

GIVING VOICE TO STONES: PLACE AND IDENTITY IN PALESTINIAN LITERATURE by Barbara McKean Parmenter. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994.

The recent renewed conflagration between Israelis and Palestinians, including the use of firepower on both sides, has placed both sides on the same tight rope, on which they must either learn to negotiate how to walk together or, failing, fall and crash together. The dream of a binational state has become a nightmare; today, the only dream on the drawing board seems to be a two-state solution. The remaining issues center around the degree of compromise from its no-budge posturing that each side is willing, able and shrewd enough to exact and to mete, in face of intransigent forces calling for all-or-nothing measures.

The current end game situation is the result of a series of moves and counter-moves, most of them bloody, that followed Israel's declaration of statehood and independence in May 1948. Just days earlier, the Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt, concerned that the creation of the Jewish State in a hostile region would undermine the Jewish Homeland as a haven for refugees, wrote:

There is very little doubt about the final outcome of an all-out war between Arabs and Jews. One can win many battles without winning a war ... The 'victorious' Jews would live surrounded by an entirely hostile Arab population, secluded inside ever-threatened borders, absorbed with physical self-defense to a degree that would submerge all other interests and activities And all this would be the fate of a nation that—no matter how many immigrants it could still absorb and how far it extended its boundaries (the whole of Palestine and Transjordan is the insane Revisionist demand)—would still remain a very small people greatly outnumbered by hostile neighbors (187).

Arendt concluded that only Arab-Jewish cooperation would ensure "the political emancipation of Palestine" (192), but her words were not heeded. She has long passed away, along with the dream of a binational, multicultural state. Now, many battles and many deaths later, Sari Nusseiba's idea of a two-state solution may be negotiated, but the war is still far from over despite the 1993 Oslo agreements.

The war between Israelis and Palestinians is being fought with weapons both sophisticated and simple, new and old. Barbara McKean Parmenter's insightful book examines the rhetorical and real power of stones, as nation-building metaphor and tool.

In the Middle East, where 'old' is nothing new and 'ancient' is ongoing history, stones play an important role in the words that make up the narrative—and the contested territory—of nation. And because everyone in the Middle East has long memories, blood feuds last literally beyond the grave as each side of every

conflict enumerates reason after reason for carrying on the flame of hatred and mistrust from generation to generation, unabated.

Since the Intifada erupted in 1987, stones have moved from the literary page to the news page, used with syncopated regularity by Palestinians to defy Israelis in the Occupied Territories. Not surprisingly, the intifada has become known as 'the stone revolution' and its youthful heroes, 'stone generals.' But stones are powerful images both sides in this struggle for homeland; stones are used figuratively and literally by both sides to make a claim to the one little land. Israelis proudly point to ancient stones that mark their ongoing historic link to the land since biblical times, while Palestinians point to their primordial stone houses. The metaphorical, metaphysical and mainstream meanings of stones is material to the lives of both peoples.

Parmenter chooses to begin her research into stone narratives in Palestinian literature with this speech, supposedly delivered by Palestinian poet-in-exile Mahmoud Darwish to an imagined Israeli audience:

The true homeland is not that which is known or proved. The land which emerges as if from a chemical equation or an institute of theory is not a homeland. Your insistent need to demonstrate the history of stones and your ability to invent proofs does not give you prior membership over him who knows the time of the rain from the smell of the stone. That stone for you is an intellectual effort. For its owner it is a roof and walls (1).

Darwish is skillful in setting up the classic 'us-them' dichotomy in which the Israelis are Western, global, intellectual, detail-oriented, and foreign while the Palestinians are rooted, local, earthy, natural, and authentic. The Israelis may have long memories, it is implied, but the stones, and the Palestinians who recognize their power, have memories that are longer still. Nevertheless, beneath the resounding rhetoric, we find here a point-counterpoint dialectic between the Palestinians and the Israelis that may well signal the beginning of dialogue.

It makes a lot of sense that the Palestinians and Israelis have moved from stones to speeches if we remember the close, familiar connection between them, substantiated by a common ancestry. After all, the Patriarch Abraham had two sons: Isaac, who begat Israel; and Ishmael, who begat Islam. Not unexpectedly, each nation has a narration that involves the word *umma* for the word nation. For both Jews and Muslims, God is the supreme ruler and every believer is also a national; outsiders are welcome only as resident aliens, not embraced into the national fold.

The Bible and the Koran are the standard texts, both rich in oral tradition. Storytelling, narration, is thus the building block of the state, the nation, for both Israelis and Palestinians. Storytelling is the key to the survival of these two peoples in this little land, however constituted or carved; whatever the compromise. I believe that one solution to the age-old suit over Abraham's birthright—over

nation and narration, state and story—is to compare the metaphors used to influence the jury of international public opinion of the absolute rights of one side and the absolute wrongs of the other. Perhaps we the jury could begin to discern ways for reaching a compassionate compromise of cousinly co-existence between the two peoples, each of whom is claiming ancient rights to new politics.

Parmenter's well-researched and insightful book is a valuable addition to the growing scholarship surrounding texts as critical tools for conciliation and understanding among and within nations. Written shortly after the signing of the Oslo accords and before the election of Yasser Arafat as President of the Palestinian Authority in Gaza and the West Bank, and of Benjamin Netanyahu as Prime Minister of a right-wing coalition government in Israel, this important book offers an invaluable inside look at the Palestinian psyche, showing how poetry and metaphors can influence a struggle for nationhood. This slim volume stands alone against many volumes showing how biblical poetry and metaphors have shaped the Jewish struggle for nationhood.

Geography is both a physical location and a mystical image. Arguing whether Palestine was a lush land of orchards and vineyards or a desert outpost rife with malaria is like arguing whether the angels dancing atop the proverbial pin are male or female. In the Middle East, facts are often co-opted by carefully constructed fiction, which then becomes fact. So it is vital to delve into the fiction, and Parmenter does an excellent job. She shows how metaphors of home are entwined with the quest not only for a personal but also for a national identity. This struggle surfaced fully in 1948, with the establishment of the State of Israel within internationally recognized borders, and triggered "Palestinian literary figures [to articulate] their sense of place within the framework of an explicitly national landscape having a generally recognized symbolic meaning" (27).

Parmenter's chapter headings reflect her literary approach to geography: Reading the Landscape; Landscapes of Exile; and Landscapes of Home. Other chapters offer The Meaning of Stones, The Literature of Struggle and Loss, and Encountering Israel. Throughout, the thesis is reinforced that for the Palestinians, the land is their birthright, they have been attached to it umbilically forever, and the European Jew who came to pioneer the land and recreate the biblical Israel is an aggressive outsider who cares little for the land, only for the title to its possession and the power that this ownership entails. In passing, the Zionist quest is recalled: "In and among these features [of Palestinian as memory] stands the writer, seeking like the Zionist of an earlier period, boundaries and security. And yet it seems that neither can find the rootedness they seek" (98). The war over the meaning and memory and materialness of Israel/Palestine as a defined geographical entity sadly eludes both.

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