

Hanging on to Home: Representations of Handala and the Home

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Bio:

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Abstract:

Palestinians call the Israeli West Bank Barrier the “Apartheid Wall” to evoke the disenfranchisement they experience in their loss of belonging and sense of home that has resulted from their denial of home and country; however, what the Palestinians have lost goes beyond the land and homes that the international community sees. While the “security fence” protects the Israeli settlers in their claimed lands, for Palestinians, graffiti on the Apartheid Wall in the West Bank questions notions of heritage and belonging imposed by the wall. My purpose here is to argue that an image of Naji al-Ali’s cartoon character, Handala, reproduced in a Palestinian refugee camp on the Apartheid Wall, represents the struggle of the Palestinians to hold on to their sense of home, heritage, and belonging in the Holy Land. I will be examining cartoons of the 10-year-old refugee boy, Handala, from al-Ali’s published drawings between 1973-1987, including especially his characteristics and meaning. I will also compare literature reporting on the history and purpose of the wall with information from interviews with Palestinians about their experiences with the wall. This paper seeks to examine the subjective relationships between the Palestinians, the wall, Handala, and the concept of home.

Introduction

The tension between Israelis and Palestinians is an issue with which most people are familiar. The separation walls between Israel and the Palestinian territories of the West Bank and Gaza Strip highlight this tension. The walls surround a large area east of Israel bordering Jordan and the Dead Sea. Surprisingly, there has been little scholarship on the walls and their impact on the lives of the nearby inhabitants. These walls have affected millions of Palestinians and Israelis, and the issue at hand is not only one of security, but one of heritage and culture. The Palestinians endured material and intangible losses during the years of Israeli occupation of former Palestine since the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. I contend that, in order to understand the losses, we must begin with the notion of heritage. In what follows, heritage will be understood as ways that the past is used in the present (Graham, Ashworth, and Tunbridge 2000) and explored in the specific context of Palestinian heritage as it relates to their citizenship and identity as Arab refugees. In this context, I identify issues of heritage including, but not limited to, individual and shared experiences, natural and constructed landscapes, centers for economic activity, places of spiritual significance, familial spaces and the home, and culture.

Scholars tell us that heritage is created and managed in the present to serve particular ends. It may privilege or disadvantage groups or individuals depending on who is doing the creating (Graham, Ashworth, and Tunbridge 2000). I contend that this process may be seen in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Each side uses the past in its attempts to gain legitimate entitlement to the Holy Land. Each calls upon unjust experiences, former boundaries, and the idea of home to support such claims. From a Palestinian perspective, the Separation Wall is one of Israel's main tools for expanding its heritage. The more land Israel cuts from Palestinian territories, the more land that belongs to Israel when the conflict is settled. Conversely,

Palestinians have been struggling against what they perceive as this land-grab since 1948 when Israel appropriated or destroyed former Palestinian settlements. The Palestinians' best strategy against Israel is to stay put.

The Palestinians' will to remember their home and heritage has played a major role in their resistance to Israeli expansion. Leadership for this resistance has come from a variety of sources. One very influential activist for the Palestinian cause was a political cartoonist named Naji al-Ali. Although al-Ali died 15 years ago, his cartoon characters continue to have an impact on contemporary Palestinian culture. They have been replicated many times, especially in refugee camps and on the Separation Wall. Palestinian refugees live in this fenced-in area, many next to the tall concrete wall that makes up a large portion of the barrier. In what follows, I will use heritage as a lens to examine a depiction of one of al-Ali's characters appearing on the Separation Wall as an image that holds significance for Palestinian refugees. Through this perspective, I will attempt to create a context in which we understand the significance of the image.

Handala

During his lifetime and continuing after his death, the Palestinian cartoonist Naji al-Ali was celebrated for his keen and creative ability to depict the situation of Palestinian refugees. Oweis (2004) recounts al-Ali's life, telling how he lived for many years as a refugee after Israeli forces destroyed his family's home and village when he was 12. He began drawing in school at the refugee camp in Lebanon, and then studied art at an academy until he was imprisoned for his political activities. In an interview, al-Ali related that it was in the Lebanese jail that he began to use his drawings for political expression (Oweis 2004). After drawing for newspapers for a few years, in 1968 al-Ali introduced what would become his signature character—Handala.

When Handala first appeared in al-Ali's cartoons, he was a ten-year-old refugee boy dressed in ragged clothes, barefoot, with sparse, spiky hair. In fact, Handala would be ten years old until he returns to his homeland. Al-Ali meant for Handala, as a young boy, to symbolize the struggle and resilience of Palestinians, many of whom were removed from their home at a very young age or even born as refugees. Often he would depict Handala witnessing an event, standing beside benevolent characters, writing, throwing rocks, or holding flowers (Oweis 2004). Handala offered solidarity to those whose struggle he shared.

Forever faithful to the Palestinian cause, al-Ali named Handala after the *handhal* plant, a native to Israel, that will grow back even if cut, because it has deep roots (Oweis 2004). It is his message of resilience and will to return that makes Handala a character with whom Palestinians identify. Handala exists as a message that the return of Palestinians to their homeland is a right for which they long and, if necessary, for which they will fight. Though al-Ali was assassinated in 1987, Handala remains a symbol of the Palestinian cause, appearing on t-shirts, walls, and even tattoos. By wearing representations of Handala on their bodies, Palestinians express the depth of their sentiment of longing and resilience.

One can clearly see the connection Palestinians have to Handala in the refugee camps, where many images of the boy can be found on the Apartheid Wall. In Bethlehem, the Aida refugee camp presents this association poignantly. There, across five panels of the Wall, an anonymous artist—or artists—painted a larger-than-life size picture of Handala, hands clasped behind his back, looking out over a serene landscape that is presumably Palestine. The image encapsulates not only the Palestinian struggle through Handala, but also what they struggle for: home and heritage and belonging.

Heritage

Palestinians are a people unlike any other in that they have a place they call home, but this home is inaccessible. Though it has been more than 60 years since the Israeli occupation began, and many Palestinians have been born in exile, there is still a strong and persistent Palestinian identity. The vast diaspora of about 4.8 million refugees (UNRWA, 2012) are blocked from their home by a physical barrier. The barrier takes different forms. In some places it is a high fence with barbed wire; in other places, it is a 24-foot high concrete wall. The various designations of the wall are telling of the different narratives produced about the Israel-Palestine conflict and claims to the Holy Land.

To Israelis, the wall is a “security fence,” yet the Palestinians view it as an “Apartheid Wall.” The international media takes a neutral position by referring to the wall as the “West Bank Barrier.” The designation of “security fence” evokes danger, a sense of property, a claim of belonging to a place, and keeping out that which is undesirable. The Israeli government is therefore not just protecting Israelis from acts of terrorism, but claiming as its own a space for which it can control access. At the same time, Palestinians claim equal rights and access to the same land, with all of its economic and cultural capital. In contrast to the Israelis, they view themselves as categorically separated from access to resources and infrastructure.

There is currently no geographical area clearly designated as “Palestine,” because international powers cannot come to an agreement on whether to grant Palestine state status. The borders of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip are constantly in flux as the Israelis build walls around their perimeter. This has created many problems for Palestinians who continue to lose their homes. With neither house nor homeland, many are turned away from making a new home elsewhere. Most of those who fled have difficulty procuring citizenship in other countries. Those who remained in former Palestinian territories lost their homes to Israeli occupation. It has been

this way since 1948. At that time, many Palestinians were pressed from their homes. Most who left have been refused permission to return. For the multitude of Palestinians unable to find a home elsewhere, life cannot progress in this state of suspension. There is no place to settle to develop new familial roots because there is no place to call home. Most do not have access to their former property or sites of heritage—their spiritual and cultural centers or familial land—and so the most that can be done is to remember the homeland.

Place

The Holy Land is known around the globe as a sacred place for Jews, Christians, and Muslims, but few know it as home. The relationship of Palestinians to Jerusalem and to the former Palestine is one transmitting life and history, a sentiment that is not shared by the global community. It is the location where Palestinians owned and managed property, made a living, and continued their family history. While place is integral to the formation of individual and group identity, a sense of place is both a result and contributor to the creation of heritage (Graham, Ashworth and Tunbridge 2000). For Palestinians, their identity and sense of home is embedded in the constructed and natural attributes of their villages, fields, homes, and the city of Jerusalem. Their heritage is a result of the time they spent in their fields and with their neighbors, and of all the cultural activities in which they participated. This history was created in and transmitted through homes and land to which they no longer have access. A large key hangs over the entrance to the Aida refugee camp, a common symbol among Palestinians for the right and longing to return to their homes. This may further indicate that the image of Handala on the Separation Wall stands in remembrance of the homes that were lost and the yearning to belong there again.

Peasants who were strongly attached to places and the land formed the larger part of the

Palestinian population (Falah, 1996). This conception of the peasant was adopted by Palestinian refugees to represent their identity because the majority of Palestinians owned and worked land centered around a village. Naji al-Ali created Handala as an ordinary peasant, barefoot and dressed in too-worn clothing; he was to be a representative of the Palestinian population now living in refugee camps. As with most refugees, major components of his life were left behind, the elements of the good life are gone, and he is left barefoot like many refugee children (Oweis 2004).

The Israelis understand that the Palestinians have ties to their homes and villages (Falah, 1996). In fact, it is this understanding that led the Israelis to destroy and occupy the villages after the Palestinians fled for what they believed would be a short time in 1948. The Israeli strategy was to destroy physical artifacts of Palestinian heritage, and any other method in which their interactions with the landscape could be seen (Falah, 1996). There was much that could not be destroyed, however, especially Palestinian ties to the land that remained a part of their identity and memory. Handala, a symbol of resilience, is a testament to the Palestinians' will to remember:

The right of return means that nobody can come and take something that's mine without my choosing it. The land is important ancestrally—my family is from there, my grandmother is buried in the field there. It's our history, our roots, not something we can sell. It's in our hearts. The small houses there were destroyed but they survive in our hearts. Every olive tree has a story. What my father told me, I tell my children and they will tell theirs. (Abed Rabin, 48, Deheishe Refugee Camp, Bethlehem)

Palestine is the site of Palestinians' history—collective, familial, and personal. It is a part of their identity and cannot be swept away easily. Handala's inability to age beyond his ten-year-old self is representative of Palestinians, individually and collectively, who cannot flourish without the connection to their homeland and history. He, as a symbol of their struggle, has not

been forgotten, and his continued presence in Palestinian thought only encourages continued resistance.

Time

Handala is both a remembrance of past injustices and a beacon of hope for the future, on behalf of which he refuses to fail. The past is “presented” through the wall as home is so close and yet unreachable (Harvey 2008); each day when the Palestinians see the wall or try to pass through its checkpoints they are reminded of this reality. The meaning of their struggle has become embedded in artifacts like Handala and the Separation Wall, both of which have become instruments for the management and creation of heritage (Graham, Ashworth and Tunbridge 2000). Nora (1989) speaks of how these objects are surrounded by memories that crystalize and preserve the past. Both Handala and the wall are examples of crystallization in that they preserve the memory of loss because they are unbroken links to the past. Handala is the same young boy that he was when al-Ali introduced him in 1968, and the circumstances under which he was created have hardly changed. The Wall itself is a visceral embodiment of the separation of the Palestinians from their homeland, a split that began in 1948. For Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip especially, there is so much interaction with, and many memories surrounding, these objects that they become monuments of the past.

Handala takes an important perspective on activities, always suspended in time as a 10-year-old boy until the time comes when he returns to his homeland, and he has a way of making the past and future present:

The concept of time has remained central: heritage is a view from the present, either backwards to a past or forward to a future. In both cases, the viewpoint cannot be other than now, the perspective is blurred and indistinct and shaped by concerns and predispositions, while the field of vision is restricted to a highly selective view of a small fraction of possible pasts or envisaged futures. (Graham, Ashworth and Tunbridge 2)

When Palestinians look at drawings of this old cartoon character, they relate his experiences to what they currently endure. While these experiences are very similar, the available options for action are not always the same. Palestinians do share Handala's desire to return to his home, where he belongs, but the path there bears on current circumstances.

The concerns and predispositions presently affecting the perspectives of Israelis and Palestinians stand in opposition. Future options are limited. Both Israelis and Palestinians feel that they are not only entitled to the former Mandate of Palestine, but they also feel that there is no other place for them to be. The chances that Palestine could return to its pre-1948 boundaries are small, which consequently begs the question, what are they fighting for? Possibly they fight for a home where all Palestinians can belong and are free to move where they please. In the depiction of Handala painted on the Apartheid Wall in the Aida refugee camp, the boy is facing away from the viewer as usual, but looking out at a serene landscape of desert hills and sea that bear resemblance to both the Dead Sea and the Sea of Galilee in the Jordan Rift Valley. Could this possibly be the free Palestine envisioned by the persistently hopeful refugees? Handala remains true in remembering the past, still the same age as when he left his homeland. With his face turned away from the viewer, he resists the injustices of the present in the hope for a better future. Most Palestinians, when fleeing their land in 1948, were sure that they would soon return to their homes. Still today, many call upon the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), which states that every person has a right to return to his or her country. For Palestinians, the key represents the right of return, and is a vessel for their hope. Many still carry the key to their occupied or destroyed homes, and some still have the deeds to their land. Several of al-Ali's cartoons, many of which include Handala, depict keys worn around necks or tied into their wearer's hair. Though the right to return is a hot debate, even those who were born under the

occupation or who now hold citizenship in other countries remain steadfast in their claim to Palestine as home.

Power

Power is an important component of the future of Palestinian heritage. For the past 60 years, Israel has attempted to delegitimize the Palestinian presence in areas where, through the power of force, they have gained and destroyed much of the Palestinian's cultural heritage. The struggle persists because there are many people besides the Palestinians, especially in the global Muslim and Arab communities, that would not benefit from the Holy Land being completely under Israeli control. Whoever holds power over this area not only controls access to heritage sites, but also controls the creation and maintenance of heritage itself. Israel has already attempted to undermine the power of Palestinians over their heritage by destroying their villages and taking their land, but the only place they have no control over is their memories. In this battle Handala is a powerful figure; setting himself against these attempts to disempower the Palestinians, he reminds them that their memory is their strength.

The Apartheid Wall is Israel's primary means to establish a relationship of power over the Palestinians. It is a technology of explicit political purpose in that it divides society while at the same time enforcing a relationship of social inequality in a shared space where one group, the Israelis, have the ability to move about as they please while at the same time restricting the movement of the other, the Palestinian group (Winner 2009). Al-Ali was acutely aware of the elites who controlled access to sacred sites and to the land taken from the Palestinians, and he used Handala to raise awareness among Palestinians of the forces that enable Israel to assume such power, often singling out the United States' involvement. In some cartoons, al-Ali would

depict U.S. helicopters or rockets destroying mosques and palm trees as Handala observed, judging those who destroy the Palestinian's culture and home (Oweis, 2007).

From 1973 until the death of Naji al-Ali, Handala turned his face away from the viewer forever, symbolizing a rejection of the poor solutions offered by the Western powers to the Palestinian people (Oweis 2004). Though stripped of most of their power, al-Ali created Handala to represent the latent dignity of Palestinians. Al-Ali swore that only when this dignity was restored would Handala turn and face the viewer again (Oweis 2004). They have a memory of the past, the place of their heritage, and that image projects into their future where they see a Palestinian identity that is free.

Conclusion

Handala plays an important role in the intersecting issues of place, time, and power of Palestinian identity and heritage. Still very much alive in Palestinian culture, he is a reminder of their past struggle and why they continue to resist. Like an elder, he has witnessed and experienced the events Palestinians have endured, and he remembers and tells his story to posterity. In Handala's inability to grow up, he urges Palestinians to remember their roots. For most, that is all that is left of their claim to land and to history. With so much of the material heritage destroyed or appropriated by Israel, memory is the strongest claim to the Palestinian homeland. Handala is a beacon of justice for Palestinians actively maintaining that a return to their home is both their right and within their power.

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Figure 1: Mural of Handala on the West Bank Barrier, Aida Refugee Camp.

SOURCE: Leuenberger, Christine. "The West Bank Wall as Canvas: Art and Graffiti in Palestine/Israel." *Palestine-Israel Journal of Politics, Economics and Culture: Jerusalem, In the Eye of the Storm* 17, no. 12 (2011). Web. 26 June 2012.