

PART THREE

Novel Citizen

If I was not Palestinian, I would be nothing.

—JABRA IBRAHIM JABRA

I mean, who's the nation other than you and me, we're it.

—SAHAR KHALIFEH

Each man or woman brings the nation to life by his or her action.

—FRANTZ FANON

WHERE PART 1 LAID OUT THE TOOLS AND DEVICES that connected Palestinian place and time in Nasrallah's linked series and part 2 worked to account for geographies of power that intersect with these connections, what remains in the story of Nasrallah's Palestine is its people. Who are the Palestinians of the *Balconies and Comedies* series? What are the parameters put forward by the Palestine Project to evaluate and understand what makes a Palestinian? What marks an individual as a successful or problematic national agent within this open-ended, multiple, and expansive Palestine? Then, more important, how do Nasrallah's characters navigate this configuration of space and time? How do they make sense and meaning out of their relationship with the nation? The final three chapters set out to answer these questions. To do so, they use and adapt the language of the citizen as a concept that theorizes the reciprocal link between a nation and its people. It is through this lens that the analysis finds in Nasrallah's works a rescripting of national character tropes, a novel construction of the self in relation to the nation, and a recrafted model for the ideal citizen.

While the body of existing theory on citizenship—what it means and how it functions—is based almost exclusively on Euro-American models, it offers a rich and often structuralist vocabulary for parsing the mechanisms of the relationship between person and nation. The need to rely as a starting point on Euro-American theorizations is (at least) twofold, first because of the limits of Palestinian political discourse around the state model (for manifold reasons) and second because of a corresponding limit in the cultural field. Neither, for the deep structural reasons of colonialism and more pragmatic reasons that are outlined below,¹ has been explored in detail. In a practical sense, there is no formulation of juridical

citizenship for all Palestinians because the idea has been pushed off the discursive map by a peace process beholden first to principles of sovereignty. All other factors are left for later. Thus any framework for deciding who is included, how they are included, what they are entitled to, and what responsibilities the state has toward them is absent.

As a result of this state of affairs, discourse on Palestinian citizenship has been confined to two areas: Palestinians as citizens in other nation-states and then the question of what it means to “be Palestinian” in the personal sense. For the first of these, for the most part, historical, political, cultural, and even literary analysis of Palestine in the context of citizenship revolves around the problem of belonging or exclusion from *other* nation-states. Most discussion has been in the context of Palestinian citizens of Israel, who—since the British Mandate period when citizenship laws were put in place²—have worked strategically within the parameters of the state to gain the widest access to freedom, justice, and self-determination.³ This puts Palestinians in Israel—as well as in the less discussed Arab states—generally outside or at odds with state policies and politics, negotiating a way of being Palestinian against the structures of belonging that other states set out.⁴ Citizenship in the nation-state model, as Noura Erekat puts it, “effectively negated their [Palestinian] status as a political community and dismissed their demands for self-determination.”⁵ This is centrally because, as the legal scholar Asem Khalil has put it, “focusing on state-centered citizenship [for Palestinians] . . . is at best counterproductive and futile and at worst a dangerous endeavor,”⁶ risking further fracturing of existing administrative Palestinian identities.

Work in the cultural realm has focused equally on the problem of exclusion: what is not rather than what is. Here the relationship between the individual and the nation tends to be discussed as a very personal experience—and usually one of alienation. “What does it mean to be Palestinian?” is also generally a question asked and answered by Palestinians “outside” of the territory that was once Mandate Palestine, and even “outside” the refugee camps. Yassir Suleiman’s 2016 volume, *Being Palestinian*, offers an example: it presumes that being Palestinian is automatic for those “inside” but is in need of discussion or definition for the diaspora.⁷ Even this delineation of inside/outside follows the imaginative parameters of the nation-state model and does not reflect the realities of the Palestine that Nasrallah’s works put forward. One of the few examples of cultural criticism that looks at Palestinianness from the perspective of refugees is Edward Said’s writings in *After the Last Sky*. Focusing on Palestinians in the Arab world, he also relies on state-style policies to define Palestinianness, saying that Palestinians in the Arab world are “given special cards identifying them as ‘Palestinian refugees.’”⁸ Of course, an identity document is not the complex legal-cultural web of citizenship. Neither of these forms of being, or belonging, can quite account for the sense of unity or shared aspiration of nation and its agent. “Being Palestinian” is more than “an essence,”⁹ a cause, something to wait for, an idea to rally behind, or a vague sense of something

that is not quantifiable. While the imaginative parameters of this sort of citizen have not been explored in discourse, they are everywhere in fiction, and they are worked out thoroughly in Nasrallah's *Palestine Project*.

To parse the vision of the *Palestine Project*, it is not the analysis of juridical citizenship that is useful. Rather, it is the forays that Euro-American theory has made into the vast imaginative infrastructure of citizenship that set the stage. Joseph Slaughter's work is particularly useful. In his *Human Rights Inc.* he demonstrated the relationship between ideals of citizenship and narrative patterns of the bildungsroman to show how that literary genre became tasked with educating the individual into the correct path of national belonging. As individuals grow up and come of age, they are being shown the "correct" way into maturity—which is also the age of most European nations' age of legal responsibility. The bildungsroman, Slaughter writes, "is a sort of civic sixth sense that gives personal texture to the abstraction of the nation-state and citizenship."¹⁰ This "sixth sense," or how one knows to go about being or becoming a national, Slaughter goes on, is "cultivated within the constraints of the state/citizen bind."¹¹ In other words, there is a clear and even rigid imaginative structure within which narrative constitutes the individual in relation to the state. This relationship, this "bind," is not legal but rather imaginative, where the goals, possibility horizons, and ideals of "success" or "failure" are set out by the national story. So too in the *Palestine Comedies*, though the bind is of a different sort.

When read as patterns for becoming linked to the imaginative structure of the nation, the tropes that haunt Palestinian fiction—the fighter, the hero-poet, the mother of the martyr—begin to make sense. Chapter 6 looks at these figures and reads (from the balconic position) them as past iterations of a hoped-for relationship between the person and a now-outdated vision of liberation. My analysis finds these tropes were modeled on a method of "becoming" a citizen in anticipation of a nation-state. In the absence of a state, individuals inhabiting these models can never actually realize citizenship. This is at once why the tropes are problematic and why they persist. In the *Palestine Project*, the tropes act as texts and also as echoes of limiting structures of power. While this configuration of relationship is marked as significant, the works of the linked series also put forward their own configuration of relationship. This shifts again the grammar of association. Rather than "becoming" a citizen and learning to fold the self into the desires and architecture of the state, Palestinian characters in Nasrallah's works rather engage in a process of "being." As opposed to "becoming," "being" is open ended and can establish the same reciprocal relationship between the citizen and Nasrallah's *Palestine*. It also, my analysis draws out, creates the parameters of a wider community subjectivity.

Chapter 7 looks first at the process by which the citizen engages citizenship. Rather than taking on and assimilating the goals of the nation-state as Slaughter described (he phrased it, quoting Mark Redfield, as the "integration of a *particular* 'I

into the general subjectivity of a community”),¹² in the Palestine Project, characters work to find what is called here a Palestinian “orientation,” to take the term established by Sara Ahmed. In her *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed describes an orientation as “not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitance.”¹³ The work of “being” a Palestinian citizen means perceiving and moving through a world that is often hostile to Palestinian presence while maintaining the ethos of openness, multiplicity, and balconic vantage. Palestinians in Nasrallah’s work “find [their] way through the world” by adopting a perspective of delirium,¹⁴ a term adopted from Nasrallah’s *Balcony of Delirium*, which is where the problem of navigating a hostile word and maintaining the personal priorities of Palestine is treated most fully.

In marked contradistinction to existing formulations, which begin with what is not, a close reading of Nasrallah’s work presents a more positivist articulation. This builds on the small but growing body of thinking exploring the meaning of “Palestinian” as it exists as a contemporary and even historical practice. For example, Zena Aga, in her 2022 series of curated articles, explored experiences of Black, Queer, and incarcerated Palestinians. Maurice Ebileeni writes in *Being There, Being Here* about what it means to include Hebrew, Danish, Spanish, and English narratives in a “polylingual category of Palestinian literature that could comprehend the ongoing cultural and literary implications of displacement.”¹⁵ Works like these answer warning calls made as early as the 1990s, as Palestinians saw the “battle of liberation” reduced to a discussion about Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza.¹⁶ Some contemporary scholarship is working hard to widen the lens, or to make sure that all of Palestine’s “texts” are available for inclusion. What remains absent, however, and where the chapters below make their real contribution, is reimagining the architecture of the relationship between people and nation.

Being versus Becoming

Hero, Mother, Child

The hero-fighter and the mother of the martyr, whether embraced or abhorred, remain ubiquitous in Palestinian politics and culture as persistent yet awkward measuring sticks that assess whether and how one embodies Palestinianness. They are the only widely known markers for identity and belonging that, in theory, provide a road map for the fulfillment of both self and nation. Yet they are as likely to be treated with derision as they are to be taken up as (dysfunctional and problematic) models. In understanding the contemporary formulation of an actor-nation relationship, these tropes clearly need to be understood: What is their function? Why do they persist? Are they useful, or should they be discarded? Answering these questions requires a digression through the vast scholarship on tropes of Palestinian nationalism, their embedded assumptions about gender, and the relationships these encode for between self, sexuality, territory, and the shape of the nation. For, as scholars have long noted, living out the tropes of the nation and the aspirations for liberation have liberated neither the self nor Palestine. As Amy Zalman put it, the imaginative directions for a successful self and a successful nation “don’t all point in the same direction.”¹ The sections in this chapter explore how, why, and what an intertextual Palestine offers by way of a different model.

Analysis shows that the persistence of the mother/fighter tropes serves a two-pronged function. First, it is a space for discussion. Texts that take on the tropes and criticize them demonstrate to other characters (and indeed readers) where and how the models go wrong. Correctly reading and understanding why archetypes are problematic becomes part of the solution of surpassing them. Second, and just as crucial, the archetypes of the hero-fighter and the mother of the martyr are shown to be stale models of relationship linking actor and nation, models that were honed in earlier political moments. These “types” encoded for a relationship between Palestinian and Palestine when the nation was being imagined

as an eventual state. Criticizing these models, then, becomes synonymous with criticizing and reimagining the relationship between actor and nation. The tropes never fully disappear, however. Living in a world where the nation-state is the status quo, the ideal actors of Palestine learn to read and mobilize these limiting representations and inhabit them when it serves a broader interest; the roles are always relinquished, however, when they limit the possibility horizons of group and individual.

This chapter traces the parameters and usage of the hero-fighter and the mother of the martyr as problematic tropes of “becoming” Palestinian. It links these tropes to a time when Palestine was imagined as a nation-state-in-waiting and the national actor was understood to act in the service of realizing the state. With no state in sight, the trope and those who inhabited it were, in a sense, doomed to failure. Now that thinking and discourse has moved past the state, something else becomes possible, but of course the past does not disappear. Reading across the works of the Palestine Project, my analysis shows how the tropes of the nation-state are absorbed into the intertextual nation. This process, however, differs between the hero and mother ideals and is related to how they were co-constructed, with mother a substructure of the hero. For analysis, it makes sense to begin with the “heroes” of the Palestine Project, who are portrayed as variously corrupt, doomed to failure, or refusing to inhabit the hero model. It is this last approach that renders the hero a text and liberates the characters from it, leaving the individual free to follow what the next chapter describes more fully as a Palestinian orientation.

The third section examines the mother of the martyr trope. As a subordinated model—so that the hero is meant to realize the state, and the role of the mother is to support the hero rather than liberate Palestine directly²—the women characters of the Palestine Project texts have less difficulty escaping the trope. Reading characters, here the analysis moves on, building on the idea of the individual as an agent interacting with the texts of Palestine. Characters who are burdened with the trope of the mother show an adeptness at mobilizing, or engaging with, the symbol as and when it suits a wider purpose. This is a sort of balconic intertextuality, where texts of the nation help individuals successfully navigate the world around them. Comparing the portrayals of the hero and the mother, the characters’ ability to “succeed” is tied to their ability to critically assess the tropes and treat them as texts rather than as a direct 1:1 model whereby realizing the success of the self is inhabiting the goals and limits of the tropes. The middle section brings these into productive conversation and explores the child as an almost balconic option, not yet expected to perform the tropes and liberated somewhat from national expectations.

The child as the third, almost nonmarked, actor in the nation provides the analytical key for reading and interpreting the hero and mother tropes and the individuals who variously inhabit them. This is where the difference between the *bildungsroman*—as a genre that creates the ideal citizen of the nation-state—and the ideal citizen of an intertextual Palestine is most clear. The difference allows

for the beginnings of a definition of “success” for the citizen of this alternative nation form. Success, readings show, is not “becoming” the trope of the nation-state. Rather, “success” resides in resisting subsumation into outdated models and critically engaging these texts of the past. The sections in this chapter, then, move from the hero figure to the child to the mother, building at once a definition of the trope-as-text and a vocabulary for “success” that rests not on the “becoming” of the coming-of-age but on an open-ended and creative “being.”

DEAD-END HEROES

There is not one “successful” hero across Nasrallah’s Palestine Project. The only exceptions, as we see in the final section of this chapter, are the heroes who refuse the label and strike out on their own to redefine the terms of personal and national success. These successful heroes manage the simultaneous fulfillment of personal and communal aims through the performance of a role. At times this role coincides (in smaller or larger measure) with the trope of the hero. These examples, however, compete for attention with a cacophony of failures. From the lonely peasant who fights off the Ottoman tax man but is denied a life of love, to the corrupt Palestinian Authority lackey who uses the ideal of the hero to steal aid money, the shortcomings of the hero take up just as much space as its alternatives—if not more. Rather than discard the hero trope as a failure, then, this first section digs in, first to understand what exactly is failed and then to consider the function that inclusion of the trope serves in the construction of a relationship between nation and actor.

For the heroes of Nasrallah’s work, and indeed across much of Palestinian fiction, the further away from the possibility of a sovereign nation-state Palestine gets, the worse the failings of the hero. Reading this into existing literature on the hero figure, the trope is revealed as a construct of the nation-state/citizen relation, something that was constructed over time as Palestinian liberation became funneled into the desires of the nation-state. But even as the state became a less desired and even impossible option—at least in terms of a form that the individual could mature into or recognize personal achievement alongside—the figure remained. This dogged persistence of the figure of the fighter and all its failures acts as a warning of the kind of citizen model to avoid at all costs. This symbolic movement can be seen clearly in the heroes of the Palestine Comedies, whose two typical heroic figures live before the Nakba. Khalid, a protagonist in *Time of White Horses* (*Zaman al-khuyūl al-bayḍāʾ*, 2007), and Dhaher al-Omar, in *Lanterns of the King of Galilee* (*Qanādīl malik al-jalīl*, 2012), set in an earlier time, almost succeed in their mission of uniting personal and national/communal desires. Dhaher fails only because his sons do not manage to maintain his legacy, but Khalid, who lives the Nakba, fails because he must sacrifice love to resist powerful oppressors.

Unlike the rest of the heroes in the more contemporary-set works of the Palestine Project, Khalid is earnest in his attempts to co-constitute his own identity through a fight for the protection and preservation of his Palestinian community. After robbing the Ottoman tax collector of what was stolen from the village, Khalid becomes a local icon. He stood up for what he believed in and is celebrated as a result. But not without consequences. He is now pursued by the Ottoman authorities, and his village cannot protect him. This, on the one hand, elevates his hero status even higher. In his life as a fugitive from the vengeful authorities, he is transformed into a “silhouette, which blended with that of his horse, both frightening and mysterious” (146). On the other hand, it decimates his personal life and alienates him from actual participation in village life. As he hides in the mountains, Khalid’s fiancée’s father cancels the wedding because the heroic acts have put both families at risk of reprisals from Ottoman governors.

If Khalid was a local celebrity for his fight against the Ottomans, his assassination of a British official marks him as a national hero. But his life besides and beyond the heroic—of love, of family, of participation in his village community—disappears as his hero status increases. As he fights for the nation he, in the words of Mourid Barghouthi, “is elevated to a symbol, up there in the sky”; the essence of the man “slips from our hands” and is removed from the network of community.³ He remains a hero but is reduced to a myth, a “phantom atop the hill” (147), seen only from afar. Khalid turned “into something of a legend, a story told by young and old alike, to the point that some thought he actually was nothing more than a legend.”⁴ “Now that he had become larger than life, it was an easy thing for girls to fall in love with him” (152), but what they fell in love with was with the image of Khalid as a hero and not the fallible and at times foolish young man who the novel traces out in its opening chapters.

Becoming a hero for Khalid is a personal loss, one that haunts him. In the years to follow, though Khalid marries another, “he would later bring to mind” thoughts of his first beloved “to banish sorrow when it took him unawares, and when joy embraced him, to experience it in all its fullness” (101). In becoming a hero, Khalid is denied half of what, as Mahmoud Darwish describes it, makes him Palestinian. In a letter written just three months before the “national poet” passed away, he wrote to the authors attending the Palestine Festival of Literature: “The Palestinian is a human being, a tormented soul with daily questions; both national and existential. The Palestinian has a love story, who contemplates a flower and a window open to the unknown.”⁵ It was a potent reminder, from the man who so often felt “besieged” by the expectation to write the nation,⁶ that being Palestinian meant life as well as politics. For Darwish, and for Khalid, the national hero, the expectation that self and nation are co-constituted through creation and protection of sovereignty, proved a trap.

For Palestine, eager to join the world of states, the problematic yet persistent paradigm of the ideal citizen as hero-fighter emerged, then “slipped from the

hands” of a lived and changing reality, to become an immovable and problematic text. In this figuration, as Laleh Khalili explains it, “archetypal martyrs become iconic protagonists. They embody people’s histories,” and the story of the nation.⁷ These idylls represented a well-crafted vision of the currently stateless but inevitably independent Palestinian. The model of the fighter provided a framework, a form of co-constitution, or “citizenship,” that tied action for the nation to the imagined result of the liberation.⁸ This construction of a heroic ideal also set out goals and horizon possibilities, so that being Palestinian meant becoming or learning to inhabit these roles.⁹ In this model the self was meant to be both personally and nationally successful when the homeland was liberated. The road signs,¹⁰ in other words, that point toward personal fulfillment were at this point the same as those that lead to national success. At least from the 1960s (if not simultaneous with its creation), however, this figuration has been critiqued and shown as problematic. Yet this ideal persists as the sole available measuring stick for national being.

This stock figure gained status as powerful myth. The idea of the fighter gave individuals what Massad calls “nationalist agency”¹¹—the personal ability to identify and be identified as Palestinian. The hero, as Zeina Halabi put it, “personified the stable triangulation of past/present/future and the inevitable transition to a future of certainty and liberation.”¹² But while the fighter gave a community a sense of purpose and direction in a world of states, it subjected the individual to the teleology of a guaranteed and predetermined outcome of the nation—but only if that nation was a nation-state. It is because of this figuration that the Palestinian national experience is so often described as one of waiting for Godot,¹³ the title of the Samuel Beckett play about interminable waiting, where, as one critic describes it, “objectives no longer exist[,] . . . [and] time does not exist either, life is ‘treading water,’ so to speak.”¹⁴ Neither nation nor its actors can be fulfilled until a state is realized. The national hero cannot truly be read as successful until the nation is free (sovereign). For Khalid, taking up this role estranged him from himself.

Where Khalid might be seen as “just” a tragic hero facing impossible circumstances, the divisions visible between the idea of the hero and the reality of the person are widened in *Eraser Child* (2000), a work in the Palestine Comedies set chronologically after Khalid’s failure to save Palestine. The novel, like *Time of White Horses*, ends roughly at the Nakba and follows the protagonist Fouad’s childish dreams of heroic success and the problems that result as the mantle of the hero is thrust too quickly upon him. As the narrator puts it, Fouad “became one of the famous, no, the heroes, before [he was] given a chance” (186)—a chance, in this case, to see the hero as a false promise. Fouad’s peers see only his physique and read in his facial hair the old adage that “a man’s honor lies in his moustache,”¹⁵ equating honor with masculinity and masculinity with power and presuming that the trifecta will lead to inevitable success. So powerful is this image that the day Fouad is sent from the village to the British Legion, “no one saw the tear” that fell from his eye as he wept in fear and sadness “because their gazes—all of them—

were on the thick and substantial moustache sitting atop [his] lip like the sign of a person who was more than his age" (43).

In this hapless character, the "signs" of the hero repeatedly come up false, but the idea is so powerful that despite his continued failures everyone is certain of his success. This continues to the end of the novel, when Fouad returns to Amman after failing to save Jerusalem-Palestine. Even at this loss his superiors would insist he is a hero, declaring, "If it weren't for you we would have lost the rest" (272). So while Palestine was lost, the ideal of the hero meant to save it somehow remains. And as Fouad breaks down—as we see in chapter 7—spending his days looking into a giant mirror he has bought for the barracks, he looks for the child who never had a chance to find his own way, for the *ṭifl al-mimhāt* (eraser child; erased child)—the child (and perhaps the nation) that was erased by the vision of the hero. These problems, we see, are not just for Fouad as a person: his personal development ceases as the world he inhabits calcifies him as "hero." Fouad takes up arms as a member of the Arab Liberation Army (*jaysh al-inqādh*, the glorious Pan-Arab effort to save Palestine from colonial forces), and despite or even because of his calcified hero status, he loses every battle he is in. Thus, as Joseph Massad has argued, the promise of the hero is false because the hero figure represents a way of being Palestinian modeled on "western-style nationalism,"¹⁶ and in its figuration repeats the limitations of the sate model (not least of which is the highly gendered nature of the roles). The hero represents a linear developmental model whose goal is bounded by territorial sovereignty, the creation of a container that can hold and retroactively make meaning out of their struggle.

The more contemporary "heroes" are even more removed from the pastoral "phantom atop a hill" figuration and either blatantly manipulate the idea to gain authority or refigure it entirely. In *Olives of the Streets* (2002), the local leader, a member of the PLO, rapes the work's protagonist, who finally convinces a local sheikh that she is being abused. He attempts action, but when he sees who the perpetrator is, he does nothing. The leader, known only by his honorific title "Ḥaḍrat," or Sir, is respected because of his role in the community (not for any leadership attributes), so no one intervenes. "Sir" wields his power and its promise of national, personal, and community fulfillment and leaves Salwa feeling as though her "teeth were stuck together, no, my teeth had melted, one into the other" (132). Criticism of the leader and the promises his position held were socially prohibited.

In *Under the Midmorning Sun* (2004), a similarly nameless al-Duktūr (the Doctor) demonstrates that the same formula for abuse holds as the PLO transforms into the Palestinian Authority. Charged with setting up a pseudo-state in parts of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip under the auspices of the Oslo Accords of 1993, the PA again transforms the idea of the hero as an expression of power and authority. Al-Duktūr mobilizes the idea to suck up the aid money that came with the Accords. Claiming to be developing Palestinians through theater, he uses his position as director to step over (and on top of) his conationals and to elevate

himself. This “hero” takes on his nickname, “the Doctor,” “as if the title was what he had been waiting for from the moment of his birth” (25)—though he never earned it. His title is as false as the ideal he wields: returning with the Accords to develop and modernize a fragmented Palestine so that it could take a place among nations. Al-Duktūr is precisely the lie of what Stephan Guth describes as “steady progress, a bright future lying ahead, and near victory,” which quickly “turned out to be a fatal lie, a mere fiction.”¹⁷ If, as Laleh Khalili has written, in post-Oslo Ramallah “the people [were] divided into two groups: that of the select who rule and steal, and that of the majority which complains and searches for someone to save it,”¹⁸ then al-Duktūr is surely in the first and represents perhaps the worst of the problems of a new Palestinian leadership in his actions and the way he uses the idea of the hero and its “modernist discourse” to manipulate others.¹⁹

In no cases does the hero-fighter adequately provide an ideal for the individuals inhabiting it to relate to the nation. The mantle of the hero is separated from the individual—who might claim it, wear it, or abuse it—but can never be fully realized by fulfilling the hero-fighter’s different manifestations. Rather, the paradigm of the fighter limits the possibilities for the individual and the way they can participate in the nation. The hero is left behind as a model for the citizen precisely because it is closed, stagnant, and not in active relationship with the parts of Palestine. The hero is portrayed as a political configuration that might once have had, but quickly loses its relationship to the lived conditions of Palestinian reality. It is left behind as a text of power, a text whose structure imitates the linear and teleological model of the nation-state. It is the figure of the child—not yet completely burdened with the need to perform the national tropes—that allows the hero-fighter to remain as a text and provides an alternative figuration for the actor-nation relationship.

FREEDOM FROM “BECOMING”

Children in the works of the Palestine Project, and in Palestinian literature more broadly, often represent a freedom from the pressures to fit into existing tropes of the nation. Where for adults the prospect of a failure to fit is equated to a failure of the individual, for the child—especially the young child—there is not yet pressure to mature, or to develop, in a particular way. In this freedom the child provides a model of the actor-nation relationship liberated from the drive to “become” or to inhabit a particular goal. Young children do not need to “become” national; they simply “are.” The difference boils down to grammar, being/becoming, but utterly shifts the role of the individual and the nation. The most carefully examined example of this difference—becoming versus being—is Nasrallah’s *Birds of Caution* (*Ṭuyūr al-ḥadhar*, 1996), where the basic tenets of the bildungsroman are mobilized and subverted. The child demonstrates to the reader the possibility of being in the world without the traps of “becoming” national through maturity and gender performance. Once the paradigm of being is established in the character

of *al-ṣaghīr*, it is easy to see the same at work for children across the works of the Palestine Project, who collectively define what it means to “be” Palestinian.

“Becoming” a citizen, a national of a nation and a successful member of its community, is, in Slaughter’s terms, to be recognized as an “incorporated citizen.”²⁰ A person, in other words, who in their actions constitutes the state because their end goals are coterminous with the ideology of the nation. This co-constitution, especially in postcolonial contexts, offers what Pheng Cheah calls a fictive “remedy” for the dislocation and ruptures of colonization.²¹ In generic terms, narrating this type of becoming is a *bildungsroman*, or literally, a story of training or education in that very *nahda*-era sense, where an individual was trained to be modern and live “properly” as an agent of the world (of course, the world according to colonial designs). But in the case of Palestine, when there is no state, performing the trappings of a state, or even a state-in-waiting, leaves the individual alienated from community—as we saw in the section above. In fact, the actor in and of Palestine must unlearn the paradigms of nation-state-ness and, instead of “becoming” national through this education, learn from the state of the child and simply—in an open-ended and flexible sense—“be.”

As the first novel that Nasrallah produced after determining to write *the* national story, his boy protagonist is bound to be invested with heavy national meaning. However, the child, known only as *al-ṣaghīr*, is very specifically *not* a fighter who marks territory, protects land and women, or presumes that by being able to protect women/nation he will be fulfilled. He is not Kanafani’s Mansour from “The Child Borrows His Uncle’s Gun and Goes to Safad” (to which we will shortly return); he is not a vision of a fighter-in-waiting. And while his life is forged by key landmarks in Palestinian politics, it is not these that his life story is collected around. As chapter 3 drew out, the boy’s perception accumulates impressions of a national experience rather than a preset national narrative, and these are assembled into an open-ended framework that represents Palestine. What this section traces is the one thing that does, in a sense, drive the narrative that the boy offers: not the necessity to meet others’ expectations, but instead a love for birds.

The symbol of flight, of freedom as an ideal, crafts a new configuration of nation/actor that avoids the traps of teleology and maintains an open view to the possibilities of the future. Crucially, it also remaps the gendered hierarchies of the hero/mother, where the hero must protect the mother/land, and the mother must nurture the child to fight. This, as the title *Birds of Caution* hints, is done delicately through a linkage between the boy’s emerging sexuality and the understanding he develops of protection—specifically, protection of birds (and then later, of women and friendships). The link comes most pointedly early on, when the boy refuses to hunt birds in the fields around the Wihdat camp like the other boys. When *al-ṣaghīr* captures the birds in nets, traps, and cages, he releases them, to “teach them caution,” so they learn how the traps work and won’t get caught in them again. *Al-ṣaghīr* teaches his friend Khalil about the traps. When their first catch

flies away from the net, Khalil cries, “We lost him!” to which the boy replies, “We gained him” (123). For *al-ṣaghīr*, “gaining” the bird is ensuring that it would not be captured, that it would stay safe and free—a condition he charges himself with maintaining. This idea of learning about traps and avoiding them is gradually mapped onto the tropes of “becoming” in the form of the fighter and the mother of the fighter. But first it is linked with sexuality.

This association and the understanding of protection from being trapped is also what motivates the boy’s amorous actions and his vision of masculinity. This does not always go over well with the other boys in the camp, who complain, “You taught the birds to be cautious and now none of us are able to catch them” (114). While the boy can prevent other camp kids from catching birds by teaching the birds caution, when they start “hunting” his beloved (145) with no intention of “releasing” her, the boy is at a loss. His beloved, Hanun, had also, from the start, been associated with the symbol of the bird. She is the daughter of a neighbor in the Duheisheh camp near Bethlehem, and when the boy, not yet through his first weeks of life, hears her feet ruffling the edges of her dress, her “soft footsteps” are forever associated with the “singing [of bird feathers], with the same ruffling beat” (8). We learn that for *al-ṣaghīr*, love does not mean possession, or staking a claim, but is an active protection of people and animals (and Palestine) from the traps that would see them confined.

There can be little doubt that the boy—whose gendered name *al-ṣaghīr* clearly marks him as male but not-yet-a-man—operates as a redefinition of gender-nation associations. It is no longer virility, in its associations with the binaries passivity/aggression, weakness/strength, defeat/victory, that orients the boy’s view of his power. This is shown clearly when the boy is teased for not fitting typical tropes. He understands that he is being mocked but responds on and in his own terms. Playing on the Palestinian slang for a young boy’s penis (*hamāma*, also the slang for “dove”), *al-ṣaghīr* is belittled by his peers when he challenges them on their treatment of Hanun. “Don’t you have a *hamāma*?” his rival teases, intimating that *al-ṣaghīr* is still a boy and unable to compete for Hanun’s affections. The boy does not respond to the associations about manhood and virility, however. He responds in the language of birds: “No, I have an *‘uṣfūr* [lit., “bird”]” (145). He is not weak like a captured dove, his response intimates, but is free like the birds he teaches caution in the fields. He does not define success in the performance of masculinity or trappings of the national hero and—reading further—sees this construction as a trap, just like the trap he teaches the birds to avoid.

With these insights, even stories of children read as prototypes of the national hero from the golden age of resistance in the late 1960s can easily be recast. Kana-fani’s canonical character Mansour of “The Child Borrows His Uncle’s Gun and Goes to Safad,” for example, may take up arms to protect the nation, but he does so to escape a set of community expectations that deny him agency and trap him in a doomed national configuration. The story of Mansour is set during the Nakba

but appears in Kanafani's 1968 collection, *Of Men and Guns* ('*An al-rijāl wa al-banādiq*'),²² so it can be said to reflect on the Nakba rather than to offer an account of its events.

Watching the adults in his life panic as word of Zionist militias emptying nearby towns and cities spreads, the young Mansour begs his uncle for the old man's even older Turkish gun. Despite being refused, he disobeys his elders and heads to Safad with his uncle's gun, as the title of the story suggests. In doing so, he disregards admonitions that he is too weak, too small, too immature to carry the gun, and he makes the journey and contributes to the battle. Heroes, after all, are grown men. While he holds his own in battle—proving that this sort of heroism is not limited to grown men—the battle is lost. The lesson here is not that the stubborn persistence of the child is a model for men.

Mansour's father, who had taken a weapon and gone to Safad to fight, is killed. Mansour is there to witness his death, and the story concludes with Mansour "in the wet emptiness watching his father slowly dying, impotent and unmoving."²³ In no case does the model of the hero succeed—not in the elderly uncle trying to protect the child from battle, not in the father fighting for the safety of the land. The only success, as Hilary Kilpatrick's deft analysis shows, is the boy's, because he alone is able to see when existing structures are holding both person and Palestine back.²⁴ The often-missed moral of the story is defiance of rigid structures and established notions of producing self/nation. Mansour, in reading the world around him, challenging tropes, and finding his own way, parallels *al-ṣaghīr* in what is ultimately a call to subvert stale authority structures. Indeed, for both children, as Kilpatrick puts it for the world of Mansour, "authoritative structures are being radically modified by the forces of circumstance"²⁵—and it seems possible only for children to escape these structures and forge alternatives that better suit circumstances. And there is the crux: the child succeeds because he can see when the "authoritative structures" are getting in the way.

While the child in both cases finds his own path toward the linkage between self and nation, *al-ṣaghīr* and Mansour are also ultimately swallowed by the larger failures of the worlds they inhabit. Mansour's story finishes in the "wet emptiness" of a lost Palestine, while *al-ṣaghīr* works futilely to maintain his model of being in a world structured by hero and state. This position, however, becomes more and more difficult to maintain. His beloved Hanun joins the resistance as tension in the camp heightens, what would come to be known as Black September approaches, and a clash with Jordanian authorities ultimately finds Palestinian politics removed from the country and displaced to Beirut. Against this backdrop, where the figure of the fighter reigned, *al-ṣaghīr* tries to maintain his worldview. When Hanun goes missing the boy announces that he will fly (*yaṭīr*) to find her. It is as he goes to find her that he is killed—trying to liberate his beloved from a paradigm of nation and citizenship he sees as fruitless. For the boy, it is better to teach caution.

How the novel narrates the boy's death is telling. It is not told as an ending but uses obscured language to keep open the infinitesimal possibility that he is still alive and at the same time drawing on eschatological tropes that see him leaving the earth toward the sky. The narrator describes the boy soaring over the camp looking for his beloved to make sure she is not captured in the nets of politics, but he cannot find her and gets tired. The boy-now-bird (a national martyr who would refuse the mantle) "cannot find a place to land" (331); there is no safe space. Finally, in what reads as a sort of dream, the boy finds Hanun, and as birds, they fly away together (332). For the story of the boy, which becomes a national story, it is the bird and its freedom—attained through caution—that now signify the link between actor and nation. But the world he lives in is not yet ready for the new configuration. It is up to the women characters, the would-be mothers of would-be martyrs, to find a way to live in and through this refusal to "become" in the sense of the bildungsroman and to rather "be" in an open-ended and, as it transpires, intertextual sense.

WOMEN'S SUCCESS

*And what if the symbol is lost? If the symbol is lost, I lose myself. What's left?
 . . . I'm no longer the land, no longer the symbol, no longer the sun, but I'm
 the feeling . . .*

—SAHAR KHALIFEH²⁶

From Salwa's launch of Abd al-Rahman's manuscript out the window in *Olives of the Streets* to Randa's exasperated accusation that Gaza's newspaper editors are slaves to existing narrative formulas when they reject her articles on the lives of children killed amid the Intifada (*Amina's Weddings*), women in Nasrallah's series are critical of the limited forms of representation that the fighter/mother paradigm offers. Randa, for example, is the first to remind readers that the "hero" is also a person in a body who "eats and drinks and watches television, and dreams and plays or gets angry or listens to music or goes to the bathroom" (*Amina's Weddings*, 61). Without these details, she regrets, the individual "is pushed aside and we don't see anything of the poet but his poetry" (61). This is a grave mistake, the young writer warns, because it reduces a person to a frame "as a character becomes a character in novels" (61). She here takes aim at the teleological character, that frame of already determined becoming that constructs not only the ideals of the hero but the mother as well. Crucially, for Randa and the other women of Palestinian fiction, there is a difference in the construction of the mother of the martyr that allows a remove from the pressures of "becoming" and opens a pragmatic and intertextual space to "be" within and between the texts of the nation.

The role of Palestinian women, like men, relied on the idea that the Palestine sought was a bounded and sovereign state. Beth Baron has deftly shown the

symbolic relationship between sovereign national territory and women's sexual purity,²⁷ where "nationalists elevated the concept of family honor, which was based on female purity, to a national plane, and honor became a larger communal affair. . . . The nation had an honor to defend, and those who shared honor made up the nation."²⁸ While Baron looked at Egyptian sources, the same formulation holds true for Palestinian women.²⁹ Of course, without the nation-state, the idea of a woman as a bordered space that shouldn't be violated transformed to accommodate the needs of the national movement. And the national movement was based on the hero. Rhoda Anne Kananneh, citing Foucault, observed that the role of women was to "integrate . . . in the state's utility,"³⁰ which in very blatant terms was to take care of the fighter or produce (by birthing) more fighters. Women were the territory to be protected and were what would sustain the fighters until the land might take their place. Despite this apparent complementarity, the role of the woman in this national configuration is dependent—for the realization of either personal or communal success—on the role of the man.

In the figuration of the Palestinian there is no such thing, Massad explains, "as *Palestinian women* struggling for Palestinian women's rights, but as *Palestinian* women struggling for discursively constituted Palestinian rights."³¹ No matter the actions or personal desires of the woman national, he goes on, "Palestinian is always already conceived in the masculine."³² Where the relationship between actor and nation for men was modeled on the state and becoming a fighter to protect the idea of that state, for women, the self as a national being could be fulfilled only by discursively supporting the default male role. So where men—aiming to "mature" and come of age into their role as Palestinians—were done violence by having to fit into the *particular I* of the state structure or risk being socially invisible, women were done a double violence in that their limited belonging is a by-product of another construction. In the only real existing construction of a national, women are twice removed from the nation. Women were thus at a remove from the nation-state construct. This remove created a sort of vantage on the impossible nature of the construction. This vantage, we shall see, created the beginnings of a balconic position from which women could identify, critique, and then engage with the text of the hero trope.

Salwa, the protagonist of *Olives of the Streets*, has the most direct approach to the portrayal of women-as-land-as-mothers. When she reads the manuscript of Abd al-Rahman, the journalist who sought to make his fame by exposing the corruption of a local PLO leader who abused her, she sees in it her reduction into a trope of the nation(state)—the evidence of a man's failure to be the hero he claims to be. Salwa is literally handed the national tropes as a text, a text she also literally throws out the window. While this act of rejection doesn't ever really get rid of the powerful figuration of the hero/mother, it does liberate Salwa from any personal expectation that she must reproduce the model. The text still exists, just not as something that Salwa chooses to embrace or use as a personal benchmark.

Critically, with the ideal of motherhood “out the window,” it can then be critiqued, rendering the relationship between the person and the idea intertextual. As texts in dialogue, the distinctness of each is preserved, and it is the conversation generated between the two that provides a model of “being” that is the new ideal for the national (of any gender).

As “being” rather than “becoming” nationals, women characters in the Palestine Project are constantly engaging with the texts of the nation—including the tropes of the hero and the mother. Reading this engagement provides a clear example of how the in/out vantage of the balcony allows for an intertextual approach to “being.” The most sustained example of this in the Palestine Project comes in *Amina’s Weddings* (2004), set in Second Intifada-era Gaza, where the protagonist, Randa, nearly literally rewrites the paradigmatic mother figure. She goes direct to the source, to Ghassan Kanafani’s *Umm Saad*.³³ Written in 1969—short years after the Arab defeat of 1967—the work is about its titular character, known only as the “mother of Saad.” The woman, of unknown but apparently advanced age, is portrayed as a paragon of steadfastness, a hero herself and mother of natural heroes (the novella reveals that her son Saad has gone off to join the resistance). She is transformed from the mother of Saad, symbolically, to the mother of all fighters, giving up on worry for her son and displacing that worry onto the nation and its safe return. Umm Saad becomes the mother of Palestine, made a mother by her willingness to transfer love of an individual son to love of collective “sons” of the nation. This system of signification turns Umm Saad from a person into a symbol.³⁴ Even in Kanafani’s words, the character “is not an individual woman” but becomes a myth.³⁵ This representation troubles Randa, who is busy recording the grief of the mothers of her neighborhood, whose children had been killed by the Israeli military during the Intifada. The experience of recording these “real women” prompts her to ask, “How many pages would Ghassan Kanafani have written if he wanted to say the story of Umm Saad in all its minute detail?” (62).

Living in a community of women whose men are absent—off fighting, in prison, dead—Randa seeks a role. She also seeks a narrative space for her experiences on a national level. Her search begins when, seeking to “make sense” of what is happening in Gaza during the Intifada, she records the stories of martyred children from her neighborhood. At first, she tried to have the stories published in the local paper, but the editors tell her they aren’t important. So she decides to compile them in a book of her own. She writes in her diary, along with the stories of the children killed and their mothers’ memories, an extended reflection on the woman that is Umm Saad. So not only does Randa refuse the subordinate position—waiting to be protected or liberated, in the wings while the men act—but she engages the paradigmatic figure of this construction and asks why it came to be. In her writing, Randa critiques the model, recognizes it as a text produced for a particular moment in time, recognizes its (limited) utility, and engages the text so as to expand on it. Her diary entry is worth quoting at length.

I know a woman like Umm Saad, she will always be amazing, but will she be amazing in the same way after twenty, thirty, forty years? Maybe she was like me, like us, but this is not exactly my question:

How did Ghassan put the most beautiful of her in the novel?

Was it because when she met him she loved him like he was Saad her son, and so he made her feelings erupt as though she was talking about her soul? Or because the novel wouldn't be a novel if it was like that, and her character couldn't be a character if it wasn't like that? He said what he needed to say in the time that he had, and said it in the words that he had in mind, and no other words but them, and made the rest disappear, only to appear a second time and say what must be said at another moment?

How many pages would Ghassan Kanafani have written if he wanted to say the story of Umm Saad in all its minute detail? And would we love her if we read her life in a thousand pages, or two thousand? Would we love her like we loved her in ninety pages? And is she full here, not missing anything, simply filling the moments of a time that the people have left behind? (62)

Randa wonders about the possibility, half a century after Kanafani created the character, of representing Umm Saad as a woman saddened by the loss of her son. As Randa's grandmother warns, to write a woman the way Kanafani wrote Umm Saad was to tell only one part of her. This was dangerous, the elder warned, because if a person buys into the narrative, "they'll remember their shadows more than they remember their real selves, and with time, they won't be able to see anything but a picture" (121). Randa wants more than a picture. And so, in fact, did Kanafani.

According to those who have read Kanafani's personal papers, "there are indications that he wrote, or thought of writing, at least two further episodes about her."³⁶ He too had sought to expand on or multiply the possibilities of the mother, but his life was cut short by a car bomb planted by Israeli intelligence agents, which killed both the writer and his young niece. Almost as if he knew he would not have enough time, or that it was not yet the right time for a more diverse and complex portrayal of the Palestinian mother, Kanafani lamented, "If only there were enough time, now one could really write some Palestinian stories!"³⁷ It is, perhaps, only as a series that the agent of the nation can imagine themselves (as full and complex individuals) as part of the nation (which is equally full and complex). Randa takes this to heart. In her renderings, women are not frozen "as a character becomes a character in novels" (61); rather she writes compilations "about them[,] . . . what they said, what they dreamed of" (125).

The further Randa gets from the codified, newspaper, novelized, stock models of people and life in Gaza, the closer she comes to understanding the world around her. As she gains access and understanding of her experience of Palestine—as a person and a place trapped within structures of power—she realizes it is not the tropes that have helped her understand. It is rather the opposite. Knowledge and

understanding of her context come, for Randa, from “mothers who never went to school a day in their lives.” Randa hears, repeatedly, “something so deep, so insightful, that no learned person would be able to say half of it” (60). This leads the young woman to the profound conclusion that Kanafani had “said what he needed to say in the time that he had.”³⁸ She takes it upon herself to continue the story. The trope of the mother is thus undone as a teleological and closed tool of becoming through intertextual engagement: reimagining Umm Saad from a different place and in the “time that she had.” Thus, representations of the mother figure also take on their place and time. Rather than the only available model of “becoming” national, they take their place as texts within an intertextual Palestine. Women like Randa and Salwa demonstrate how these texts can be—often productively—engaged with, either as a declaration of a life otherwise or to dig deeper into the many “sides” of women (and indeed most characters). Engaging with the trope opens essential conversations, both within the texts and for the reader. For both, it becomes clear that the nation has moved on from the hero/mother paradigm but certainly not forgotten.

The “successful” citizen, then, sees Palestine moment by moment, refuses limitation, and understands representation within larger systems, where at a time and a place reducing the self or nation to a single “part” is necessary or inevitable but is always escapable. This approach to the world, perhaps, is the teaching of caution, so that once the time and the place have changed, the citizen can continue to grow, to be reconstituted within the full range of national possibility. Rather than closed, determined, and rigidly gendered individuals failing to liberate a sovereign homeland, citizens navigate, witness, and produce the nation through their own acknowledgment of lived experience. Citizens, then, do not “become” Palestinian in a process of maturation but rather learn to navigate their nation in a constant quest to remain and keep others out of the traps presented by the systems of power and delimitation that exist therein. If for the character of the *bildungsroman* there is the constant possibility of falling out of the trajectory of the state, and “failing” as a national personality because the goals of the individual do not line up with the desires of the nation, for the citizen of Nasrallah’s Palestine, the trap is rather the inability to see, to critique, or to maintain distance from the *telos* and its echoes, in order to remain oriented within Palestine. But what, exactly, makes this approach to the world Palestinian? It is to this question that the next chapter turns, to build further on the notion of orientation.