



# LE FORME e LA STORIA

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Rivista di Filologia Moderna  
Dipartimento di Scienze Umanistiche  
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n.s. X, 2017, 2

*La guerra e i testi*

a cura di  
*Felice Rappazzo*

**RUBZETTINO**

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*Maria Elena Paniconi*

## Memory as a Scandal. The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in *'Ayn al-mir'ā* (*The Eye of the Mirror*) by Liana Badr

Contemporary Palestinian literature deals with the harsh condition of life under military and political occupation (*iḥtilāl*), in diaspora, exile and displacement. Themes and literary tropes as such as struggle, resistance (*muqāwama*), loss, territorial devastation, trauma, nostalgia and conflict have been widely explored by novelists such as Saḥar Khalīfa or Ghassān Kanāfānī and evoked throughout the verses of poets like Maḥmūd Darwīsh. Edward Said, taking inspiration from his own autobiographical experience, elaborated on a specific notion of “displacement”, meaning by this the necessary condition of any de-territorialized Palestinian and his continuous reorientation of his self throughout his life. In their poetry and fictional works, Palestinians not only celebrate and evoke their places, but they rather vivify and inhabit their villages, cities and valleys now colonized, or destroyed. The Tel al-Zaatar (*Tall al-za'tar*, which means The Hill of Thyme) refugee camp is certainly one of the more significant places in the topography of the Palestinian struggle.

The Tel al-Zaatar massacre, in 1976, represents a watershed in the perception of Palestinian national identity and history. This painful trauma, preceding that of Sabra and Shatila and the subsequent exodus of the PLO from Beirut in 1982, reinforced the sense of the abandonment of the Palestinian issue on the Arab and international part. Many visual artists, as well as poets and writers – as for instance the Iraqi poet Muḥaffar al-Nawwāb<sup>1</sup> and the Lebanese novelist Etel Adnān<sup>2</sup> – have

<sup>1</sup> L. Tramontini, *Place and Memory: Badr Shākir al-Sayyāb and Muḥaffar al-Nawwāb revisited*, in S. Günther and S. Milich (Eds.), *Representations and visions of Homeland in Modern Arabic Literature*, Georg Olms Verlag, Hildesheim, Zürich New York 2016, p. 54.

<sup>2</sup> E. Accad, *Sexuality and War: Literary Masks of the Middle East*, New York University Press, New York 1990.

portrayed in their works vivid, sometimes disturbing scenes and memories of the massacre, digging in the collective memory to reimagine the place itself. In other words, many Palestinian artists and literati are acting, self-consciously, as agents of cultural memory, choosing among the variety of lost landscapes and territories their landmarks in the geography of the Palestinian memory. As emphasized by Tramontini, Tel al-Zaatar became a site of memory, whose commemoration evolved into a highly political enterprise, “not only to remember what took place there but to produce meaning and instil a sense of belonging for Palestinians, to give them back their identity<sup>3</sup>.

### *A Women's War Story*

In April 1976, in a climate of looming civil war, four Maronite Lebanese men were killed in an ambush: the response by the Christian Militia came immediately, and a bus travelling to the Tel al-Zaatar camp was attacked and all passengers were killed<sup>4</sup>. The camp, located in the Christian-controlled part of Beirut, was then placed under a very harsh siege that lasted one year, until the moment when the camp surrendered, and hundreds and hundreds of civilians had been massacred, including women and children. According to David Gordon the number of victims was 4,000 dead and 12,000 refugees in other parts of Lebanon<sup>5</sup>.

Liana Badr, a journalist, writer and political activist who left Palestine in 1967, and settled in Jordan until 1970 and then in Beirut until 1982, returned to the spot to document the events and over seven years she gathered a substantial number of interviews with the survivors of the massacre<sup>6</sup>. This material allowed her to write *'Ayn al-mir'ā* (*The Eye of*

<sup>3</sup> Tramontini, *Place and Memory*, cit., pp. 66-70.

<sup>4</sup> Regarding the creation in 1948 and the subsequent history of the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon see I. Pappé, *Storia della Palestina moderna*, Einaudi, Torino 2005, p. 171.

<sup>5</sup> David Gordon is quoted in B. Mehta, *Rituals of Memory in Contemporary Arab Women's Writing*, Syracuse University Press, New York 2007, p. 29. See also M.L. Kohlke, *Blood and Tears in the Mirror of Memory: Palestinian Trauma in Liana Badr's The Eye of the Sun*, in *Feminist Review*, 85, 2007, p. 46.

<sup>6</sup> Liana Badr left Palestine in 1967, and fled with her father to Jordan where she enrolled at the University of Amman. After Black September (1970) she escaped to

*the Mirror*)<sup>7</sup>, which has been defined as an “epic novel”<sup>8</sup> for its accurate historical setting and the poignancy of the central story which evolves around the character of the young 'Ā'isha. This novel is indeed the result of hours of interviews<sup>9</sup> and a capillary work of oral history interspersed with elements of fiction.

The novel revolves around a climax that is gradually approaching as the siege by the Israeli forces tightens around the camp. During the harsh siege of the refugee camp of Tel al-Zaatar, supplies of water, electricity and food were cut off with the explicit purpose of decimating the population. While the men set up an armed resistance, the women provided the material and logistic support necessary for survival in a state of siege.

In the novel, the armed resistance to the siege becomes a theatre of social inversion and transformation for both men and women, with clear consequences for interpersonal, family and social relations and for the balance of internal power within the families<sup>10</sup>.

To ensure survival of the population, women made the most of all resources that the meagre space of the camps could offer them. Women took control of the public space, organized shifts for the collection of water, and expeditions to find lentil flour to make bread. They re-inhabited old buildings including abandoned factories to support the resistance. By showing similar strategies of survival and empowerment enacted by women in a context of armed conflict, Badr creates what miriam cooke calls a “Women’s War Story” – namely a story that *per se* reveals how “the ways in which war stories have been told were deeply flaw-

Beirut where she spent eleven years. From Beirut, in 1982, she fled to Syria and then Tunisia. In 1994, following the Oslo agreements, Badr returned to the west Bank. Among her novels we mention: *Nuḡūm Ariḥā* (The Stars over Jericho), translated into Italian as *Le Stelle di Gerico* (Edizioni Lavoro, Roma 2010) by Paola Viviani and Giulia della Gala. For more details about Liana Badr’s life see L.S. Majaj, P.W. Sunderman and T. Saliba, *Intersections. Gender, Nation and Community in Arab Women’s Novels*, Syracuse University Press, New York 2002, pp. 132-33.

<sup>7</sup> L. Badr, *'Ayn al-mir'ā*, Dār Tuqbal, Casablanca 1991, English translation *The Eye of the Mirror*, 1994, translated by Samira Kawar. The excerpts presented in this article are taken from this English edition, with the exceptions of few passages which have been translated by me.

<sup>8</sup> F. Faqir, Introduction, in L. Badr, *The Eye of the Mirror*, cit., p. v and see also B. Mehta, *Rituals of Memory*, cit., p. 29.

<sup>9</sup> See the dedication of the author, Liana Badr, *The Eye of the Mirror*, cit., p. V.

<sup>10</sup> Mehta, *Rituals of Memory*, cit., p. 30.



ed,”<sup>11</sup> for their point of view excluded systematically the experience of the women. Another definition used to describe Badr’s narrative has been that of “war counter-narrative,”<sup>12</sup> meaning an account that contradicts the dominant narratives of women as idle onlookers of the events, perennially waiting for their men to return. At the same time, the reader is not faced with a classic “feminist” counter-narrative, the collective memory being enhanced by Badr’s narration of a memory that both contests and conforms, as we shall see in detail, the dominant gender paradigm.

The present contribution sets out to show the originality of Badr’s novel in its use of women’s collective memory as a guiding force for society, and to underscore the disruptive potential of such a “fictionalized chronicle” against both the military/national narrative on the one hand, and the written, official and recorded history on the other. After placing Badr’s narrative in the context of the Palestinian literary field, I analyse the chronotope of ‘A’isha’s body as a narrative parallel to that of the refugee camp of Tel al-Zaatar. Eventually, I analyse the multi-layered trope of personal and collective memory in this narrative, in the light of the theoretical consideration made by Alessandro Portelli on oral history and on the ‘scandalous’ dimension of memory in uncovering concealed sides of history.

### *Positioning Liana Badr’s narrative*

In his reconstruction of the historical profile of Palestinian cultural production during the Eighties and Nineties, the Palestinian sociologist and historian Selim Tamari affirms that

the cultural isolation [after 67] was not decidedly a negative thing; it forced Palestinian Writers, poets, musicians and artists to recreate new forms of national culture, forms that emerged in local colleges and municipalities despite Israeli censorship on publication and performances. Thus, the dual predicaments of isolation and Israeli censorship fed the production of new theatrical and literary events, beginning in the early 70s. Yet another contradictory effect took hold in East Jerusalem, where Israeli law

<sup>11</sup> Miriam Cooke, *Women and the War Story*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London 1996, p. 7.

<sup>12</sup> Mehta, *Rituals of Memory*, cit., pp. 32-35.

was unilaterally extended in 1968, and the Arab sector was annexed in 1980, a measure of legal freedom allowed from the limited flourishing of a Palestinian press and theatre<sup>13</sup>.

During the Seventies, as recounted by Tamari, we have seen indeed the growing visibility of the Arab of *Nakba* 1948, which appears evident in a literature that tries to reinforce Arab identity also through the creation of a peculiar register of communication with their readers<sup>14</sup>. On the other hand, we also witness the formation of a resistance culture among the intellectuals of the territories who, to a large extent, promote the revival of tradition and popular memory, as appears clearly, among other cultural forms, in Palestinian fiction, poetry and drama<sup>15</sup>. This cultural vitality was to come to an abrupt halt in the Eighties, when the political crisis leads to a heightening of censorship and the cultural isolation of occupied territories. In this context, here is how Badr describes her return from her long years in exile and how she explains her involvement in cultural work that also had a political and social bearing, in order to preserve the identity of the Palestinian people:

I feel that we must wage a kind of battle to revive the arts, to renovate the cinema and theatres, to revive the cultural vision of the people... I was astonished when I came back because there wasn't anything to see, nobody is showing videos or going to cinemas, all the cinemas are closed, there are no theatres, there are no clubs for writers, no debates, it wasn't the same place I left<sup>16</sup>.

Badr presents herself as a link between inside and outside, between the exiles and the people in the occupied and colonized territories. Badr pursues her project of cultural resistance not only through fiction and film-producing but also by getting involved in projects which enabled the exiles to communicate with those who remained. Badr not only

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Selim Tamari, in A. Amireh and L. S. Majaj (Eds.) *Going Global: the Transnational Reception of the Third World Women Writers*, Routledge, New York and London 2000, p. 99.

<sup>14</sup> See I. Taha, *The Palestinian Novel. A Communication Study*, Routledge, New York 2002.

<sup>15</sup> See I. Camera D'Affitto, *Cento Anni di Cultura Palestinese*, Carocci, Roma 2007, pp. 95-126.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Liana Badr, quoted in A. Amireh and L.S. Majaj (Eds.), *Going Global*, cit., p. 100.

conveys these elements in her own fiction, but she also develops the full gamut of themes linked to cultural memory. Although she was for many years known abroad rather than in Palestine<sup>17</sup>, in the last fifteen years her fame has increased significantly. This late recognition would seem to be due also to a gender issue: Badr has been actively engaged in questioning masculinist assumptions of nationalism and identity for nearly two decades, and her late recognition seems related to a broader context, that of an Arabic literary field which more and more is including narratives from the “margins”<sup>18</sup>.

Therefore, it is possible to say that Badr embodies the traits of the Palestinian intellectuals in exile, a significant part of her narrative being focused on themes as such the geographical and cultural memory of her homeland, but also the freedom and the autonomy of the exiles and the intellectuals abroad. This condition provided fertile ground for the development of a war counter narrative, against the backdrop of a Palestinian “canonical”, male-centred, nationalist ideal that no longer seems adequate<sup>19</sup>.

In particular, in the novel under discussion here, the trope of the collective memory and that of the physical, bodily and individual memory are principles of narrative subversion: in her multiple aspects, memory destabilizes and reshapes communitarian logics, interpersonal relationships, inclusions and exclusions with regard to the community as it regulates the personal, emotional, social growth of the young ‘Ā’isha. As we shall see, Memory exposes the “scandal”, the *faḍīḥa*, it projects into the reality of the listeners/readers the shadow of an unspeakable truth, a truth which has been incised on an individual’s body, or in a society’s texture.

By continuously negotiating the boundaries between chronicle and fiction, the novel succeeds in portraying the eclipse of a national, masculine memory, embodied by the characters of a few *fidā’in* who appear to be lost and disconnected from their society. As a consequence, the novel brings to the fore the daily account of survival during the siege as the only, necessary chronicle to be told. As an artefact made up of chronicles, collected memories and fiction, *The Eye of the Mirror* powerfully challenges the boundaries between history and daily life, between reality and fiction, between the taboos and the normativity of common-sense.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>18</sup> See T. Saliba, *A Country Beyond Reach*, in *Intersections*, cit., pp. 135-38.

<sup>19</sup> See Mehta, *Rituals of Memory*, cit., p. 33, footnote 5.

*Story and Herstory: the plot of 'The Eye of the Mirror*

'*Ayn al-mir'ā* (*The Eye of the Mirror*), unlike the earlier novels by the author, presents a cohesive plot and is made up of two major narrative units. In its first part<sup>20</sup> the story of 'Ā'isha is narrated, a 15-year-old girl from a poor refugee family. She works as a maid in a convent school for wealthy Christian girls, where, in exchange, she receives her basic education. After the bus tragedy, her mother takes her back to the camp. Suddenly 'Ā'isha finds herself in a hostile environment, and she is considered by the people of the camp as a "stranger", the one who studied in a Catholic convent, and as a stranger she becomes a recluse on the margins of social life<sup>21</sup>. In the convent she was a working-class girl, a refugee, an Arab, a Muslim, a Palestinian, whilst inside the camp and among her own relatives she is ostracized by her own community as almost a foreigner, being ridiculed by her own father, who treats her harshly to conceal his own frustrations ("What yamma? Are you upset because you didn't go to Paris?")<sup>22</sup>.

In fact, 'Ā'isha maintains a hybrid dimension: since childhood she often prays to Jesus and the Virgin, she hates Arab music, she is uneasy at home and under the destabilizing gaze of her father. The narrator indulges in describing the changes that take place in her adolescent body and her feelings toward a *fidā'ī*, George, who is in the habit of visiting her parents' house and considers them as his own family. George acts largely as a Christ-figure for 'Ā'isha, distant and un-moved by her increasing love. When she is forced into an arranged marriage with Ḥasan, a companion of George, she tries to resist, but she finds herself powerless against the community. The omniscient narrator describes all the preparatory rituals to this marriage as a violent intrusion on her body<sup>23</sup>, which culminate with the outbreak of 'Ā'isha's nervous crisis just before entering her husband's house, she furiously cuts her own hair<sup>24</sup>. The preparations for this undesired wedding between 'Ā'isha and Ḥasan is described in parallel, and in a contrastive way, with the preparation of the wedding between George and Hanā', who, in contrast, actually love each other.

<sup>20</sup> From Chapter One to Chapter Eight, see Badr, cit., 1-134.

<sup>21</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 10-21.

<sup>22</sup> *Ivi*, p. 22.

<sup>23</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 98-99.

<sup>24</sup> *Ivi*, p. 101.

The character of Hanā', a brilliant, independent young girl who works at the Signal office ("she would tease people around her, joke with them, jump around, her voice rising above others as though anyone were her family"<sup>25</sup>) is presented in opposition to that of 'Ā'isha. Hanā' owns the complicity of her *fiancé*, an unusual autonomy and self-confidence. As for 'Ā'isha, her liminal position and her weak body, her psychological illness are a prefiguration of the start of the *ḥiṣār*, the military siege, which will be the core of the second part of the novel.

The second part of the novel<sup>26</sup> starts when symptoms of 'Ā'isha's pregnancy start to show: this new condition will determine her progressive readmission into the community. This section focuses on the siege and its tragic epilogue: women take over the control of the camp with its common, promiscuous, overcrowded space, surreptitiously ruled by the women. Each of them specializes in a task that makes her indispensable for the collectivity: some women are responsible for fetching the water from the only supply pipe in the camp, in the midst of shelling and mortars. Hanā' acquires responsibility for the radio-transmitter while Umm Ḥasan becomes a fulltime baker to provide the people with her lentil bread. Umm Ğ, 'Ā'isha mother, produces home-made candles. As for 'Ā'isha, she is almost unaffected by the siege, until her husband, Ḥasan is killed in a war operation<sup>27</sup>. She is suddenly deprived of her young husband, and takes on a new status, that of "*Shahīd* widow" (widow of a martyr), a status that will completely transform her once naive perspective within the camp. Her sympathy for Umm Ḥasan, her mother-in-law, is another element that helps 'Ā'isha inclusion and readmission into the society.

Once the siege tightens, the *fidā'iyyīn* are forced to flee the camp and they are obliged to escape through the mountains to avoid the control of the Phalangists. The civilians have no choice but to surrender. The narration maintains a double focus on George, the man once beloved by 'Ā'isha, and his companions who are trying to cross the territories controlled by the PLO and to avoid the Phalangists, and on 'Ā'isha and her families, testimonies of deportations, famine and massacres. This double focalization seems to be informed by different expe-

<sup>25</sup> *Ivi*, p. 76.

<sup>26</sup> The second part includes from Chapter Nine to Chapter Fourteen, *ivi*, pp. 135-264.

<sup>27</sup> *Ivi*, p. 175.

riences of the same war: *fidā'ī* on the one hand, and civilians (women, old men and children) on the other.

While the Phalangist militias strike terror all over the camp, some people are separated from their families, to meet them again only outside or to never see them again. The narrative, which has thus far maintained a panoptic view of the camp, splits now into two main focuses: one on the camp, where civilians surrender and are driven out among all sort of violence, and one on the mountain, where the fighters withdraw.

### *Lost icons and found chronicles*

*The Eye of the Mirror* is a choral narrative in which many threads are interwoven: there is the personal experience of the marginalized, oversensitive 'Ā'isha, whose personal struggle against her own family and society foretells the tragedy of the siege. The special collective memory, which revolves around this "narrative of survival"<sup>28</sup> woven by Badr, redraws the topography of lost places and regards a "we" that seems to be possible only in the recounting (in a necessary orality of the expression) of a storyteller<sup>29</sup>. Laleh Khalili, who studied the role of memory in the process of "producing identity", highlights how Tel al-Zaatar represented a "significant rupture in the heroic narrative which was dominant through the 1970's."<sup>30</sup> In this perspective, Badr's epic narrative can be understood as a narration of disenchantment with and of crisis in the mythological narration of the Palestinian armed struggle. But what are the major narrative strategies adopted by the author to undermine such a mythology?

First of all, Badr's narrative blurs the traditional boundaries between fighters and common civilians: under the siege, the inhabitants of the camp and the fighters (George and his comrades are cases in point) share the condition of human beings suspended between life and death. In Badr's narrative, however, it is the latter who are more affected by the withdrawal. Fighters are used to engaging in forced marches, living a

<sup>28</sup> Mehta, *Rituals of Memory*, cit., p. 33, footnote 5.

<sup>29</sup> On literature as counter-memory, in particularly with reference to the big "catastrophe" of the Palestinian people known as *Nakba* (1967), see S. Sibilio, *Nakba. La memoria letteraria della catastrofe palestinese*, Edizioni Q, Sassari 2013.

<sup>30</sup> L. Khalili, *Heroes and Martyrs of Palestine*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2007, p. 60.

harsh life and suffering shortages of food, but withdrawal finds them unprepared, helpless and probably less equipped than the civilians in terms of psychological preparation for loneliness and loss. George, for instance, presented at the beginning as a hero-like character, in his solitary withdrawal faces his own despair. He encounters a wounded man and is forced to leave him to his destiny, and thus finds himself enveloped by an overwhelming spirit of death (“George saw death before him as a savage instinct in whose darkness a human being gets lost and is unable amidst its maze to help one’s comrades”)<sup>31</sup>.

The account of George’s withdrawal is also characterized by the strategy of dramatic irony: as the *fidā’i* marches alone, he tries to convince himself that his *fiancée* Hanā’, who took on the job of running the telegraph office during the siege, will get out alive. The reader, on the other hand, is aware that the militiamen recognized her in the crowd, captured her and took her out of the camp where she was most probably raped and killed (“the white scarf that had fallen from her head as she had resisted was all that was left of her. For several years to come, her mother would take it to fortune tellers as she searched for her daughter”<sup>32</sup>). The account of the exodus and of the distinct destinies of George and Hanā’ are emblematic of Badr’s narrative as it reveals the fading of national icons, while she recounts the personal chronicles given to her by the besieged women, and shares them as an ultimate act of justice.

To sum up, the traditional hero-like figures are here narrated as vulnerable and lost fighters, almost severed from the society they are fighting for.

Another major strategy Badr adopts to undermine the male-centred traditional account of *muqāwama* is that of pairing the account of the Tel al-Zaatar massacre with that of an individual and woman-centred experience. The fulcrum of this experience is ‘Ā’isha’s body, which enregisters all the transformation and pressures suffered by the girl from her community during her coming of age. ‘Ā’isha’s body is a talking body (“her body spoke, and she heard the words it was saying to her”<sup>33</sup>), it reacts violently when she feels that she is no longer a little girl, rather “a woman” (“The odour of hidden rotteness which her stomach would

<sup>31</sup> Badr, cit., p. 243.

<sup>32</sup> *Ivi*, p. 235.

<sup>33</sup> *Ivi*, p. 11.

sense and convulsively reject as she was overcome by nausea<sup>34</sup>), it responds when she discovers that she is in love with the *fidā'i* George (“a lump rises in her chest up to her throat, causing her to almost suffocate with gloom as she watches George listening to the details of the mediation with her mother. And her mother is trying to get Hanā’ to marry him.”<sup>35</sup>), and it almost faints on the first night of marriage with Ḥasan (“the man bursts into her, assaulted her body. She was lost and lost herself. Then, she regained her senses...”<sup>36</sup>). Therefore, ‘Ā’isha’s body is the “unit of measurement”, in the novel, recording social and patriarchal pressure.

Umm Ġalāl – ‘Ā’isha’s mother – plays the twofold role of the active organizer of the civil resistance on the one side, and advocate and legitimizer of a social *status quo* on the other<sup>37</sup>. Like other women in the camp, Umm Ġalāl embodies the ambivalence of a woman-centred memory, which deals with women’s empowerment by means of a strict adherence to tradition and traditional gender roles. Such ambivalence has been underlined by Mehta:

The double bind of national and gendered disenfranchisement that dominates the lives of the women nevertheless instigates the creation of an effective woman-centred war story, or narrative of resistance in the face of loss and alienation. These narratives simultaneously contest and conform to dominant gender paradigms, wherein women use conventional gender role such as care giving and nurturing, inscribed within a politics of survival to subvert patriarchal authority and political repression<sup>38</sup>.

Therefore, in this narrative, women are consolidating the patriarchal structure, leaving ‘Ā’isha no choice but a personal alienation and amnesia. Paradoxically, only by strict adherence to tradition, and becoming a

<sup>34</sup> *Ivi*, p. 17.

<sup>35</sup> *Ivi*, p. 31.

<sup>36</sup> *Ivi*, p. 103.

<sup>37</sup> See *Heroes and Martyrs of Palestine*, L. Khalili, *Heroes and Martyrs*, cit. This book deals in depth with the “practices of commemoration”, intending by this a variety of practices, mainly performed by women, aiming at revitalizing the memory of a traumatic event, such as the death of a young fighter, or an action that has resulted in tragedy. The scholar distinguishes between various types of commemoration (from the narratives of “heroism” to those called “of suffering”, to those of *sumūd* or “nonviolent resistance”). These practices are deeply rooted among the refugees themselves, as they are entrusted with the task of making the past intelligible.

<sup>38</sup> See Mehta, *Rituals of Memory*, cit., p. 31.



mother and, subsequently, a widow of a martyr she will get recognition from society. One of the last scenes of the novel translates 'Ā'isha's shocked glance over her camp, and her ultimate refuge in the words of her beloved mother-in-law. Her thought shows what has been said so far about the ambivalent role of women, as keepers of a women's memory and of a collective identity on the one hand, and – at least apparently – supporters of the patriarchal structure of society on the other:

Why are we here? Why death? Why don't we live normally like other people? Why won't they leave us alone? The heat! And the smell of rotten bodies and blood. Living human beings could not possibly turn into such a bitter, murderous smell. Impossible! [...] She recollected what the old lady [Umm Ḥasan] has said to her: "My child, we shall all become strong women. Have they left us any other choice? They take everything from us. Marriage, children, homes, stories, old people, everything. So, all of the time, we defend ourselves *as though we were not women*, but standing in the trenches<sup>39</sup>.

The patriarchal binary structure is not disturbed in Umm Hasan's discourse. For the well-being of the identity and community it remains intact. Women have to find the energy to "defend ourselves as if we were not women", with cunning and strength they will boycott the male power and take it into their own hands. The gendered war, indeed, is battled as a paradoxical reinforcement/overthrowing of gender roles.

### *The "scandal" of memory*

Memory and its transmission are not neutral territories, but they are rather a ground battle and a point of rupture, as they have a serious impact on the relationship among the individuals and members of communities. Alessandro Portelli, in his scholarship on oral history, underscores how memory is not merely a database, but it is, instead, an ongoing *process*<sup>40</sup>. Every act of selecting, wording and telling a memory enhances a dialectic between voice and silence, remembrance and oblivion, fragment and whole, past and present. In Badr's narrative, for instance,

<sup>39</sup> Badr, cit., p. 260.

<sup>40</sup> A. Portelli, *Storie orali. Racconto, immaginazione e dialogo*, Donzelli, Roma 2007.

we are faced with three levels of memory: one is the narrated time, the year 1976 when the massacre takes place. An earlier level of memory is that of the *Nakba* (1948), re-enacted by several characters in the novel as they remember Tel al-Zaatar as the repetition of a first traumatic exodus. Thirdly, we are faced with the chronological dimension of the late Eighties, the time when the author collects her material.

According to Portelli, memory as a coherent, fluid and clear account “is but a literary device”<sup>41</sup>: memory is performed, and it is only the performer who directs his memory toward a specific function, or form. Among the different functions of memory, the Italian scholar includes the use of memory as an absolving ritual, something used to keep past and present apart. However, there are less celebrative forms of memory, which are therefore less socially accepted. One of those is the “scandal-like memory”. The Greek word *skandalon* had, in origin, the meaning of a trap, set up to capture an enemy. To make a *skandalon* was indeed, in the original meaning of the word, to make someone fall-down, to prepare an obstacle to fall on. Then, it took the meaning of “defamation”, namely the conscient pollution of one’s memory. How can a “memory” in itself be a *skandalon*? Portelli defines the “scandalous” memory as the overstepping of a boundary, the braking of a taboo *vis à vis* of society, or a specific community, by the unveiling of a socially unaccepted historical truth.

In *The Eye of the Mirror*, as we have seen, ‘Ā’isha’s body is a continuous source of *skandalon*, for the girl herself and for her community<sup>42</sup>. Both ‘Ā’isha’s body and the “social body” of the refugee camp try to liberate themselves from the siege and in their resistance become a *skandalon*, something that challenges the established order of things and brakes a system of meaning. Not accidentally, the term *fadīḥa* marks the narrative climax both in the first and in the second part. When Umm Ġalāl realizes that her daughter has brutally cut her own hair to express her refusal to marry Ḥasan, she covers her head with her bride-tulle saying: “What a scandal (*fadīḥa*)! Why have you done this to yourself?”<sup>43</sup> At the end of the second part of the novel, the narration creates a similar climax as the siege tightens around the camp, and culminates in the

<sup>41</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 96-108.

<sup>42</sup> “Don’t scandalize us” is a reiterate admonition to ‘Ā’isha, see for instance Badr, cit., p. 28, p. 56.

<sup>43</sup> *Ivi*, cit., p. 102.

massacre. When the evacuation is almost concluded, a militia leader fears that the killings, tortures, rapes perpetrated against the civilians will provoke a “scandal” if noticed outside and exclaims: “Enough scandal (*fadiha*). Tomorrow they’ll all go and tell everything they’ve seen to the media.”<sup>44</sup>

‘Ā’isha’s crisis, which destabilizes her family and marks her as an “outsider”, exposes the violence of a community that seeks its identity. The second “scandal” the novel evokes takes the form of a subtle sense of threat in the heart of a militia man, facing the massacre his troops have been responsible of. He sees the blood, the mass of corpses, the deportation and violence suffered by civilians. In each of these two parts of the novel the narrative creates a tension that seeks to hover in a *fadiha*, a scandal, a word recalled and repeated by the author with surprising awareness. *The Eye of the Mirror*, therefore, combines a disruptive narrative vocation with a strictly documentary nature. Tracing an ideal line to divide the “narrative” part from the “documentary” would be impossible and unsuccessful. Thanks to the skilful narration of the two sieges, each one portrayed in one half of the novel and each one leading the reader to a *skandalon*, Badr underlines the scandalous function of memory.

### Conclusions

Badr’s work of journalistic investigation and storytelling is mirrored (the title of the novel itself hints at a self-reflectiveness of the work) at a certain point of the novel<sup>45</sup>: the author appears in the character of the woman journalist committed to recounting the events of Tel al-Zaatar after ten-years.

Badr’s narration, thus, subsumes the disruptive side of memory, operating a fracture in the dominant narration of armed resistance and with the way in which the figure of the (male) patriot fighter was generally portrayed. As noted by Valassopoulos, “the people in the story feel *stranded from* rather than *part of* the Palestinian cause.”<sup>46</sup> It is precisely this extraneousness to the Palestinian issue, and this threat of losing any

<sup>44</sup> *Ivi*, cit., p. 246.

<sup>45</sup> *Ivi*, cit., p. 125.

<sup>46</sup> Valassopoulos, *Contemporary Women Writers*, cit., p. 94.

sense of belonging to Palestine, which is the last “scandal” objectified by this work fiction, exposed and expounded between the folds of 'Ā'isha's personal story, and re-discovered among the obliterated memory of one of the most atrocious massacres of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

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### *Abstract*

Nel romanzo *'Ayn al-mir'ā* (“Lo sguardo dello specchio” o, letteralmente, “l’occhio dello specchio”) pubblicato nel 1991 l’autrice palestinese Liana Badr attinge alla memoria collettiva delle donne per redigere una “cronaca narrativa” del massacro di Tel al Zaatar avvenuto nel 1976.

La storia può essere letta come una contro-storia, come una sorta di denuncia del discorso militar-nazionalista da un lato, e dall’altro della storia così come essa è stata scritta e registrata. Dopo aver posizionato la narrativa di Badr nel campo letterario palestinese, analizzo le due principali narrazioni che stanno alla base del progetto autoriale: la trasformazione della personalità della protagonista da un lato (trasformazione che si articola in un climax per sfociare in una crisi) e il tema dell’assedio, che viene descritto come un assedio parallelo al corpo della protagonista nella prima parte, e al campo rifugiati nella seconda. Il concetto della memoria-scandalo proposto da Portelli nei suoi scritti di storia orale accompagna la mia riflessione sulle modalità attraverso le quali l’autrice riesce a fare riemergere molti aspetti nascosti o dimenticati di questo capitolo di storia palestinese.

In her masterpiece *'Ayn al-mir'ā* (“The Eye of the Mirror”, 1<sup>st</sup> edition in Arabic 1991) the Palestinian writer Liana Badr uses women’s collective memory to create a “fictionalized chronicle”, which aims at providing the reader with a plural account of the Tel al-Zaatar massacre of 1976. This narrative can be read as a counter-history that denounces the military/national narrative on the one hand and the written, official and recorded history on the other. After placing Badr’s narrative in the context of the Palestinian literary field, I analyse the two major narratives that underpin the whole novel: the transformation, and subsequent crisis, in ‘Ā’isha’s body and, in parallel, the chronicle of the siege of the refugee camp of Tel al-Zaatar.

I analyse the multi-layered trope of personal and collective memory in this narrative in the light of the theoretical consideration by Portelli on oral history and on the 'scandalous' dimension of memory in uncovering the more concealed sides of history.



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