as a site of beauty, has a twofold prospect: the fulfilment of the real and a nostalgia for the ideal. Seeing, as a threshold to internalising beauty, also becomes a threefold prospect where sights, insights and foresights compete. The spectator has to bear the anxiety that resides in both the act of seeing and its subject. In Ibrahim's last solo exhibition 'Reflection', it was the mission and the obsession of the artist to recall anxiety and to re-create its archways over the stream of meaningfulness in the form of humanistic, aesthetic and political signals. A humanistic signal is encapsulated in Ibrahim's exhibition to 'A Blue Exodus for Aziza and Iqbal' dedicated to the traditional house decorators in his hometown of Ya'bad. It is as if Ibrahim announces that seeing oneself

White, *The Flâneur: A Stroll through the Paradoxes of Paris*, Bloomsbury, London, 2001.

30. Faysal Darraj, 'Baudelaire's Modernity and Mirrors of the Modern City', *Al-Karmel*, vol 83, 2005, p 52 (in Arabic)

31. Ibid, p 54

through others is still the enigma of that blue and its birth certificate. Ibrahim does not recognise his image in water or in life – neither submitting to the Prophetic tradition, nor evading Narcissus' tragedy – but rather identifies with the everlasting subject of the blue – the misery of the oppressed and their hardship, without which no Blue Period in art history would have ever existed.

The aesthetic signal in 'Reflection' is transmitted by Ibrahim's use of dust – the essence of being – as a possible medium to wed the universe's things and selves in a psalm of delight. From dust – the primordial element of the universe and its most abundant substance, the 'dot' and the 'line' of being, and from their innocent by-products – Ibrahim aspires to construct a humanistic collectivity for the oppressed who still yearn to unite human consciousness and secure conditions for its sustainability, even if these conditions are unseen even by the attentive spectator. Dust is a 'cheerful incident' in itself. It seeks realisation in the advance of time and its perpetual dialectic of forming and reforming. Reflection is an attempt to manifest a sole realisation of this 'cheerful incident' within the oneness of the Palestinian 'universal dust'.

From the humanistic emerges the aesthetic, and from the latter the political is born. Ibrahim exorcises the cruelty of power out of the maxim that reads: 'Truths are nothing but illusions that we forgot to regard as such.' Through 'Reflection', Ibrahim reverses this maxim,

Aziza and Iqbal, 2007, 90 × 90 cm

asserting that 'Illusions are nothing but truths that we were forced to regard as such.' Ibrahim creates a possible artistic reality in remembering the Palestinian narrative after it has for so long been thought of as an impossible political reality. Because the coloniser dominates the Palestinian time and space, homogeneity and familiarity transform into heterogeneity and estrangement. To overcome this transformation, the Palestinian recalls the *idea* of the place when it is impossible to reclaim the place itself, and when achieving triumph over the coloniser seems an almost unattainable dream. Hence, the idea of the place in Reflection entails stripping the place of its most defining feature – power, for place is nothing but a space for the implementation of power.

The idea of the mirror is called upon to refer to the Palestinian's authentic existence, at the same time emphasising the presence of his phantom and recollecting it through remembrance of the 'domestic space' – the space of dreams and childhood obsessions. Reflection reflects a vanishing space as a place implementing the coloniser's power. Through Reflection, the mirror is transformed into a home, a narrative and a space of resistance. The Palestinian enters neither the mirror, nor its 'phase', to use Jacques Lacan's notion, except as a bright image. He waits for nobody to carry the mirror before him so that he can collect the fragments of his desired narrative.[32] The Palestinian himself holds his own mirror from which, by which, and in which his narrative emerges. Ibrahim neither enters the 'mirror stage', nor leaves it, but rather surpasses it in the act of Reflection – after which he smashes all aesthetic devices as a salute to existence and freedom.

NOMADIC ART AS EXIT

The longstanding controversy regarding the relationship between art and politics, from Bertolt Brecht and Leon Trotsky to T W Adorno and Edward Said, leaves us with very little in *understanding* rather than *overstanding* this relationship. In the labyrinth of aesthetic theory we are assailed by two deceptive questions: how can we measure the political momentum of art? And what modes of art can we create to overcome the political conditioning of art when it has turned against itself?

In spite of all the merits of the lines of flight proposed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, and their ability to transverse, transform and transmit, there is no danger-free zone when it comes to art and politics, especially in the case of Palestine. At certain points, lines of flight can be ineffectual, leading to a regressive transformation of rigid relations in a given assemblage – becoming 'lines of deconstruction' when art is turned against itself through institutionalisation, losing its mutability, becoming a vehicle for normalisation or betraying the collective memory of the downtrodden through the trends in Palestinian art that stem from a local Orientalism. Here 'the politics of art' gives in to 'the art of politics'. These cautions against exaggerating the usefulness of lines of flight are reinforced by an exhortation to use them minimally, for 'they are very dangerous for societies, although they can get on without them, and sometimes manage to keep them to a minimum'.[33] That is, just as art is not immune to fascistic investment, it is also not immune to being used, misused and abused by the rising deviant nationalism of

32. For an account of the Freud–Lacan exchange on the implications of the mirror stage regarding the attempt by nationalist movements to retrieve the memory of the nation, especially in the context of the Palestinian struggle against Zionism, see Joseph Massad, *The Persistence of the Palestinian Question: Essays on Zionism and the Palestinians*, Routledge, London, 2006, p 37.

33. Ibid, p 204

most of the NGO community of mediators within the tunnel condition of Palestine. Art, at this point, is no art, for it has lost its most innovative radicality: the ability to transform, transverse and transmit moral signals and aesthetic values to a still-colonised people.

This, however, should provoke those who put lines of flight to better use to be more progressive, for only through new criteria can art exceed itself. Lines of flight maximise what art can do: explode strata, cut roots and engineer new connections within any given assemblage. Since the immanent dynamic of art is what defines it, Adorno asserts that art is not a being but a process of becoming.

> The idea of a conservative artwork is inherently absurd. By emphatically separating themselves from the empirical world, their other, they bear witness that that world itself should be other than it is; they are the unconscious schemata of that world's transformation.[34]

As this transformation is the highest quality of art, Adorno bluntly declared that failed artworks are not art: relative success is alien to art; the average is already the bad.

To this end, nomadic art seems to be always good, for it is always on the move, heading towards further transformation. It escapes the moral line of the official establishment, the molecular line of the NGO industry, and fulfils the promise of an absolute and relative positive de-territorialisation. Simultaneously it creates a unique meaning of nomadic knowledge and nomadic citizenship in the absence of a nation-state that would endow all its citizens, whether at home or in exile, with a dignified citizenship. It is a poetic and political alternative to the national art that was betrayed and turned against itself, and most certainly it is the only mode of art that would salvage our inhuman condition in this century.

He who does not become a nomad in his heart will neither understand nor live freedom.

34. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, eds Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, ed and trans Robert Hullot-Kentor, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 1997, p 177