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Crafting Alternative Visual Narratives on Palestine

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The artworks embedded in this issue of *Feral Feminisms* on Free Palestine! are part of a sketch study for a solo exhibition I am working on about Palestinian memory.

The exhibition offers alternative visual narratives about the Palestinian cause from my own perspective. I am neither Palestinian nor Israeli. I grew up learning about Palestine from a Western-dominant point of view. That is why one of the rationales behind my works is to create images and artistic representations of Palestine and Palestinians that challenge the dominant Israeli/Western narratives about how they are perceived.

As is known, this "conflict" is as much a struggle of arms as it is of narratives. While the world knows and recognizes the Israeli narrative—since Israeli officials describe themselves as the greatest victims of history—very few recognize the Palestinian one. This is caused by the hegemony of the Zionist discourse, which diminishes and excludes any oppositional narrative to its own, especially from the subjects it oppresses: the Palestinians.

Therefore, instead of hearing about Palestinian efforts to liberate their lands from a brutal occupying regime, the Israeli narrative has managed to convince many that Palestinians are savage terrorists who threaten the existence of the only Jewish state, or the "only democracy in the Middle East," as Israel likes to describe itself. Consequently, the Palestinians have become encapsulated in frames constructed by the politics of fear that not only shape how they are viewed globally but also deny them any sort of global support or sympathy.

Given that Israeli narratives are so dominant, denying the legitimacy of the Palestinian narrative, it is necessary for artists, writers, activists, and truth-sayers to take action to challenge this discursive dictatorship that blames the victims and glorifies the oppressors. This way, we can shape future historical narratives so that voices and images from the margin are also heard and recognized for what they are.

This is especially imperative now after the recent and ongoing heinous acts of mass genocide in Gaza, where more than 9,000 children have been killed and a total of around 30,000 Palestinian civilians have been murdered indiscriminately in the name of protecting the Jewish state. Currently, there is an utmost need to unite and speak up against these documented war crimes against humanity and call for the accountability of those who commit them, as no child should be killed under any pretext.

A State of Capitulation (pencils on paper, A4, 2023)

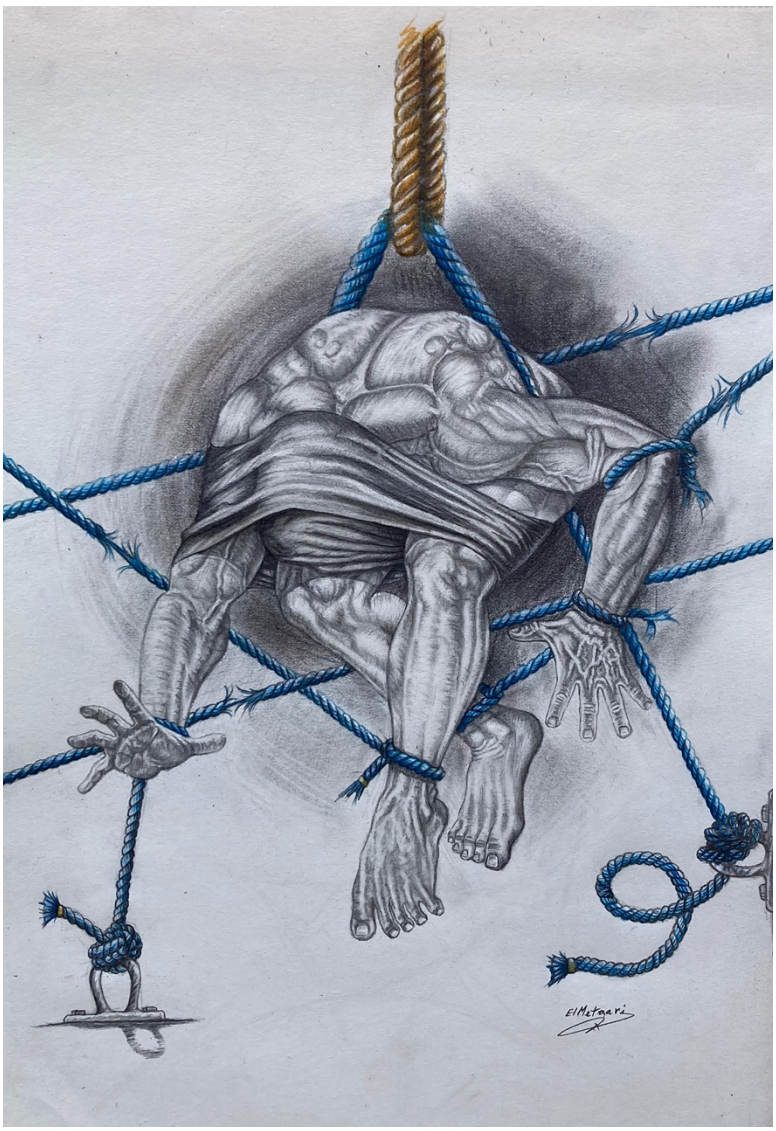

Figure 1: A graphite sketch of a muscular body, head covered, rendered in black and white, pulled in all sides by blue ropes attached to a brown rope noose.

The first artwork in this series is a sketch for a painting I am developing. This sketch is directly inspired by the artworks of the Kuwaiti artist Sami Muhammed, who expresses the torture of Middle Eastern subjects with his body depictions like no other. In this artwork, I intend to portray the total state of *capitulation* to which the Palestinians are subjected. This specific term was used by the Palestinian-American literary critic Edward W. Said to convey the complete state of surrender and hopelessness of the Palestinians in the aftermath of the 1993 Oslo Accords (Said 1996).

As of now, despite being colonized by a brutal settler-colonial regime, the Palestinians are not allowed to have a state of their own, an army, nor are they permitted to carry arms to defend themselves against encroaching armed settlers or IDF/IOF forces invading their homes. The situation has further deteriorated, with certain undemocratic Arab countries opting to establish normalized relations with Israel, effectively leaving the Palestinians utterly isolated. Nevertheless, recent developments in Gaza have ignited a wave of vocal support for Gazans and Palestinians, prompting a collective denouncement of Israel for its true nature among the peoples of the world. South Africa, previously an Apartheid nation, has even gone as far as presenting a genocide case against Israel at the International Court of Justice (ICJ). Consequently, the metaphorical ropes binding the Palestinian body in the sketch can now be perceived as on the verge of breaking.

Humanizing Resistance (acrylic and watercolors on paper, A3, 2020)

Figure 2: A powerful central figure in drapery looks up to the sky, hands open in prayer. In front of her is a rifle, wrapped in a rose and ear of wheat, with Palestinian patterns below. In the background is a mosque, colorful, against a bright blue sky.

The second painting challenges and aims to rectify the narrative surrounding resistance, which has been dehumanized by Western media discourse. The primary objective of this painting is to humanize resistance and legitimize the Palestinian right to self-defense. This legitimacy extends not only to Gaza, where there is an armed resistance, but also to the West Bank and the Occupied Territories, where cruel forms of Apartheid and occupation persist. Therefore, to humanize resistance, the elements of the rose and the ear of wheat have been added, both serving as national symbols of steadfastness and human struggle for liberation among pro-Palestinians.

The inclusion of the central figure represents a model that reinforces the role of women in Palestinian society, a role often neglected by Western media discourse, which tends to present them as passive subjects. In Palestinian culture, the figure of the mother and motherhood is one of the most persistent themes in Palestinian literature and arts. This also asserts the equivocal insistence of the Palestinian people, whether children or adults, on their right to a secure an independent state.

At the bottom of the painting, there is an embroidery motif inspired by Palestinian embroidery art, symbolizing Palestinian folk heritage, and emphasizing Palestinian identity, which is consistently violated by Israel along with Palestinian history and identity. Of course, there is also the Dome of the Rock, representing the focal point of the so-called conflict between the two sides. Each side claims its rightful place in it, but the Israeli side refuses to acknowledge the legitimacy and rights of the Palestinians.

Refugees in Their Own Land (Oil on Canvas, 60x 45.5 cm, 2022)

Figure 3: Three children sit on a wall, clad in bright clothing, with one wearing a keffiyeh and holding a Palestinian flag. They look out on a city with Israeli flags.

Inspired by the artworks of the great Palestinian artist Sliman Mansour (Sherwell 2012), this painting offers a counter-narrative to the foundational Zionist narrative which claimed that Palestine was a "land without a people for a people without a land." The problem with this colonial narrative is that it violently removes the Palestinians who inhabited and inhabit the land. Hence, the Zionist movement built its settlements by expelling and dispossessing the Indigenous population that resided in Palestine for centuries. Not only this, but it also made and makes refugees out of them in their own land and in neighboring Arab countries, residing in camps and ghettos in Gaza, Lebanon, or Jordan. This dispossession and displacement resulted in a situation where the real inhabitants of the land became stateless refugees, and Europe's ethnic group/refugees were settled in another country that is not theirs without any legitimacy, grasping onto a narrative with multiple interpretations and various colonial pretexts.

After WWI, all the previous Ottoman states were colonized by France and England. Whereas most of those states gained their independence after WWII, Palestine remained the last colony that is yet to gain its independence. Ironically, another white supremacist, majorly European entity was the one to announce its independence—the State of Israel, resulting in the greatest refugee crisis that continues to amplify in our modern time.

On the other hand, this painting is a response to all Zionist attempts to annex and dispossess Palestinian territories, especially in Jerusalem. Undoubtedly, the attempts to dispossess the Christian and Muslim Arabs who live in historic Palestinian neighborhoods like Sheikh Jarrah are a prominent example of this. Additionally, my piece serves as a pointed response to the Abraham Accords agreements which gave an Arab blessing to this dispossession. These newly established agreements with this settler colonial entity, which is based on racial segregation, contribute to denying the Palestinians the right to have an independent state, like all other citizens of the world.

Works Cited

Said, Edward W. 1996. *Peace and Its Discontents: Essays on Palestine in the Middle East Peace Process*. New York City: Vintage Books.

Sherwell, Tina. 2012. "Jerusalem: City of Dreams." *Jerusalem Quarterly* 49 (Spring): 43–53.

MOHAMED EL METMARI is a Moroccan visual artist and an independent blogger based in Larache, Morocco. He taught drawing and painting to adolescents from 2018 to 2021 at D'art Elfen, an NGO he cofounded. He has also participated in several collective exhibitions. Currently, he is working on his solo exhibition on Palestinian memory. In addition to being an artist, Mohamed obtained his Masters in critical theory, English literature, and philosophy from Abdelmalek Essaadi University. His thesis focuses on the Khan Younis and Rafah Massacres of 1956. He has contributed opinion articles to platforms like *Al Jazeera Arabic, The New Arab, Derin Tarih Magazine, The Palestine Chronicle,* and *Countercurrents*. You can follow his art on Instagram (https://www.instagram.com/elmetmari_artworks/) and at DeviantArt: https://www.deviantart.com/elmetmari.