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Palestinian Versus Western Mothering

Reconsidering Dichotomies in Media Representation

Deeply embedded in both the "Western" and "Middle Eastern" societal imaginations are mythological, archetypical constructions of Mother as the naturally passive, peaceful and altruistic nurturer. Such constructions have become so deeply entrenched as to have normalized reductivist dichotomies surrounding good versus bad mothers, from which to shape discursive practices around motherhood and mothering—practices that fail to account for how political, historical and socioeconomic developments contextualize a woman's feelings toward motherhood and maternal practice. In the interest of how this manifests itself internationally and particularly in relation to North American mass media news coverage of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, this paper examines both the dominant, Western ideal of mothering in contrast to that in the Palestinian context. It is particularly concerned with how, through the hegemonic, Western definition and expectations of what is ostensibly "normal" and "natural" mothering feelings and practices, Palestinian mothers, often represented through North American mass media for instance, as "mothers of martyrs" who "happily" send their children off to die as suicide bombers or provocative stone throwers, cannot help but fall into the "moral deviant" or "bad mother" category—they are "primitive," "unfit" and "abusive." As a result of such classifications, Palestinian mothers' notions of "maternal thinking"—notions characterized as those born out of maternal practice—are subjugated and therefore invalidated within dominant Western, modernist discourses—thus forcing such mothers to continuously defend and validate their maternal experience and practices to the international community—members of which are unfamiliar with or far removed from their intimate experiences.

Despite an evolution in women's education and employment as a result in part of feminist criticism, which involves the political contestation of patriarchal assignations, the symbolic and imagined constructions of women as "mothers"

first and foremost and conversely, constructions of mothers as being emblematic of true womanhood, have remained a near universal constant (Bortolaia Silva; Smart).

Embedded in both the "Western" and "Middle Eastern"[1] societal imaginations are mythological, archetypical constructions of Mother as the naturally passive, peaceful and altruistic nurturer—notions that have long been shaped by ideological, political, economic, cultural and demographic forces (Chafe; Baylies; Code). However, such constructions are arguably contingent upon a mother's ability to provide "caring labour" within the context of ongoing male domination of the private and public societal spheres in its various manifestations (Solinger). Such contingency fails to account for how political, historical and socioeconomic developments—especially cultures of militarism as opposed to cultures of peace—contextualize a woman's relationship with her children and thus her feelings toward the practice of mothering (Solinger; hooks 1990; Naples; Hill Collins 1990; Ruddick). For instance, ongoing death and violence associated with armed conflict or war as opposed to peace may increase women's level of despair, subsequently weakening or obscuring their feelings of affection toward their children (Scheper-Hughes 1993, 2003). That same despair may also lead women to redefine notions of maternal sacrifice—from caring nurturers to producers of martyrs—a way to make sense of ongoing deaths among family members (Al Labadi).

Still, mythological constructions of mother as a peaceful, passive, altruistic nurturer have become so deeply entrenched as to have normalized and naturalized reductivist dichotomies surrounding good versus bad mothers. These dichotomies both shape and reinforce dominant discourses around motherhood and mothering practice and by extension, their respective communities or societies.

In the interest of how these dominant constructions and discursive practices manifest themselves in the international arena this paper examines both the dominant, Western ideal of mothering in contrast to motherhood and mothering in the Palestinian context. It attempts to illustrate how, through the hegemonic, Western definition and expectations of what is ostensibly "normal" and "natural" mothering feelings and practices, Palestinian mothers are often represented through North American mass media for instance, as "mothers of martyrs" who "happily" send their children off to die as suicide bombers or provocative stone throwers. As such, they cannot help but fall into the "primitive," "unfit," "abusive" or "bad mother" category, similar to Orientalist portrayals of Palestinian society in general (Johnson and Kuttab; Al Labadi; Said). Such "unfit" mothering practices may reasonably be tied to representations of mothers as suicide bombers, human shields and proud defenders of sons serving time in Israeli prisons (Johnson and Kuttab; Al Labadi).

These more obvious, warrior symbols, in the context of a culture of militarism (as is the case both in the United States as well as those within Palestinian resistance movements) are important to note because they represent a violation

of strictly defined, dichotomous male-female boundaries so pervasive in both war and maternal rhetoric (Ruddick). Typically in militarist cultures, men are predominantly constructed as warriors, associated with military aggression, death and destruction. Given these dominant understandings, women are constructed as peaceful, nurturing figures, whose maternal practice includes what Sara Ruddick refers to as "preservation love" (161). This phrase suggests that women are naturally inclined to protect and nurture their children despite circumstances that may alter a mother's feelings of affection and subsequent practice. And indeed, strident, purposeful, and intensive efforts by women to defend their children or aggressively lobby on their behalves are typically read in non-militarist cultures or cultures that perceive themselves to be non-militarist as inappropriate or inadequately feminine.

As a result of the classifications previously noted, Palestinian mothers' notions of so-called "maternal thinking" (Ruddick)—notions characterized as those born out of maternal practice—are subjugated and therefore invalidated within dominant Western, modernist discourses. The mother in dominant Western discourse, where she rarely encounters the manifestations of active combat on the home front, is quintessentially passive and symbolically focused. Her material concerns are culturally directed toward shelter and nourishment in a nurturing way rather than through struggle, combat and survival. So it is that Palestinian mothers must continuously defend and validate their maternal experience and practices to the international community—members of which are unfamiliar with or far removed from their intimate experiences (Shalhoub-Kevorkian; Code; Ruddick). These attempts at validation arguably reflect the overall, ongoing struggle for legitimization in North American society.

This examination can be understood not only within the context of militaristic cultures but also within the context of neo-liberalism as the dominant ideological framework that in part, informs contemporary Western notions of mothering. From a socio-political perspective, neo-liberalism is characterized by its political ideology that values individualism and free market capitalism over a so-called welfare state. It also demonstrates a reverence for the rule of law that reinforces existing patriarchal power structures (Barker-Plummer and Boaz; Entman; Aronowitz; Harvey; Herbert). Such political ideology, naturalized into mainstream popular and political discourses in North America over the last several decades, in part, links causation of poverty to race, culture and behaviour as opposed to economic and political forces (de Goede; Takacs; Harvey; Herbert).

Within dominant neo-liberal understandings, people from disadvantaged communities are often viewed as moral deviants who are to be blamed for their circumstances (de Goede; Takacs). These moral judgments may extend to perceptions of "good" versus "bad" mothering behaviour—even as it applies to representation of North American women (de Goede; Bobel; Richardson and Poole).

For instance, a poor, single mother—normatively perceived as a moral deviant who is corrupting the "traditional" family unit within popular, mainstream North American discourse—may possibly be perceived as a "good" mother, as long as her sufferance is demonstrated through heroic qualities such as altruism and self-sufficiency (Juffer; Bortalaia Silva; hooks 2000). In such a glorified scenario, the toll such sufferance might take on her emotional or physical well-being is rendered inconsequential—thus reinforcing support for governmental social policies that penalize single parents for instance through decreased social services in certain areas (Bortolaia Silva; hooks 2000).

This is not to presume that Western constructions of motherhood as a gendered role or institution for women are monolithic, as they have undergone transformations over the last several centuries. However, there are predominant themes including mother as natural pacifist or peacemaker that, despite criticism, continue to inform dominant, historically Judeo-Christian, Western discourses surrounding women and family in general (Bortolaia Silva; Bobel; Warriner and Tessler; Hartmann; Horner Plumez).

The noted themes give prominence to so-called "'female' values of caring and nurturance" (Warriner and Tessler 253; Horner Plumez). This notion of a maternal "nature" inherently overlaps what Ina Warriner and Mark Tessler call "moral mothering" (254). Such a notion obliges women to act on their so-called nature and work toward the "'preservation love' and the elimination of violence in human relations" (254).

This essentializing view of mothering as it relates to "maternal thinking" (Warriner and Tessler) creates expectations surrounding family in general and women in particular. These expectations imply that despite personal needs, problems or socioeconomic conditions, the woman alone must unselfishly devote herself to the mothering ideal—without consideration to the kind of mothering such expectations produce (Bortolaia Silva; Horner Plumez). Within this understanding, motherhood still serves as a true and ideal source of identity within womanhood (Bobel).

However, many contemporary feminist scholars criticize notions such as "maternal thinking," as an exercise derived from a white, educated, middle or upper class experience that ignores specific circumstances (Code; hooks 2000; Bobel). Such criticism draws from Michel Foucault's notions of power/knowledge—a concept which relies on surveillance and visibility in order to classify and establish non-neutral claims about a subject or object—based on value-laden understandings by male authorities "who dictate the social norms of maternal practice" (Code 91; Steedman and Dieter; Foucault 1997, 1990; Gordon).

bell hooks (2000) refers to the romanticization of the "cult of domesticity" (135), revived by "white, bourgeois women with successful careers who are now choosing to bear children" (135). This Western ideal, arguably commodified through popular culture, undermines the work achieved by feminists who have attempted to explore the differences in perception and classification of

mothers and mothering practices—particularly regarding race and class (hooks 2000; Bobel).

Interestingly, fundamental, societal expectations of women as mothers and of mothering in general within predominantly Muslim though politically and ideologically varied Middle East societies, generally resemble that of mothering within the ostensibly secular, Western, modern context. These expectations are closely associated with notions of pacifism, sacrifice, devotion and honour—a highly moral, natural, therefore God-given "vocation" that obliges women to become mothers and obliges mothers to reinforce normalized, patriarchal patterns as devoted, but segregated family caregivers—achieved through the so-called "Islamic" socialization of their children (Shahidian; Shehadeh). Here, birthing and mothering, essentially epitomize femininity and from a cultural perspective, are considered vital to transcending womanhood (Peteet 1997).

However, the notion of motherhood and mothering within Palestinian societies specifically, whether Islamist or secular, must be considered in the context of their militarized culture, shaped by prolonged military conflict and occupation—namely because these situations in their many manifestations such as home demolitions and bombings violate the lines between the public or "male" area that is the battlefield and what might otherwise be considered the protected area of the domestic or "female" sphere—thus infusing political resistance into the domestic sphere—politicizing what is "personal" or "domestic" (Sharoni; Mayer; Peteet 1997; Johnson and Kuttab).

The concept of "home front as battlefield" is important to note also in terms of how it contrasts with the more familiar, though perhaps idealized notion of home front as safe haven, as imagined by Western and more specifically North American populations (Lanza; Peteet 1997). Such imaginings are attributable in part to the prevailing narratives within twentieth-century American Civil war literature, where the home has been conceptualized as a protected space that is geographically distant from the male-dominated battlefield or warfront (Lanza; Peteet 1997).

The conception of home might also encompass an entire national boundary and within that, a perceived consistency or homogeneity about an ostensible way of life within that boundary—culturally relevant given contemporary, dominant, Western discourses on terrorism and security and in reverse, the reification of the "corrupted West"—used to justify the perpetuation of patriarchal and oppressive policies that subordinate women in Middle East societies under the infantilizing guise of protecting women from Imperialist, moral corruption (Kaplan; Chomsky).

Cultural anthropological research illustrates that motherhood and mothering in the context of war or armed conflict challenges conventional, culturally constructed notions of mother as natural and universally pacifist for instance. It has been and continues to be argued that maternal feelings are deeply affected by social experience and that maternal activism specifically is fostered through manifestations of armed conflicts such as oppression, poverty, deep-rooted,

pervasive violence and overall suffering—all areas that threaten the survival of her children (Peteet 1997, 1991; Al Labadi).

Under such traumatic conditions, women may achieve a sense of political agency by re-defining their maternal practice and feelings. Activist mothering through the notion of "mothering martyrs" for instance might help make meaning out of realities such as ongoing deaths of family members that are beyond the control of these women (Peteet 1997, 1991).

Ethnographer Julie Peteet (1997) expands on the notion of "letting go" (Scheper-Hughes 1993: 362) to relate in some respects to the Palestinian mothering experience, as it is employed in ethnographic research regarding mothers in Brazilian shantytowns. The concept of "letting go" (ibid) in the Brazil research comes with attempting to explain and understand high rates of post-natal abandonment by mothers and what might be perceived as bewildering and callous methods of disposal for the bodies of their dead infants (Peteet 1997; Scheper-Hughes 1993, 2003).

According to researchers in these cases, the domestic lives of these women are influenced and arguably guided by endemic violence, social isolation, desperate impoverishment and despair. High infant and child mortality rates, due to disease and hunger, may undermine maternal affection, confidence and hopefulness. In these kinds of cases, the dominant, culturally constructed notion of maternal sacrifice remains, but the sacrifice gains new meaning (Scheper-Hughes 1993; 2003).

The controversial and arguably misunderstood notion of "letting go" (Scheper-Hughes 1993: 362) in this regard is undoubtedly problematic in that it violates dominant, class-oriented constructions that exist around motherhood and mothering practice as defined and classified by male power elites. It also arguably violates those same, inextricably linked, class-oriented, Western constructions around the notion of "childhood" that informs contemporary attitudes toward and about children, their behaviour, and by extension parenting practices (Aries; Jenks).

The social construction of "mothering martyrs" within the Palestinian context must also be considered within the framework of a nationalist movement—intimately connected to the prolonged conflict in the Palestinian situation. Within the volatility of such movements, giving birth and raising children also force women to re-evaluate the notion of maternal sacrifice (Peteet 1997).

In the case of Palestinian women living in the occupied territories, particularly during the first Intifada, where family homes were demolished or bombed as well as for Palestinian women living in refugee camps in Lebanon in the early 1980s, women's ability to give birth, nurture and literally produce "labour power" (Al Labadi 122) and so-called fighters for the resistance, gave women a visible, position of influence within the resistance movement. They could literally "replenish wartime losses" (Peteet 1997: 113) whereas in peacetime societies, giving birth is not seen as contributing to the state or having political purpose and therefore not worthy of government reimbursement. In the case

of the Palestinians, mothering, which emerged from private to public sphere, became an iconic symbol of devotion and ultimate sacrifice to the nationalist struggle—a struggle, which had subordinated women's more particular concerns over gender equality (Peteet 1997; Mayer).

Despite private bereavement or shock, the concept of martyrdom within Muslim culture demands that women display public pride to celebrate the martyrs they produced and ultimately sacrificed. The belief that their children have died a "noble" and "holy" (Al Labadi 125) death again helps provide a sense of meaning and empowerment for mothers who were in fact powerless to protect their children from ongoing danger (Peteet 1997; Al Labadi; Shalhoub-Kevorkian; Khamis). The public suppression of grief also affords women a chance to renegotiate a hybridized space to demonstrate their resistance to ongoing military interventions, which manifest themselves through violence, loss of homes, unemployment and dire poverty—again obscuring those same boundary violations between the public battleground and private life (Peteet 1991).

Contrary to the near singular, North American portrayal of mothering martyrs, which most often involves a suicide bomber, and feeds the "savage Muslim terrorist" narrative, which simultaneously subjugates and delegitimizes Palestinian women's voice and loss, the symbolic notion of mothering martyrs *has* also manifested itself ways such as peaceful protests, that may appear more acceptable within the discursive boundaries of a neo-liberal framework but rarely receive the same, Western media attention (Johnson and Kuttab).

Symbolically regarded as mother to an entire nation of fighters and thus potential martyrs, the Palestinian mother has also been expected to mobilize networks of women to publicly observe, demonstrate and intervene on behalf of entire groups of men and boys who have been jailed, injured, killed or face threat during resistance fighting (Peteet 1997). Once again, politicizing their mothering practice has served a public, nationalist role in a male-dominated arena, though such practices were more visible during the first Intifada than in the second (Peteet 1997; Johnson and Kuttab; Al Labadi). Given that nationalist issues often eclipse gender issues during times of conflict, critics add that mothers are acting within an acceptable cultural framework (Peteet 1997).

Such context is not intended to romanticize the most *visible* and arguably overrepresented manifestations of politicized mothering within Palestinian society. Indeed some critics argue that in producing many children, women merely adhere to and reinforce a male-defined and controlled hegemonic power structure that perpetuates a form of militarism that subordinates women (Sharoni). Simona Sharoni (1994) highlights the Israeli example when she argues that military forces within war and conflict zones must reinforce ideological beliefs regarding men and women's patriarchal gender roles in order to ensure the reproduction and recruitment of new soldiers.

Indeed, while the role of mothering martyrs within Palestinian society afforded such women immediate, influential power as well as a platform from

which to criticize leadership, true, transformative, power and influence may well have been illusory, or at least fleeting (Peteet 1997; Al Labadi). Several scholars concerned with women's rights and development argue that Palestinian women achieved no long-term reward in terms of political status for their "sacrifice" (Al Labadi; Peteet 1997; Johnson and Kuttab). In fact, Penny Johnson and Eileen Kuttab note the decreased visibility of women and women's activism between the first Intifada and the second. Post-Oslo saw the emergence of the male-dominated Palestinian National Authority—a centralized, elite, political power structure that marginalized less formal modes of Palestinian, civil activism that had incorporated women (Al Labadi). The Palestinian Islamist movement further stifled women's visibility and political participation by reviving regressive social practices that restricted and controlled women's mobility under the guise of family honour and protection (Al Labadi; UNIFEM).

Finally, the notion of mothering martyrs, particularly in Lebanon, could not sustain its initial status and subsequent influence due to the sheer and growing volume of families who had lost men or boys to "martyrdom." As such, many women who lost husbands and sons felt betrayed by their leaders. Severely impoverished, surviving on tiny or non-existent pensions, these widows would age without men to support them. While still revered within official, nationalist, Palestinian discourse, such women would hold little influence in policy and decision-making circles (Peteet 1997; Johnson and Kuttab).

In the meantime, women as mothers, largely relegated to the private sphere, continue to suffer under the manifestations of continued occupation. For example, social and economic frustrations, as well as overcrowded living conditions are believed to be contributing to the rise in domestic violence, incest, rape and family honour killings in Israeli-occupied territories such as Gaza, since the second Intifada began in 2000 (Elrashidi; UNIFEM; Kuttab and Bargouti).

While it is important to refrain from romanticizing the employment of motherhood and mothering practices in the context of armed conflict, military occupation and nationalist movements, it is also important to avoid feeding the contentious, reductivist and dichotomous "us" versus "them" debates that reinforce mythological, cultural narratives that place North America for instance, at the vanguard of women's rights and gender equality. Patterns of maternal sacrifice and variations of martyrdom are neither exceptional to Islam nor the Palestinians.

In the United States, a country with a deeply entrenched militaristic cultural fabric—despite public protests to the contrary—notions of "militarism" are projected onto political enemies while denying that military build-ups in sovereign nations count as militaristic. In this context, mothers have also attained iconic status during wartime—traditionally serving as cheerleaders in support of their own children as soldiers and by extension, the overall war efforts (Cappuccio). Leading up to the current war in Iraq, mothers of American soldiers appeared on the highly competitive, nationally televised, morning or "breakfast" show programs (Cappuccio).

Academic research concerned with the ostensible collusion between corporate media organizations and militaristic ambitions of the state found that these mothers were consistently portrayed as proud, supportive caregivers and thus, legitimized as justifiers of war and Imperialist adventures as a means of "protecting" an imagined, socially constructed "way of life" through nationalist rhetoric (Cappuccio).

Such unconditional support for state sponsored militarism would fail to critique what effect manifestations of war or conflict would have on traditional societies and more specifically for the women within those societies (Bortolaia Silva; Peteet; Johnson and Kuttab). The mothers' roles were further legitimized by the lack of coverage afforded to otherwise credible dissenters of the war (Cappuccio).

Despite the unconscious, cognitive tendency to move culturally aberrant notions back into dominant or familiar cultural narratives in order to make meaning, I conclude here that it may perhaps be necessary to "locate the position from which women engage in mothering" (Peteet 1997: 8) in order to acquire a more empathetic perspective about the unknown "other." It is important to question whether an inability to do so precludes distant societies, in the habit of reinforcing status quo hegemony, from being able to distinguish, identify or recognize an issue within its contextual origin (Richarson and Poole). In the case of Palestinian mothers, as defined in this paper, such neglect arguably reinforces the asymmetrical politics of representation—penalizing the subjects according to prevailing, class-oriented, Western standards, who continue to be scrutinized based on an obscured power relationship—between Western powers and for the purposes of this paper, the Middle East and Muslim societies in general.

[1]The loosely defined concepts of "Western" or "Middle Eastern" will be employed throughout this paper, based on normative, contemporary classifications in international relations that do not presume homogeneity.

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