SIX

BEING A BORDER

Honaida Ghanim

> "You can be a citizen or you can be stateless, but it is difficult to imagine *being* a border."
>
> —Andre Green in Etienne Balibar, *Politics and the Other Scene*

Abu Ahmad was twenty-seven when the 1949 Rhodes ceasefire agreement was signed between Israel and Jordan, leaving him on one side of the new border and his parents, brothers, and sisters on the other. For him the agreement was a private disaster that decontextualized his social map. Abu Ahmad found an extraordinary way to reconnect with people now on the opposite side. Every day he would sit for a few hours at the top of a rock in the eastern side of Tulkarim where he now lives, with his eyes to the main street that connects Tulkarim with his mother village Dayr al-Ghusun. He counted the passing cars: "Thirty cars passed today," he would say to his friends who thought he was losing his mind.

Fatmeh was thirty-five when the borders kept her on one side and her family on the other. But she was more fortunate than Abu Ahmad, since she had land next to her parents. In those early years, only a line through the field indicated the inside and outside, a line preserved by the Jordanian and Israeli security forces. Fatmeh and her mother used to pretend that they were digging the land as they whispered their news and updates to each other. Most of the time they were lucky. But if the Jordanian guards saw them talking, they would shout at the mother who was on their side: "How dare you talk to the Jews," meaning, of course, her daughter!

THE CONSTRUCTION OF INSIDE/OUTSIDE

Relying on self-reflection and stories from family, neighbors, and friends in my home village of Marjeh, in the Triangle region, I explore how Palestinians there created symbolic and substantive practices that aimed on one hand to recapture their social life as they lived it before the partition of 1948–1949, and on the other hand to resist the transformation of the military and political border into a social one. Palestinians in Israel developed symbolic and practical actions to cope with the 1948 partition of Palestine and the demarcation of new borders that resulted from the establishment of Israel and the Nakba of the Palestinian people. These included infiltrating, sneaking, smuggling, using specific signs and marks to pass messages to the other side, loud calling, or quiet whispering and talking to friends and family across the border (see also Mana', 2006; Sa'adi, 2006; Ghanim, 2007). The partition shattered clans and social entities, sent mothers away from their children, and separated brothers and sisters from each other. The daily life of Palestinians was turned upside down and regular social practices became risky and dangerous.

The creation of Israel, followed by the 1949 ceasefire agreement, divided Palestinian villages into two parts: those "inside" what became known as the Green Line would be under Israeli control and those "outside" of it would be controlled by Jordan or Egypt. Around 170,000 Palestinians (approximately 10 percent of the Palestinian population) found themselves to be "inside" the Green Line. The ceasefire agreement created a *de facto* border and, for the Israelis at least, the "Green Line" became synonymous with the border line that had to be controlled and preserved by all possible means, including military ones. However, as Illana Feldman explains, "the political and military demarcation of a border, of a new spatial arrangement and of a new category of 'outside' (and 'inside') does not proceed at the same tempo as social life, as personal connection and as communal identification" (Feldman, 2006: 14). In the case of Palestinians, the social and cultural borders stand in contradictory and controversial relation to the political and military borders. Unlike Israelis, the Palestinians saw the Green Line as a temporary obstacle that needed to be overcome and dismantled.

The contradictory role of the border turned it into a site of constant tension between the indigenous and colonial orders, between Palestinian villagers and the Israeli armed forces. While the new State of Israel was doing all it could to turn the border into an untouchable and prohibited zone that demarcated its sovereignty, villagers from both sides of the border were also doing their best to dismantle it. In the new order that followed the Nakba and the establishment of Israel, the border was a microcosm of the conflict par excellence. The zone was always haunted by the "return of the real," by the eruption of phenomena that were supposed to be repressed by the new order. The border was the sign of oppression but also a possibility

of liberation, a sign of cutting but also of connection, of colonizing and of decolonizing, of death but also of life. Ironically the border was a site for the intensive practice of power but also intensive resistance.

For the Palestinians, the Green Line could not and would not be conceptualized as a normal fact or *fait accompli*. Between 1948 and 1967, Palestinians living in Israel under strict military control and surveillance consistently attempted to cross the border. Their aim was not explicitly political. They were merely trying to visit their families, harvest their crops, and purchase merchandise. "Infiltrating," "sneaking," "evading," and "penetrating"—all strictly illegal actions as defined by the Israeli state—were, in fact, their way of catching a glimpse, however temporary and curtailed, into their lives as they had lived them before that border brutally crossed them. The border came to be a place that the Palestinian ran up against, repeatedly passing and repassing through it, as when she is expelled or allowed to rejoin her family. It becomes, in the end, a place where she resides, almost a home.

MARJEH: THE NEW MAP

One of the villages affected by the new "border" was Marjeh, my home village. Following the Rhodes ceasefire agreement, the village was annexed by Israel in 1949. Marjeh is colloquially referred to as a *khirbeh*, or hamlet, by its neighboring villagers. It is somewhat smaller than a village but larger than a farm. Marjeh's inhabitants are the descendants of several Palestinian families from the larger village of Dayr al-Ghusun, adjacent to Tulkarim, who decided in the nineteenth century to settle on their various plots of land, including the plot of land that was to become Marjeh, in order to preserve and cultivate them. After annexation, Marjeh, which had hitherto been merely an extension of Dayr al-Ghusun, was transformed into something of an orphan whose parents had forcibly abandoned it. In the space created by the absent parent, Marjeh was forced to mature into an independent village. Marjeh is now located at the edge of the Green Line between Tulkarim city, located inside the 1967-occupied territories of the West Bank, and Netanya city inside Israel. Today, the place proudly proclaims its heroic ability to grow and develop into what is nearly a village, and even boasts of its achievements to its absentee parent.

My family, descendants of Marjeh, used to sit together on hot summer nights telling and listening to stories of the old days. On such nights, my eight uncles and their wives and children would gather together on the roof of our house, and grandfather would regale us with his life story. The stories, however, were always accompanied by a warning: we were cautioned against telling these stories to other people so as to protect our family's privacy and, most importantly, to protect us from the Shin Bet (Israeli General Security Service). The conflicted relationship between my family and the border

made our very history—even basics such as who begat whom, where, and with whom—criminal from the point of view of the Israeli state.

My grandfather would stretch his arm out toward the east and say: "That light comes from the village of Dayr al-Ghusun, where I was raised by my uncle Ahmad after my father died and my mother remarried." This orphaned grandfather of mine, growing up in an orphaned village, carried his burden in the hope that, if nothing else, the situation of national orphanhood would one day be sorted out. Ever since I was a child, I have seen him gaze eastward, ears glued to the radio, listening to BBC reports about a "solution" that grew more and more distant by the day. He consistently held on to his hope, by now Messianic, that some metaphysical, omnipotent power would restore normality.

For my part, I always wanted to explore the other side of his life, to understand how he came to be "here" and not "there."

"Grandfather, why did you come here?"

My father looked at me with something of a shy smile: "Sssh . . . Grandfather must not be interrupted while he is talking."

I fell silent but the question continued to trouble me, and I remembered to ask my mother the same bothersome question the following day.

"Your grandfather came here because he fell in love with your grandmother, whose family owned much land here. They agreed that he could marry her under the condition that he dig them water wells. So, he came from Dayr al-Ghusun and began digging the wells. Then he bought an olive grove, married your grandmother, and they settled down here. Your grandmother gave birth to nine boys and two girls."

One of these children was my uncle Khalid, who crossed the border when he was thirteen and joined the Jordanian security forces. According to my grandmother, the Jordanians picked him up when he was shepherding the family cows near the border. They took him to an army station, and asked him to name the people that used to cross the border from the Jordanian side to meet with Jews in the house of my uncle's neighbor, a well-known Israeli collaborator. My uncle agreed but asked for their protection, and he joined them.

The question that occupied me next was: "How did Uncle Khalid manage to visit his family?"

"He would steal out, always at night, when there was a heavy rain. He knew that the Jordanian guards would leave their stands in the heavy rain. And he always knew how to evade the Jordanians and the Israelis. He used to wear women's clothes and cover his head, especially because he didn't want our neighbors to know that he had come to visit."

"Border fear" did not prevent him from "infiltrating" back to his mother. The border, which was supposed to disconnect him from his family, failed in its task. The darkness of night was his faithful ally, hiding him on his journey westward and back.

The French philosopher Gaston Bachelard (1969) claimed that darkness denotes the unconscious that cannot be civilized, its nature mysterious and even frightening. My uncle, though he had never read Bachelard, understood that only in the darkness/unconscious could he experience the normal/conscious. At night he became a ghost or a shadow, released from his physical presence, invisible to the Jordanian and Israeli border patrols.

Living on the border overloaded my family with stories of border passages, although not all of them concluded with the same kind of Hollywood-style happy ending as my Uncle Khalid's tale. This was certainly not the case for his maternal grandfather, Abu 'Ali. Even though he was not a prince on a white horse and his wife was not Snow White, my great-grandfather's story inscribed itself into my childlike mind as the quintessential story of love and desire.

LOVE STORY

Once upon a time, but not so long ago, when the "Jews" conquered the village of Qaqun, destroying its houses and expelling its inhabitants, several families from Qaqun escaped to Marjeh and found a temporary safe haven in the midst of the families of our village. One such family settled near grandfather Abu 'Ali's land. Several months passed, and grandfather Abu 'Ali, who was a lonely widower, decided to marry again. Su'ad, a refugee widow whose family was living near grandfather's land, seemed like a perfect match for him. She would not ask for a fancy dowry like young brides nor would she tire him with a variety of demands and requests as the daughters of settled families were accustomed to doing. She would accept him as he was. The perfect choice perhaps, but certainly not in the perfect context.

She was an illegal resident and an unwelcome stepmother. From the perspective of the Israeli authorities, she was a right-less refugee who had not received permission to stay within the borders of the Green Line. From the perspective of her stepsons, she was a stranger and a poor woman whose offspring threatened their inheritance. Su'ad, by no choice of her own, became the personification of the border, embodying the presence of the unwanted, the prohibited, and the banned.

Su'ad was able to handle the double pressure for the short period of one year and a few months. During this time, she gave birth to Ibrahim, her only son from this marriage. When she could not take it anymore, she ran away and crossed the border toward the Jordanian side. For several years, she settled in Shwekieh, the closest village to Marjeh. Su'ad, the persecuted wife, and Abu 'Ali, the frustrated husband, believed that this was the most tenable arrangement: she would rent a home there and he would come to meet her once a week. Crossing the border was just a technical issue, or at least that's what they believed until they were made aware of the problematics inherent in the border.

Abu 'Ali safely navigated the border many times with the aim of visiting his son and wife. Sometimes he spent a night, sometimes an entire week. As his number of successful "infiltrations" increased, rumors reached the ears of the Israeli and Jordanian authorities who began to pay attention to his movements. The first time he was caught, the Jordanians issued a warning. They stressed that if he did not heed it, the next time he was caught he would be sent to prison. Abu 'Ali promised to behave like a "good citizen" and made guarantees that he would not return without the necessary permission.

He returned to Marjeh, on the Israeli side, waited a couple of weeks and then decided to traverse the border again. He received his permission, as he had on all previous occasions, from himself. But his bad luck and the Jordanians' good informants proved to be a recipe for disaster. He was apprehended by the Jordanian security forces, who were extremely angry that he had broken his promise. They arrested him and sent him to jail—but not before they violently beat him. His encounter with the Jordanian judge who presided over his case became a cynical family story. When the judge sentenced him to three months in prison, Abu 'Ali asked for permission to address the court:

"Sir, I have a family that I need to feed—who will take care of them if I am in jail for such a long time?"

The judge responded: "Don't worry. God will provide."

But Abu 'Ali, who wasn't a very religious man, retorted: "Oh sir, if I, God, and the donkey barely manage to provide, how on earth is God going to manage alone?"

The judge obviously was not impressed by the argument and Abu 'Ali spent three months in a Jordanian prison. Having served his time, he was brought to the Israeli side. The Israelis, not wanting to be outdone by the Jordanians, proceeded to send him to an Israeli prison.

The prison experiences left Abu 'Ali—by then a sixty-five-year-old man—reticent to continue "infiltrating" the border. He decided to wait a few months and hoped that the Jordanians and Israelis would forget about him in the meantime. Several months passed and Abu 'Ali decided to attempt another "infiltration." Crossing the border was by no means an impossible task but circumventing the network of collaborators and informants on the Jordanian side was. Having spent only a few hours with his wife and son, Abu 'Ali found himself in the hands of the Jordanian army who had come to the house to arrest the entire family. Abu 'Ali was sent to jail. His wife and son were transferred to an unknown place. When he was released from prison, Abu 'Ali returned to the village to see his family but was told by a neighbor that they had been forced to move. He searched for them endlessly but never managed to find them. After the 1967 war, Su'ad and her son, Ibrahim, came to visit the family in Marjeh, revealing the story of their

transfer to an area near Jericho. Abu 'Ali, who passed away in August 1967 without having seen his wife and son again, never heard the story.

For the people who lived in my village, the border was a physical sign of the reality of emergency into which they had been thrown. The border marked an abrupt severing from their pre-Nakba lives. It embodied both the forced cutting of family ties as well as the loss of olive groves that had fallen on the other side of the border. Palestinians did not simply accept the border that crossed them—though it did so violently and with powerful border patrols, prisons, population displacements, informants, and new criminalizations. Border passage stories like those from Marjeh are an important reminder that state-formation processes such as land annexation and line drawing are not as neat and seamless as they often appear to be.

NOTE

Parts of this chapter appeared in a different form in 2007 in "Living in the Shadow of Emergency in Palestine." In *The Partition Motif in Contemporary Conflicts*. Smita Tewari Jassal and Eyal Ben-Ari, eds. Pp. 283–296. New Delhi: Sage Publications.

III

GENDERING BODIES AND SPACE

Figure 4. Still of filmmaker's mother on her rooftop in Ramleh, from *The Roof* by Kamal Aljafari, 2006. Courtesy of the director.

SEVEN

THE ROLES OF PALESTINIAN PEASANT WOMEN

The Case of al-Birweh Village, 1930–1960

Lena Meari

The mid-twentieth century was a period of the accumulation of multiple and drastic changes in Palestinian political, social, and economic life. This period saw British colonization (1917–1948), Zionist colonial occupation accompanied by the expulsion of more than 750,000 Palestinians (1947–1949), and military rule (1948–1966) imposed on those Palestinians who survived expulsion and managed to remain within the borders of what became in 1948 the colonial State of Israel.[1] This chapter explores the lives of peasant women from al-Birweh village during the years 1930 to 1960 and the transformations in their roles that accompanied the changing economic-political regimes. Based on interviews with al-Birweh refugees, I analyze women's work roles during the years that preceded the destruction of their village by the Zionist forces in June 1948, during the expulsion from al-Birweh, and later when they settled in other Palestinian villages that survived destruction. In particular, I examine how Palestinian peasant women experienced and coped with changes relating to land ownership during this period—property law, land tenure, and land expropriation and reappropriation.

I explore women's roles as part of the household economy and under the changing conditions of colonialism and modernization. In the process, I answer Scott's (1988) call to interrogate ahistorically fixed binary oppositions between categories such as male and female by seeing them as contextually defined and repeatedly constructed. I show that in contrast to the simplistic