

## “Mirrors of Alienation”

### *West Bank Palestinian Women’s Literature after Oslo*

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#### **Abstract**

This article examines what characterizes the writing of three prominent young women writers from the West Bank whose work was published in the period following the first intifada and the Oslo accords: Hālah al-Bakrī from East Jerusalem, Amānī al-Junaydī from Hebron, and ‘Ā’ishah ‘Ūdah from Ramallah.

The article shows how those new generation authors succeed in diverging from the ideological style of writing that was characteristic of the West Bank’s women writers who preceded them, while continuing to “exploit” their geographical location and voice the unique reality of life in the West Bank. It shows how these writers gaze as women (“others”) upon the reality and how they create an alternative version of reality and also of the past.

#### **Introduction**

Until 1967 Palestinian literature had two main centers of gravity: Israel and the diaspora. This period was distinguished by what Elaine Showalter calls “feminine” writing.<sup>1</sup> Palestinian women writers were not aware of gender difference and their writing did not markedly depart from the line of writing that typified Arabic literature of the time; authors did not write to shock readers with a harsh picture of women’s status, as later women writers would do.<sup>2</sup>

The aftermath of the 1967 war witnessed the emergence of a third center of gravity: the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.<sup>3</sup> Up until 1967 the West Bank and the Gaza Strip were tied to the Arab world through the states ruling them and there was therefore no need to establish local cultural infrastructures, such as newspapers and publishing houses. The severance from these states and the onset of Israeli occupation created new conditions. While some writers and intellectuals from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip felt constrained to emigrate to Arab states and ceased their literary activities, those who remained were compelled to introduce local cultural and social activity. This led to the establishment of publishing houses who published local work, to the founding of local news-

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1 See SHOWALTER 1993: 13, and HAFEZ 1994: 160-65.

2 COOKE 1996: 167; ḤAṬĪNĪ 1999: 9-10; FĀ’ŪR 2001: 131-32, 173; MUNĀṢĪRAH 2002: 28; SHIHĀB 2005: 18.

3 For more information see ELAD-BOUSKILA 1999: 1-19.

papers, and to the setting in motion of cultural activities by academic institutions and cultural societies. Writers who left to study in Arab countries and were exposed to new literary forms also contributed by introducing these new forms to the literary scene on their return to the West Bank and Gaza Strip.<sup>4</sup>

The period which came after 1967 was characterized by a “feminist” phase of Palestinian women’s writing,<sup>5</sup> which included protest of the writers against the standards and values of the patriarchal discourse. Palestinian women’s writing in this period was usually realistic and ideological and focused on the problem of the Palestinian woman, accentuating the connection that existed between the woman’s problem and the national one.<sup>6</sup>

The women writing in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip had an advantage in that they witnessed events first-hand and described what they themselves observed and experienced; their inability to write freely with no fear of censorship, however, was a disadvantage.<sup>7</sup> In the years following 1967 particularly prominent in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip was the well-known novelist Saḥar Khalīfah (1941- ), whose work articulated the dual conflict experienced by women.

The first intifada (1987) lent another dimension to the unique situation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip in that it led to the creation of literature of a particular nature that focused on the events of the intifada, playing on the emotions and replete with slogans and stereotypes. Literature was written in prisons and detention centers and its central axis was that of nationalism.<sup>8</sup>

However, feelings of frustration and despair, which were coincided with the advent of literary modernism and post-modernism, led to changes in the new generation of Palestinian women writers.<sup>9</sup> These writers made the shift from realistic, ideological writing to modernist and postmodernist writing, and from “feminist” phase of writing to a “female” one.<sup>10</sup> They focus on the female experience and spirit and their narrative discourse is concerned with granting the voiceless female a mature narrative voice that is truly her own.<sup>11</sup>

At the same time, however, new generation Palestinian writers from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip succeed in diverging from the ideological style of writing that was characteristic of the West Bank’s women writers who preceded them, while continuing to “exploit” their geographical location and voice the unique reality of life in the West Bank by using an innovative and creative style of writing.<sup>12</sup>

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4 For more information on the cultural activity in the West Bank and Gaza after 1967 see al-USTĀ [1993]: 21-27.

5 See SHOWALTER 1993: 13. See also HAFEZ 1994: 165-70.

6 ZEIDAN 1995: 170; FĀ’ŪR 2001: 205, 214.

7 For more information on the situation of women in the West Bank and Gaza see ABDO 1987; COOKE 1996: 167; PETEET 1991; STRUM 1993: 63-73; Massad 1995: 467-83; HILTERMANN 1998: 41-45; HASSO 2005: 65-89.

8 ELAD-BOUSKILA 1999: 85, 86, 105.

9 The term “new generation” means those writers who began to publish their works after the first Intifadah.

10 SHOWALTER 1993: 13.

11 See HAFEZ 1994: 170-74.

12 See ABŪ BAKR 2008. For more on the writing of new generation Palestinian women writers, see SHALḤAT 1995: 20; GHANĀYIM 2002/03: 189-93; TAHA 2009.

This article explores the writing of those new generation women writers from the West Bank. It examines the writing of three prominent women writers whose work was published in the period following the Oslo Accords: Hālah al-Bakrī from East Jerusalem, Amānī al-Junaydī from Hebron, and ʿĀʾishah ʿŪdah from Ramallah.<sup>13</sup>

It should be noted that tracking down literary research on new generation Palestinian women writers from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip is not an easy task and learning about them and evaluating the extent of their popularity and success is not a simple matter. The criteria according to which the three writers were chosen for this article are the extent of their inclusion in various literary anthologies and in critical articles which were written about their work, especially in newspapers and on the internet.

### Yearning for Paradise Lost

Hālah al-Bakrī is an example of a new generation writer who adapts herself to the current trends of writing in that she focuses on the female's inner thoughts and feelings, while placing the political reality as a backdrop to her work.

Al-Bakrī was born in East Jerusalem; although "Marāyā al-ghurbah" (Mirrors of Alienation, 1997) is her first and only book, her short stories are published in the newspapers<sup>14</sup> and she also writes plays. In addition to writing she is also a lecturer in arts. She numbers among Palestinian women writers who were chosen to appear in the anthology "al-Ṣawt al-ākhar" (The Other Voice, 1999) collected and edited by the well-known literary critic Walīd Abū Bakr, an indication of her status and importance.<sup>15</sup> She is a member of the Palestinian Writers Association and participates in literary events. Her book "Marāyā al-ghurbah" is written in a distinctive, original style and was honored with an introduction by the celebrated poet and literary critic ʿAlī al-Khalīlī.

Hālah al-Bakrī has defined the book "Marāyā al-ghurbah" as "narrative texts," apparently because the stories are often written in the form of contemplation and thoughts. A perusal of the narratives reveals that the stories are situated on the boundary between two literary genres: poetry and very short stories. The use al-Bakrī makes of the very short story genre creates lyrical stories, ambiguous and concise, that leave the reader a place for thought and imagination.<sup>16</sup> Such a narrative strategy places the protagonist and her suffering at the center and so establishes a rapport between it and streams of post-modern writing. However, at the same time, it does not sever the ties that bind the protagonist to the reality of occupation and the suffering this reality causes her.

At the heart of the narratives, the Palestinian female protagonist is depicted confronting the difficult challenges she encounters in her life, described from different angles/ "mir-

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13 Other prominent new generation Palestinian writers who write from the West Bank and Gaza are: Aḥlām BASHARĀT, Fāṭimah Khalīl ḤAMED, Dīmah al-SAMMĀN, ʿAdniyyah SHIBLĪ, Māyah ABU ʿL-ḤAYĀT.

14 It should be noted that many new generation women writers write for newspapers and/or literary sites on the internet in order to win recognition and later have their work published more formally through publishing houses.

15 See ABŪ BAKR 1999.

16 For more on this genre, see al-ḤUSAYN 1997; TAHA 2000.

rors". This is how 'Alī al-Khalīlī explains the significance of the book's title in his introduction:

It is not by chance that the writer chooses "Marāyā al-ghurbah" as the title for this anthology; after all a woman sometimes derives pleasure from, and at other times smashes the mirror. The "alienation" is the alienation of the woman herself, in a dark lair, from tradition, customs, values and ideologies, generation after generation, era after era, with no change or development in the environment where sits the "Oriental man" on the throne of a king.<sup>17</sup>

Most of the stories in the anthology "Marāyā al-ghurbah" describe protagonists who are emotionally weak and isolated, who feel that it is difficult to meet society's expectations of them. These protagonists leave home and roam from place to place in an attempt to escape reality and take refuge in places that remind them of the past and their memories.

Although most of al-Bakrī's work is written in the present tense and describes the present, in practice the protagonists draw upon the past in order to gain strength to live. The use of the past tense is characteristic of works depicting a cruel present that causes the characters to cling to their memories. Returning to the past and to the memories serves the protagonists as a way of coping with the reality of the harsh life they have been dealt.<sup>18</sup> It is also typical of works that adopt a post-colonial discourse. Writers with a post-colonial approach often construct a pre-colonial version of their native land and turn their backs on the colonial present.<sup>19</sup> Frantz Fanon claimed in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1966), which heralded the emergence of post-colonial criticism, that the first step people under colonial domination must take in order to find a voice and identity is to reclaim their past. In the same vein, writers of a post-colonial inclination construct a pre-colonial version of their native land and shun the colonial present.<sup>20</sup>

Yearning for the past is discernible in Hālah al-Bakrī's story "Ziyārāt" (Visits). In this story the protagonist is an old Palestinian woman who despite her poor health and the problems that stem from her old age, she goes to see her three beloved ones. The first beloved one is described as deceased; the old woman refers to him as an "absent presence" and visits his grave. This beloved one may symbolize Israeli Arabs, "absent presences" was a term coined in the 1950s to refer to them as declared absent; The second beloved one is "on the other side of checkpoints and prison bars."<sup>21</sup> The old woman visits him after she has walked a long journey. This beloved one may symbolize the Arabs of the occupied territories reaching them entails traveling a long road and passing through countless checkpoints; The third beloved one is depicted as someone the old woman cannot visit, since his location is unknown. The old woman "visits" him in her thoughts only. This beloved one may symbolize diaspora Arabs who are dispersed among different countries.

It could be said, that the beloved ones may represent the Palestinian people scattered in different places. The old woman may symbolize the past when the Palestinian people were

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17 al-KHALĪDĪ 1997: 6.

18 See 'ABD AL-HĀDĪ 1997: 234; AHMAD 2007: 221-23.

19 BARRY 1995: 193-94.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.: 53.

concentrated in one geographical unit and it is hard for her to get used to a situation where the people are scattered throughout the world. For this reason, she finds herself wandering from place to place, from beloved one to beloved one rather than becoming submerged in sorrow and despair as a result of the current reality. In her wanderings the old woman expresses a yearning for the past and hope for returning the past to its rightful place.

The old woman feels her beloved ones with all her senses, each one activating a particular sense: she speaks to the first beloved one, touches the second, and thinks of the third. However, in every case this activation of the senses is one-sided: she speaks to the first beloved one, but he cannot answer; she touches the second, but he cannot respond to her touch; and she thinks about the third, but he does not return her thoughts. This is also reflected in the style: it does not include any dialogue between the characters. The words that describe the three visits are divided by dots that may represent the words or actions the protagonist might have said or done but did not. These dots accentuate the silence that characterizes the life of the old woman that results from the problematic communication between her and her beloved ones. It seems that the protagonist is trying to break the silence in her life and she does this through these visits that activate her senses and provide her with an opportunity to create contact with them.<sup>22</sup>

Yearning for the past is even more discernible in another story- "Raḥīl" (Journey), in which the protagonist journeys to her old childhood home and, like the old woman from "Ziyārāt," she too is fleeing from the present to the past and its memories. The story begins with the description of the present. It describes an old, sad song playing in the car in which the protagonist is traveling. The sad song arouses in her anxiety and leads her to pessimistic thoughts, it causes her to be afraid of dying in an accident that might happen to her at any moment and to feel threatened by the gaze of the driver whose "eyes stared at her insolently... devour her.... his stares are like arrows that strike her... a woman alone and the night a black, shadowy demon a habitat for bad things..."<sup>23</sup> At the same time, "Fear, concern, and black thoughts dance before her like blind demons..."<sup>24</sup>

We can see that the story "Raḥīl" Accesses to the depths of the female's soul, although the descriptions are usually laconic and short.<sup>25</sup> The protagonist's bad feelings are reflected in the language of the writing, since the writer draws on her expressions from the world of death and darkness: "black demon," "darkness," "a habitat for bad things," "blind demons." The truncated, short sentences, as well as the frequent, confusing shift between hallucination and reality, also reflect the protagonist's emotionally disturbed condition.

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22 This story is reminiscent of the story "‘Ām ākhar" (Another Year) from the Palestinian writer Samīrah ‘AZZĀM's anthology of short stories *Ashyā' ṣaghīrah* (Trivial Matters, 1954) where the protagonist is also an old woman who lives in the past and is disconnected from the present. She too draws strength from her thoughts of the past in order to survive the present. The difference between the two stories stems primarily from al-Bakrī's innovative writing. For more on this story see GOTTESFELD 2011: 75-101.

23 AL-BAKRĪ 1997: 57.

24 Ibid.

25 Access to the depths of the female's soul is one of the more discernible characteristics of western and Arab women's writing and some researchers claim that only a woman is capable of expressing her mood effectively. See MUNĀṢIRAH 2002: 428.

It is interesting to observe that despite the fact that the protagonist is not alone in the car, she feels she is alone sitting next to a man, the driver, in a car in the darkness of night. So, the story emphasizes the female's perspective which is clear in this example. The expression of the protagonist's fear of leaving home and coming into contact with men is present in most of al-Bakrī's stories and the illustration that appears on the cover of the anthology also expresses this fear.

The cover of the anthology shows the picture of a faceless woman crouching before four images of men, who are also faceless, above whom is a barred window with a small oil lamp hung above it. The woman is sitting in a room which resembles a prison cell, and it seems that she is at the mercy of the four men. It may be said that the illustration draws a parallel between life in prison and the life of the woman.<sup>26</sup>

It is not surprising to discover that on arrival, "Raḥīl"'s protagonist's old childhood home is described as the realization of a lost dream. The house is described as ramshackle: the stone walls and steps are crumbling, the fireplace is rusty, and it is described as "in pain and missing its tenants."<sup>27</sup> In its present state the house induces in the protagonist again an atmosphere of death and makes her think again about death. Only when the protagonist closes her eyes and descends into pleasant dreams from the past does she manage to detach herself from bad thoughts and, as in "Ziyārāt" she draws strength from these thoughts and senses her beloved ones with all her senses, as if they are still alive: "She sees them...hears them...speaks to them...drinks coffee with them...here she throws down her bag and jumps quickly upon the crumbling stone steps...knocks on the door and they hasten to receive her with great joy."<sup>28</sup> The protagonist sees, hears, speaks, tastes, and touches until the morning light interrupts her. When she awakens from her reveries and returns to the present she "finds herself alone in a terrifying silence...swallowing the taste of alienation and death."<sup>29</sup> When she looks at the photograph of her parents hanging on the wall "the bells of memory ring out within her soul," that is, awaken life within her and she goes back to dreaming.

The woman protagonist in al-Bakrī's stories live, therefore, in an absurd reality where dreams intermingle with reality. Her escape to the dream and the past result from the fact that she feels reality is of no benefit to her. In many of al-Bakrī's stories the protagonist lives in an unstable society that sometimes accepts her and at other times condemns her. That leads al-Bakrī to describe the protagonist as filled with confusion and questions as to her identity and function in society. In these stories the protagonists feel that society does not accept them as they are and, like a chameleon, they are constrained to change their behavior and nature in order to gain acceptance. This finds expression in the story "Marāyā al-ghurbah," which is also the title of the anthology, hence its significance.

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26 Such a parallel appears even more explicitly in al-BAKRĪ's story "Ib'ād" (Expulsion), in which the life of the woman protagonist outside prison is depicted as harder than life in a real prison. See al-BAKRĪ 1997: 60. This concept also appears in the West Bank writer Nāhidah NAZZĀL's book *Fī 'ntizār al-ḥulm* (In expectation of the dream, 1989) that describes the release of the protagonist from prison to real life outside that is a prison no less a traumatic and harsh than the real prison.

27 Al-BAKRĪ 1997: 58.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

In “Marāyā al-ghurbah,” the protagonist is described as “a woman whom life has wearied...who hopes to cross the borders of time and place...who hopes to cross the circle of despair.”<sup>30</sup> Here again is expressed the motif of time and the transitions between periods of time and space, which are described as giving the woman strength and air to breath. The protagonist in this story tries to alter her appearance in order to improve her image in the eyes of society. She does this at first by trying to groom herself and become more feminine:

She applies powder to her face...wears her most beautiful clothing...fastens golden chains around her neck...stands in front of the mirror...deceives it...speaks to it, reveals her secrets...whispers a secret...reveals her concerns and sorrow, asks its opinion about her beauty and perfection.<sup>31</sup>

The mirror, therefore, is described as a “mute friend”<sup>32</sup> and, just as the one-sided communication of the protagonist in “Ziyārāt,” the protagonist in this story is also described as being engaged in one-sided communication with the mirror. The mirror, within which the protagonist’s reflection is reflected, actually illustrates the extent to which she herself is silent and mute and it is therefore not surprising that the mirror’s silence so enrages the protagonist, because it is as if she is angry at herself: “She explodes in anger...screams...cries broken heartedly.”<sup>33</sup> At this moment the protagonist decides to alter her appearance to something less feminine that expresses rebelliousness against society and its attitude toward women. She “takes off the beautiful clothing...removes her makeup...cuts off her golden chains...rebels and declares her defiance...”<sup>34</sup> However, even when the protagonist alters her appearance nothing else changes and the silence continues. At this stage the protagonist smashes the mirror and her face, described as “pale, despairing...crumbling...cracked,”<sup>35</sup> is reflected in the pieces. She searches in the fragments of the mirror for her real, whole face, but “descends into impossible despair.”<sup>36</sup>

Other stories by Hālah al-Bakrī express the woman’s confusion when faced with the issue of what kind of woman society expect her to be. However, most of the stories leave the woman in contemplation and lead her to the conclusion that she has to alter her face and search among the fragments in order to be accepted by the unstable society within which she lives.<sup>37</sup>

In her work Hālah al-Bakrī expresses, therefore, the reality of an absurd life where the protagonist lives in a constant state of inner confusion and isolation between the past and the present. This reality is reflected in the strange situations presented in the stories, in the construction of the female characters who are detached from reality, in the laconic, ambiguous, truncated writing style, and also in the domination of the female’s perspective. Hālah al-Bakrī’s work does not describe the reality of the conflict, but focuses on the

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30 Ibid.: 51.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

37 See for example the stories: “Naḥḥāt” (Sculptor, 61); “Fuṣṣat ‘amal” (Work Opportunity, 68).

ramifications of reality on the soul of the woman. It could be said that the stories focus on the feelings themselves more than on the reasons which alluded to them.

### Submerged in Illusion

The writer Amānī al-Junaydī also focuses on the female's soul, but by using the stream of consciousness style, which includes long and detailed descriptions. She emphasizes and describes more clearly the reasons for the female protagonist's suffering, while the political reality continues to serve as a background to the descriptions.

Al-Junaydī was born in Hebron, she completed her studies toward a BA degree in the Department of Arabic Language and Literature at the University of Jordan. She then worked in the Palestinian Ministry of Education and Culture where her main occupation was the teaching of Arabic and is today a school head. She edits the cultural column of the periodical *al-Dīmuqrāfī* published in Ramallah and is a member of the Palestinian Writers Association. Many critical articles have been written about her in the press and on the internet and she is considered popular in the West Bank. So far, she has published one story for children *Al-Sawr* (The wall, 2003). She has also had three anthologies of short stories published: *Imra'ah bi-ṭa'm al-mawt* (A Death-Flavored Woman, 2005); *Rajul dhakī w-anisā' balīdāt* (A Clever Man and Foolish Women, 2007); *Sukkān kawkab lāmūr* (Inhabitants of Lamur Planet, 2007). She has recently published a novel: *Qilādat finūs* (The Necklace of Venus, 2009).

Most of al-Junaydī's works are a fusion of a realistic style of writing – which describes the political reality – and a stream of consciousness – which reveals the depths of the protagonist's soul. In a few works al-Junaydī also uses the style of fantasy and Surrealism.

This kind of combination between private and public spheres characterizes Palestinian women's writing after 1967. As noted, from 1967 Palestinian Women writers describe both how the political-national reality influences the female protagonists and how they cope with it. Most descriptions are based around stories of the home front and the women and children's emotional injuries. They focus on human relations and the emotional turmoil caused by the political situation and they frequently describe the human consequences of war, the inner distortion that occurs in a person's mind and his or her moral code.<sup>38</sup>

Most of al-Junaydī's works describe the way by which the female protagonist copes with the reality of occupation, but their focus is on the female's soul and on the implication of the political situation on the woman. It may be seen in the story "Hādhā mā ḥadatha" (This is What has Happened).

In "Hādhā mā ḥadatha", the protagonist is described as a downtrodden figure, lonely and exhausted; she listens to birdsong "to drown out the voice of the isolation within which she has been brought up;"<sup>39</sup> she asks herself, "What is worse, death or hunger, or death from humiliation for the sake of a crust of bread?"<sup>40</sup> On the morning depicted in the story

38 COOKE 1992: 460-61; ZEIDAN 1995: 157; SHA'BĀN 1999: 19; ABŪ BAKR 2008.

39 al-JUNAYDĪ 2005: 43.

40 Ibid.

she has to leave home for work in the early hours of the morning out of a fear that her employer will be angry if she is late. She describes it thus:

With each step she casts down a part of herself on the tiles of the long street, until her life's organs, imprisoned behind the bars of faith this twenty-five years, were scattered on the road [...] the emptiness inside her wrings her out, she rotates in a misty space, not screaming, not crying, not thinking, not dying. She sits on a stone in the middle of the road, a body filled with emptiness that withers within a wide world. Her legs cannot move. She hopes for a magician to bear her away on a magic carpet to wherever she desires.<sup>41</sup>

Already in the story's opening scene, it is discernible that the protagonist is the same isolated, terrified protagonist of Hālah al-Bakrī's stories, but Amānī al-Junaydī uses the stream of consciousness style to describe in detail the protagonist's deep feelings, while al-Bakrī suffices herself with laconic descriptions that mostly leave the reader to imagine these inner feelings.

The political dimension has already filtered into "Hādhā mā ḥadath" at the beginning when it becomes clear to the reader that the protagonist leaves her house early in order to walk all the way on foot to work, since it is forbidden for Arabs to drive on this road. In other words, the political reality and its constraints are represented as what make her life difficult. At the same time, the political reality is also represented as the catalyst that beckons the protagonist to an emotional adventure: the walk on foot leads to her enticement into a car that stops and invites her to escape from reality into a kind of illusion. From this point, imaginary-mythical elements begin to pervade the story: the appearance of the car is described as sudden and unexpected, as if from out of a dream. The car bursts forth from a cloud of heavy fog, while a wind blows all about: "The headlights of a car strike her tired eyes, arouse her like a thirst seeing a mirage."<sup>42</sup>

The protagonist experiences a kind of momentary illusion where she finds herself unusually close to the driver who is also a man and also, apparently, a Jew (as he is permitted to drive on the road). By getting into a car, accepting a lift with a strange man and sitting beside him the protagonist has put herself in danger, which constitutes a clear act of courage.<sup>43</sup> Accepting a lift even constitutes a type of search for excitement and adventure that overturns the order of the protagonist's life and lures her into an unusual experience, since sitting in a narrow space beside a strange man who smiles at her and has a calming effect is something that, for her, is out of the ordinary. When the protagonist says to the driver, "I am afraid to love someone I should hate," she means loving him as a man and/or as a Jewish man.

The fact that the protagonist enters a romantic illusion with the first man she encounters, whoever he is, on the strength of a single glance stresses the extent of her isolation and detachment from the sphere outside the home and her pressing need for a man who will

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.: 44.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> There is a similar scene in 'Ā'ishah 'ŪDAH's story, which will be discussed hereafter, where the protagonist finds herself exchanging smiles and making contact with people whose identity is unknown. See, for example, the story "Ragħm al-aṣābi' allafī kānat 'alā l-zinād" (Despite the Fingers on the Trigger).

turn his gaze upon her and grant her a feeling of love. At the story's conclusion the protagonist's realization that time has stopped at the hour she left her home reinforces the fact that this temporary illusion is part of the protagonist's hallucination. Time standing still is a characteristic of a condition of hallucination or reverie, since only then can time be frozen. As in the story under discussion, the occurrences described as part of a hallucination seem prolonged, but in reality no time has passed. While Hālah al-Bakrī's protagonists flee from the reality of their grim lives by turning to the past and to their memories, Amānī al-Junaydī's protagonists descend into illusions and escape into romantic worlds, clinging to something that is absent from their lives.

A similar situation is encountered in the story "Lam ashrah al-qahwah" (I Didn't Drink Coffee), which depicts a man traveling to Ramallah in order to undergo an operation who has to take both his wives and his daughter with him in order that they can assist him during his recuperation. The story opens with a description of the relationships between the man and his women. The husband/father is described as looking at the women sitting beside him with revulsion and anger, while his daughter "shuts herself off in her seat like a cat afraid of the flame alight in the eyes of an angry beast hiding in the shadow of a tree."<sup>44</sup> In an inner monologue, one of the man's wives thinks to herself:

I asked myself: who will I talk to? With a man resembling my father who forced me to become the second wife of a man who prevents me from running in the fields and sets fire to the notebook of my memories. He visits me according to a defined plan. Locks the garden gate of my house with a key he carries. Encircles me with both his clammy hands so as to devour my body. Afterwards, he falls asleep in pleasure. And when I said that I felt nauseous when I see him my father responded violently: He is a man from paradise. And since entering the four walls of his home, I have not inhaled the scent of my jasmine. I have not heard the song of the nightingale. And I have strayed from my paradise.<sup>45</sup>

This passage clearly and explicitly depicts the subjugation of women in a patriarchal society. While Hālah al-Bakrī described a general sense of female isolation and emptiness, Amānī al-Junaydī takes this even further and provides real information of women's daily lives that she places in a general social framework. Firstly, she is commenting on the issue of marriage to two women, which is familiar in Arab society and points, not least, to the low status of the woman in this society.<sup>46</sup> Amānī al-Junaydī describes the man as someone who transforms the woman's life to a life within a kind of prison and a life where he "devours" her body.<sup>47</sup> She concludes this description by depicting the life of the protagonist as a living hell. This harsh description is shattered as the protagonist enters

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44 Al-JUNAYDĪ 2005: 33-34.

45 Ibid.: 34.

46 Amānī al-JUNAYDĪ also relates to the phenomenon of many women in another story from her second anthology, *Rajul dhakī wa-nisā' balidāt*, whose title is the same as the anthology. See p. 17.

47 The image of the man as a beast of prey is a recurrent image in the stories of young women writers. This can be seen, for example, in the work of the East Jerusalem author Dīmāh al-SAMMĀN and also in the work of writers who are not from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip – for example Rajā' BAKRIY-YAH. See Dorit GOTTESFELD 2010b: 227-37.

an illusion. This happens during the journey in the taxi when the daughter exchanges glances with the driver:

She absorbs from the smoke the odor of the first man she has seen at close quarters, no chair divides them, she loses herself in the illusion when he steals feeble glances through the mirror that reflects his glittering eyes. A sudden halt jolted her. Removed her from the sweetness of the illusion of a man courting her with flashing eyes and dissolving her with a broad smile.<sup>48</sup>

Just as in “Hādhā mā ḥadath,” the first man to turn his gaze upon the protagonist and pay attention to her is the one with whom she realizes her fantasy. In both stories the man’s gaze allows the protagonist to feel cherished and to obtain everything that is missing from her life, such as a smile and warmth from a man.

The longing to feel loved is a recurrent theme in both Arab women’s writing. It causes the protagonists to construct a fraudulent world for themselves, a world of false feelings and false acts that are meant to make them to feel loved. In this way it is possible to explain the protagonists’ feelings of attraction toward a man in the stories. The gaze the protagonists return to a man express their suppressed yearning to rebel against the values they were raised upon and which surround them in daily life, a yearning to seek a world that is better than the one they inhabit, where the man provides the woman with warmth and love. This could also be a yearning for equality between the sexes from the perspective of passion and love. The message is that the dominant male values should be destroyed and a new world-view constructed, according to which men would equal women.<sup>49</sup> However, since no such condition of equality yet exists in the reality described in the stories of Amānī al-Junaydī and situations such as those described above are in the realm of a soon-to-be-interrupted illusion, situations of mutual passion take strange and unusual forms.

In other stories written by new generation Palestinian women writers, not necessarily from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, the protagonist’s search for excitement and relations with a man in such strange ways is also present.<sup>50</sup> In the story “Lam ashrah al-qahwah” the same emotions take on a political mantle and in this they are unique. The political mantle is obvious here when, on hearing the soldiers’ voices as the car is stopped at the checkpoint, the protagonist abandons the illusion. At this point, the realistic dimension of the storyline that has been temporarily lost is reinstated. The soldiers demand the identity cards of the people sitting in the car. As the daughter is not listed on the father’s identity card, he has a problem. The father asks his daughter to declare her identity to the soldiers but she refrains from doing so and it is as if she is using the opportunity to have her father arrested by the soldiers. And indeed when the father is arrested, the daughter feels that she has finally achieved freedom.

The story reveals, therefore, the harsh, inferior lives of women in a patriarchal society in the shadow of the man. The reality of occupation, which compels them to stop at check-

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48 Al-JUNAYDI 2005: 34.

49 MUNĀṢIRAH 2002: 503.

50 See for example the stories of the Palestinian-Jordanian writer Sāmiyah ‘AT‘ŪT: “Wajbah dasimah” (Rich Feast) and “Ṭarīq ‘amyā’” (A Blind Path) which appear in her collection of stories “Sirwāl al-fitnah” (Pants of Temptation, 2002). For more information see GOTTESFELD 2010a: 303-20.

points and obey the soldiers' orders, is what allows the protagonists of this story to observe the man's humiliation, make their voices heard, determine their fate, and obtain freedom, since this is one of the few situations where the man is equal to the woman: he feels humiliated and his voice is not heard. Amānī al-Junaydī makes manipulative use of the reality of the occupation and thereby highlights the wretched situation of the woman, who has to enlist the "services" of the soldiers at the checkpoints in order to gain freedom.

Al-Junaydī, as noted, sometimes uses surrealism and fantasy, especially in order to reveal a strong and/or revengeful side to the female protagonists. The anger that builds up in al-Junaydī's protagonists transforms them in those surrealistic works into demonic, threatening images whose objective is to harm every man who approaches. The fact that these works are written in a surrealistic style detached from reality and that their protagonists are only imaginary turns them into works that do not reflect the existing reality, but rather works that are attempting to establish an alternative reality. It appears that what al-Junaydī is saying in these works is that the female's strength and power are in the realm of the imagination rather than in reality and their purpose is to convey the message that, instead of being weak and submissive, it is the women's responsibility to be strong and tough.

This is discernible, for example, in the story "Imra'ah bi-ṭa'm al-mawt" where a man is described as yearning for a woman from the moment he first sets eyes on her, but she warns him not to approach her because if he does he will die. After his death, the protagonist turns into a beautiful, enticing, but poisonous, flower.<sup>51</sup> Amānī al-Junaydī writes at the conclusion of the story, "If you want to travel don't go to the place where the flower of dreams is, because there destruction awaits you with open arms the moment you bend down to pick the poisonous flower."<sup>52</sup>

Al-Junaydī demonstrates that the man desires the woman only once she becomes revengeful and threatening. This absurd situation once more explains the same confusion of the female described in the work of Hālah al-Bakrī that stems from the fact that the woman is unsuccessful at adapting herself to a society so absurd and to a reality that is inconceivable and illogical.

Amānī al-Junaydī stresses in her works, therefore, the women's oppression by the men, which alludes them to dream about better men and better reality. The use she makes of a realistic style combined with surrealism allows her to describe in detail the protagonist's

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51 Also in al-Junaydī's story "Al-Sibāq" (The Competition, 55) the protagonist resembles a rose that wounds the man with its thorns and causes him to keep his distance from anything beautiful that is liable to wound.

52 AL-JUNAYDĪ 2005: 107. The prominent Palestinian-Jordanian writer Sāmiyah 'AT'ŪṬ has a very similar story to "Imra'ah bi-ṭa'm al-mawt" which is "Unthā al-'ankabūt" (The She-Spider). In this very short story she writes, "She is a woman who is unlike any other of your wives. If you approach her she will turn her back, if you turn your back she will approach you with burning emotions and she will spin her fine, pleasant web around you while she undresses and curves like a snake...and when you awaken from your amazement you will not find her and you will find yourself hanging upon that web with the gossamer threads." See 'AT'ŪṬ 2008: 13. 'AT'ŪṬ uses the image of the spider's revenge in order to highlight the feelings of anger and vengeance that have accumulated in her protagonists over the years and in herself as a woman writer, toward men, patriarchal society, and patriarchal discourse.

feelings and thoughts and to admit the readers into a world of imagination and to let them feel what might have been, but is not.

### A Journey to Imagination's Districts

A writer who does take advantage of her geographical location and highlight the political dimension in her writing, while using innovative style, is 'Ā'ishah 'Ūdah.

'Ūdah was born in Ramallah and was arrested in 1969 accused of planting a bomb as a result of which she spent ten years in Israeli prisons. Released in 1970 as part of a prisoner exchange deal between Israel and the Palestinians, she lived in exile for fifteen years before returning to the West Bank in 1994. Today, she lives in the village of Dīr Jarīr, a suburb of Ramallah.

'Ūdah's first book "Aḥlām bi-l-ḥurriyyah" (Dreams of Freedom, 2005), which garnered favorable reviews, was published twenty years after her release from prison. Describing her sojourn in prison, this book is therefore categorized as *prison literature*. The book reveals the steadfastness of Palestinian women in times of difficulty. Her second book, "Yawm mukhtalif" (A Different Day, 2007) is an anthology that includes stories combining imagination and reality whose subjects are love, hope, and the cruelty of the occupation. This article will concentrate on this anthology because of its distinctive, original style.

The stories in "Yawm mukhtalif" relate, to a large extent, to social phenomena, such as corruption and social self-interest, the older generation, and the connection to tradition. At the same time, the anthology also includes stories depicting life in the reality of occupation. While Amānī al-Junaydī's protagonists regarded the man as an object for their anger and vengeance, those of 'Ā'ishah 'Ūdah, in most cases, aim their anger at the social reality and the reality of occupation. It may be that the latter's time in prison has led her to regard the reality of the general life of society, rather than the individual woman's problems, as more serious.

The use of surrealism is at its zenith in 'Ūdah's work and she even introduces an element of fantasy, admitting the readers into strange and impossible worlds. Fantasy is a genre of fiction that uses magic and other supernatural phenomena as a primary element of plot, theme, or setting. The fantastic can be any event that happens in our world that seems to be supernatural. Upon the occurrence of the event, we must decide if the event was an illusion or whether it is real and has actually taken place. Only if the implied reader cannot opt for one or the other possibility, the text is purely fantastic.<sup>53</sup> The depiction of Palestinian reality through the use of a literary, fantasy style facilitates the presentation of 'Ūdah ideas in an original, interesting way, and makes it easier for her to relate more freely to the emotional issues that emerge.

'Ūdah's stories frequently describe her protagonists' tortuous journeys between the checkpoints and the sense of anger they feel as well as their courage in confrontation with the soldiers. The protagonists in these stories stand alone before the soldiers and are not

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53 See TODOROV 1973; al-'INĀNĪ 1996: 28-29.

represented as part of a female collective of women united in their conflict with the occupation, like the protagonists in Saḥar Khalīfah's novels has used to be represented.<sup>54</sup>

In 'Ūdah's stories, imagination does not return the protagonist to the past, but focuses on the present, magnifies it as if it is under a microscope, and transforms it into monstrous, threatening dimensions. A monstrous, frightening magnification of reality is present in a number of 'Ūdah's stories where it appears that they are continuing and completing one another. In these stories, the protagonists flee to a world of imagination wherein they undergo a journey filled with a series of adventures. One of these stories is "Ragham al-aṣābi' allatī kānat 'alā 'l-zinād".

The story "Ragham al-aṣābi' allatī kānat 'alā 'l-zinād" depicts adventures of the female protagonist at the checkpoints. The protagonist in this story waits at the checkpoint; the people waiting with her resemble a solid human mass moving in a bottle neck. The word "mass" is intended to express the overcrowding at the checkpoint with people packed closely together, as well as the fact that as far as the soldiers are concerned they are all the same and lack identity. Later, the writer also describes the people as lacking identity and uses the word "heads" in order to describe them.<sup>55</sup> The writer introduces a feminine dimension to the description of the human mass by comparing the bottle neck to a womb and the protagonist's emergence from that bottle neck to the emergence of a foetus from its mother's womb:

The mass pushed me out of the bottle, as contractions push the foetus [...] my anger burst out in screams at the soldiers, while I refused to keep back and, if truth be told, this was impossible just as it is impossible for the foetus to return to its mother's womb.<sup>56</sup>

'Ūdah shares this passage depicting a woman's experience – the experience of birth that is difficult, long, and tiring – with the readers. She wishes to emphasize the great suffering involved in passing through the checkpoints when, as a woman, she can testify that it equals the suffering of labor contractions.

The comparison of the human mass with the foetus in its mother's womb is meant to highlight the despair of those passing through the checkpoint and to foreground and criticize the extent of their dependency on the soldiers. The birth itself that occurs after passing through the checkpoint introduces a note of optimism into the writing since it is meant to symbolize rebirth and new life for those who have crossed the checkpoint. In other words, with a little patience and hope checkpoints can be breached and it is possible to emerge into a new reality.

The image of the people at the checkpoint as a human mass recurs in the story "Al-Lā min minṭaqat in 'idām al-wazn" (The No from the Non-Gravitational Area), which takes the same image of a mass and, rather than a womb, depicts it as being in space, concerned about wasting time, and therefore behaving obediently. The creation of the mass and its conduct is described thus:

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54 See, for example, the concluding scene of "Abbād al-shams" (The Sunflower). For more information on this novel see GOTTESFELD 2010b.

55 'ŪDAH 2007: 123.

56 Ibid.

With its proximity to a place where there is no gravitational force, bodies became smaller and their heat was reduced, they grew closer to one another until they were stuck together. They became a mass, packed close together, perhaps out of a desire to protect their souls from flying into space.<sup>57</sup>

The use of space as a source for an image is intended to express somewhere where people lose the ability to control their bodies and lose their balance on the ground. Being in space signifies a fear of wasting time and wandering.

The feminine dimension enters this story in the image of a gloomy, proud girl who gazes upon the mass from her exalted position on a platform through the checkpoint, which is described as glass, transparent on one side through which she can see them, but they cannot see her. The girl controls the movement of the mass: “She orders the mass she sees to go back. The mass moves back and then forward, like a dance a clock.”<sup>58</sup>

The fact that the author chose the image of a woman to give orders to the people passing through the checkpoint reflects a reality where it is often women who man the checkpoints and also reflects the humiliation experienced by the Arab man who is subordinate to the authority of a woman. ‘Ūdah immortalizes these moments, perhaps the only moments, in the life of the Arab man where he finds himself subordinate to a woman and subject to her authority. To a great extent this is reminiscent of the situation in al-Junaydī’s story “I Haven’t Drunk Coffee,” where, when it comes to confronting soldiers, men and women are equal.

‘Ūdah’s story takes a surprising turn when a rebellion flares up in the audience. What is surprising is that this rebellion is incited by the word “no.” ‘Ūdah has imbued the word “no” with human qualities when she pits it opposite the girl, shouting, “No, I will not move back”<sup>59</sup> at her. The “no” causes the girl to react with amazement: “Her mouth opened wide, her eyes bulged as if they wanted to burst out of their sockets; her voice carried a threat toward the human mass standing before her.”<sup>60</sup> All the people are struck with fear and ask the “no” not to waste time, but the “no” rebels again and makes the people stop dancing. At the end of the story, the two letters of the “no” are transformed into wings of a bird bearing a sparkling jewel that causes the girl to open her mouth wide again.

Again in this story, the author is critical of people’s obedience and expresses this by describing a word (“no”) as rebellious, rather than the people. ‘Ūdah is describing a completely absurd situation whose purpose is to reflect the absurd reality within which people are left in despair, they are fearful and do not attempt to rebel. In this story too, the message is optimistic. This optimism is expressed symbolically when the word “no” – that is, insubordination – sprouts wings and jewels – that is, the insubordination gathers momentum.

Another interesting story in ‘Ūdah’s surrealist series of stories, which may be regarded as a male version of the previous story with the gloomy girl, is “Hīna lam yamrah al-aṭfāl” (When the Children Were Not Happy). The story describes mothers and their children traveling in a vehicle that is transporting them to a party. The children, who until now have been happy, fall silent at the moment a fantasy element begins to filter into the

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57 Ibid.: 149.

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid.: 150.

60 Ibid.

story. This happens when a series of iron grilles move slowly toward the entrance and block it off. At this point, the place turns into space and, as in the above stories, the people become light, they huddle close to one another and are lost in space, while time stands still and everyone is afraid.

‘Ūdah replaces the girl with soldiers, who are described as sitting on a stage looking over the same space and who are called “emperors of time.”<sup>61</sup> In other words, in this story space has become part of a legendary kingdom where time is precious. The people are asked to remove from their bodies anything heavy and to look in reverence at the heavenly thrones on which the soldiers sit. Here again, ‘Ūdah uses personification as in the story “Al-Lā min mintāqat in ‘idām al-wazn”. But this time it is the gaze that is endowed with human qualities. She describes a gaze that moves away from the group of people observing the soldiers and shouts, “Behind you is only an empty space!”<sup>62</sup> Only then does everyone begin to smile and the children are happy again.

This story could be said to be conducting a dialogue with the famous children’s fairy tale “Alice in Wonderland,” where time also plays a central role. The concluding scene of the story, where it becomes clear that the emperors are not threatening at all, is reminiscent of the scene in “Alice in Wonderland” where Alice reveals happily that the soldiers threatening her are in fact just a pack of cards and do not present a real threat. It may also be claimed that the series of stories where the protagonist roams between checkpoints and encounters strange girls resembles Alice’s odyssey in “Alice in Wonderland” and her encounters with strange creatures like the gloomy girl and the emperors of time.

‘Ūdah’s use of the world of fantasy and the personification of a gaze or a word, as we saw previously, is innovative and original, it intensifies the imaginary dimension in the works and confuses the reader. This is even an indirect way of dealing with the sensitive issue that touches on relations between peoples without having to worry about criticism and without inserting into the text the elements of didactics and sermonizing.<sup>63</sup>

‘Ūdah creates, therefore, symbolic situations that serve as metaphors for the inner emotional conditions and perspective of the woman towards the political reality. Her uniqueness lies in her radical use of surrealism and fantasy in order to express her ideas.

## Conclusion

In their work, Hālah al-Bakrī, Amānī al-Junaydī, and ‘Ā’ishah ‘Ūdah depict the reality of an absurd life at the center of which is the protagonist submerged in constant solitude and a sense of alienation. The protagonists shatter their isolation by fleeing to other worlds that distance them from the real world to that world of the past, the world of romance, and the world of imagination and fantasy.

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61 Ibid.: 161.

62 Ibid.: 162.

63 An interesting use of the world of fantasy to convey political and “women’s” messages is also made by the East Jerusalem Palestinian writer Dīmāh al-SAMMĀN in her novel *Al-aṣābi ‘al-khaṭīyya* (Invisible Fingers, 1992). See GOTTESFELD 2010b: 227-37.

The escape to these worlds reflects the authors' criticism of the reality of life that causes this flight: Hālah al-Bakrī is critical of a reality that is so harsh that the woman is compelled to flee from it to the imaginary world of the past; Amānī al-Junaydī is critical of the patriarchal repression of the woman that is so harsh that she is compelled to create imaginary romantic situations; and 'Ā'ishah 'Ūdah is critical of the entire Palestinian people who act with blind obedience and live in constant fear of the Israeli soldiers.

Each writer includes a description of the political reality in a way that serves the messages she wishes to convey. Hālah al-Bakrī focuses on the suffering female's soul and thereby places the political-national reality only as a memory belonging to the past and not the present. She turns a spotlight onto a society described as self-interested and repressive. The protagonist in her stories yearns for a man and for his presence, but this is a man that constitutes a kind of symbol of victimization that supports the conflict and is not a genuine character.

Amānī al-Junaydī represents reality as a background to her work in order to foreground the suffering, isolated soul of the protagonist against the backdrop of the patriarchal repression of which she is a victim. Therefore, in her work, the man is described as the object of the protagonist's blame and criticism.

'Ā'ishah 'Ūdah puts the reality of life at the core of her work and shows how it leads to general human suffering and transforms people into a human mass that seems to be flying in space. Man in her work is, therefore, the Israeli soldier who prevents the woman from moving peacefully and calmly from place to place.

The article illustrates how an absurd reality – confusing and unpredictable – is reflected in the innovative style of new generation writers who, to a large extent, have been influenced by modern and post-modern literary tendencies: the writers focus on the female's self; create absurd, bizarre situations; combine imagination and reality; and use artistic, original tools, such as creative personification, unique images, and interesting word play.

It is as if the three writers are putting into place three mirrors that reflect the same woman, but from different perspectives. It is as if they are waiting for the moment the woman will smash these mirrors and reassemble her image as the protagonist of "Marāyā al-ghurbah" attempts to do, but within themselves they know that this is an almost impossible task given the prevailing reality and the existing situation.

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