MOTHERHOOD AND LOSS
IN THE SHADOW OF THE INTIFADA

Identity Formation Among Palestinian Refugee Women

NINA GREN,
WORKING PAPER 34,
“Old tales, so well-known we’re sick of them. Abandoned villages? And where aren’t there? What was the name of this place? A few years ago there was a place and it had a name. The place was lost and the name was lost. What was left? At first, a name stripped of a place. Soon enough, that too was erased. No place and no name. May G-d have mercy. And it was turned on its face, plowed it was, and become a field. Here it is, furrowed and yielding before you, among the stones, young carob trees. What happened to the place happened to its name: for a time the name tarried, hanging there, lingering in the air until it vanished. Names without places hover for a while like bubbles, stay for a while, then burst. Here it is, a leveled hill; they leveled it well. Humble and lacking any sign of life; they returned it to before it was.”

From *Silence of the Villages*  S. Yizhar, Israeli writer

"In order for the victim to forgive, he must be recognized as a victim. That is the difference between a historic compromise and a cease-fire."

Azmi Bishara, Palestinian-Israeli intellectual
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**ARABIC WORDS**

**Note on transliteration:** Arabic uses sounds which are difficult to convey in English script, except through "hieroglyphs" recognized only by Arabists. In the list below, as well as in the MA Thesis in general, I have used the transliteration most frequent in my references.

*abu:* the father of a son, what a man is called together with his first son’s name.

*Al Aksa Intifada:* the second uprising in the occupied territories, starting the autumn 2000.

*Al Nakba:* the disaster, referring to the loss of the land and the dispersal of the Palestinian people in 1948.

*ardi-‘irdi’:* my land is my womenfolk.

*beit:* house, or family.

*balad:* land, meaning both country and field.

*dabkeh:* a Palestinian folk dance.

*hamula:* the patrilineal descent group, males related to the fifth degree by descent from a common ancestor.

*Ibda’a:* the cultural centre in Dheisheh, the word means ”to create”.

*im:* mother of a son, what a woman is called together with her first son’s name.

*Intifada:* the uprising in the occupied territories, starting in 1987, literally meaning ”shaking off”.

*‘ird:* male honour, depending on a man’s ability to control the behaviour of his kin-women.

*mahr:* dower, gifts a bride receives at marriage and what she obtains in case of widowhood or divorce.

*shahid:* a martyr, one who witnesses.

*sharaf:* male honour, depending on a man’s ability to control the behaviour of his kin-women.

*shari‘a:* the Islamic law.

*shebab:* young men, usually unmarried, the category on which villages depended for defence. Today also used for youth in general, females included, like ”guys” in English.
**INTRODUCTION**

**OBJECTIVES, THEORETICAL INSPIRATION AND RELEVANCE**

The aim of this study is to examine the Palestinian political struggle and the process of national identity formation, by exploring the experience of Palestinian refugee women.

The following relevant questions have been posed: What are the involvement and role of women in the struggle? Are there specific ways of being a woman and a camp refugee in the Palestinian national struggle and in the process of national identity formation? What symbolic themes are recurrent to express the experience of women in the struggle?

Identity processes in a war-torn society are of course complex and influenced both by the conflict and the image of the significant "Other", the enemy. This is obviously the case of Palestinian and Israeli national identities, which seem to presuppose one another. Also, in these kinds of violent and conflict-ridden societies, it can be assumed that men and women and their roles and relations to social and political life are affected differently. Many other social identities, besides the national one, may as well become politicized; for instance, motherhood, as this thesis will show, may take on important political dimensions.

The striking paradox of Palestinian national identity formation is that it emerged with the loss of the land and the dispersal of the people, beginning in 1948. Until then, identities and allegiances were primarily, at least in the rural areas, based on village and kinship, as well as religion and Arabism (Khalidi 1997:145-150). There was no imagined community of Palestinians in the sense described by Anderson (1983).

The displacement constitutes a key historical event referred to as *Al Nakba*, the disaster. *Al Nakba* and the losses it entailed, especially the loss of land for the displaced, form vital building blocks in the Palestinian national identity. The loss of land will be analysed using Turner’s (1967) ideas about dominant symbols as well as liminality. In the experience of Palestinian refugees, sacrifice and suffering are recurrent themes. To understand the relationship between sacrifice and political force I will draw on the analyses in Bourdillon and Fortes (1980). Refugees in camps are emblematic of the Palestinian political condition and they occupy a central position in the struggle. They symbolize the problematic relationship between national identity and place, national consciousness and social memory. A useful parallel is found in Malkki’s (1995) study of Hutu refugees in Tanzania and their relation to history.

This study is an anthropological study of the local conditions and everyday life of women and families in a Palestinian refugee camp on the West Bank. As such, it is one of the few of
its kind. Ethnographic studies on Palestinian refugees are rare, especially as regards women’s experience, gender relations and Palestinians living in the occupied territories. As far as I know the only recent one in English is Moors’ *Women, property and Islam* (1995). Other anthropologists, like Sayigh (1979) and Peteet (1991), have been studying Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. Peteet (1994) has as well conducted fieldwork on the West Bank during the Intifada, but then focused primarily on male gender. Swedenburg’s work (1989, 1990, 1991) in the early eighties concerned the significance of the Palestinian peasantry in both the past and the present. The focus of Rabinowitz’ (1997) and Slyomovics’ (1998) studies has been on Palestinians who are citizens of Israel, so called Israeli Arabs or Israeli Palestinians.

Rabinowitz (op. cit) claims that social anthropologists have failed to elaborate the complex relations between Israelis and Palestinians. Other social sciences, such as political science, peace research, sociology and women studies have dominated this field. However, the study of women’s participation in the political struggle has frequently focused on women organizations but these seem to have limited influence, since only a few per cent of all Palestinian women are involved (Sida 1999:48). This MA Thesis, in contrast, tries to grasp women’s more or less informal political participation in the national struggle.

**METHODS AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS**

The data for this study were collected during a three months’ stay in Bethlehem, ”Palestine”. The field study was conducted in Dheisheh refugee camp. I did not live in the camp myself, but in Bethlehem a few kilometres away.

Since I do not speak Arabic and since most of the refugee women’s English is scant I used an interpreter during fieldwork. Working with an interpreter restricted my possible options of methods to more structured forms, but also gave me a very capable assistant who knew cultural codes I otherwise surely would have missed or even violated. Moreover, my interpreter became an important discussion partner who gave me her opinions during fieldwork.

The fieldwork was conducted mainly through two different kinds of interviews apart from informal conversations. The first part consisted of semi-structured interviews, using an interview guide with open-ended questions. Twelve women were interviewed this way and all interviews were conducted in the women’s homes. Normally, my interpreter and I were invited to the living-room of the house and offered coffee or some other drink. Children and female relatives were often present. To keep the children calm I soon started to distribute
lollipops before starting the interviews. This was a reciprocal arrangement that seemed to please everyone; I drank their coffee and their kids loved my lollipops.

To facilitate interpretation, interviews were always recorded, given that women agreed. If a selected woman did not like to be taped we would choose someone else. Normally, women did not mind being recorded and were easily persuaded to be interviewed. In general, the women welcomed me and gave me proof of the famous Palestinian hospitality.

After advice from my Palestinian supervisor, the women were chosen by a systematic random sample\(^1\) which turned out to work well. It gave two advantages: firstly, it saved time since I did not need to spend days arranging meetings; secondly, women who did not have high status or many contacts in the camp were also included. To avoid the interference of husbands and brothers the interviews were normally conducted in the morning, when working men were out.\(^2\) However, this meant that few of the women interviewed were wage earners themselves or had higher education. It also meant that the percentage of older women, more likely to be housewives, was greater than their actual percentage in the camp.

I tried to balance out this possible bias in the second kind of interviews, focus groups, by looking for younger, working and educated women. Four such interviews with four women in each group were conducted, in total 16 women. To form these groups I used the acquaintances and contacts of my supervisor, the UNRWA’s Women Centre, the cultural centre \textit{Ibda’a} and my own acquaintances. The arranging of the groups was time-consuming, but the groups produced a great deal of valuable information. My interview guide for the focus groups drew on Wibeck (2000). The persons participating were more or less existing groups; they were women who worked together, who were friends and relatives or who were engaged in the same organisation. The focus groups provided an opportunity to observe the negotiation between women of different status and age with respect to the topics discussed.

Since the focus groups came to be concentrated on the ”political” raising of Palestinian children and transmission of knowledge, I wanted to conduct some complementary interviews with teenagers. Six semi-structured interviews with respectively three girls and three boys between 14 and 16 years of age were carried out. These children were not just any children of the camp, but participated in \textit{Ibda’a}’s dance troupe. This participation had given the teenagers the opportunity to travel all over the world, to develop a political consciousness and to learn

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\(^1\) In systematic random sampling the interviewees are chosen by chance, but in a systematic way. This means that the researcher enters the sampling frame [sic!], for example a village, at a randomly selected spot and interviews a person in every ninth or second (or what number you prefer) house (Bernard 1994:82f).
about their roots. I chose children from Ibda’a assuming that these children if any would know about their families’ past, the historical events connected to the Palestinian exile etcetera. The interviews were conducted at the cultural centre and most of the time my interpreter and I were alone with the teenager interviewed.

In addition to these interviews, I made more informal visits with my interpreter to a couple of the women who had been interviewed individually, for more in-depth probing. These visits were to be kept informal and therefore not recorded and depended to a high degree on my interpreter’s social skills. Sometimes these visits helped to gain deeper insights; sometimes they ended up being mere nice talks.

I also interviewed two women who worked professionally with women’s issues and a female member of the Palestinian Legislative Council. These interviews have in the Minor Field Study been used to ameliorate my understanding of the Palestinian women’s situation in general. Moreover, I paid visits to the refugee organisation BADIL and to the Alternative Information Centre (AIC) to gather material and discuss the current situation.

A normal reaction after fieldwork is to reflect upon the researcher’s own role at the fieldsite since this influences social contacts and accordingly also the collected data. My role in Dheisheh was facilitated by my coming from a University, though distant, and by having a well-known and well-reputed Palestinian supervisor. The importance and status of higher education are not to be neglected in the Palestinian society. Some people wanted to assist me in my work, simply because they thought positively of the University education I represented. At the end of the fieldwork people remarked on my comparatively ”long” work in the camp, since they were more used to short-time studies. Some were asked by a friend to help me and may have felt more or less obliged to co-operate. Others had messages they wanted to send to the world outside, of which I became a representative. These messages were normally about the sufferings among the Palestinians both in the present and in the past. They wanted to make Westerners conscious about their situation in order to receive political support or, to a lesser extent, financial donations. These aims of the informants were connected with an urgent need some people felt to talk about their lives or to have someone who was interested in listening, especially to their stories and memories of the Intifada. ”When I start to talk [about the Intifada] I could talk for ten days” said a woman in her fifties.

2 Sometimes the men of the family were at home during my visits, but, with one exception, they did not interfere.
This quotation leads us to another discussion: the problems of fieldwork in a war-torn society in which people still fear and are suspicious of the enemy and the enemy’s collaborators among themselves. For obvious reasons, it was not a good idea to ask unknown people directly about their political affiliations or their personal participation in the national struggle. Therefore, it was necessary to give the informants the option to talk about the past and the present in general rather than in personal terms, even if many women explicitly talked about their own experiences. Before starting the interviews I always declared that I was not going to note the interviewees’ names or where in the camp they lived. Neither did I take photos in relation to interviews. These precautions were perhaps not always, but often, necessary and a way to respect people’s fears as well as not to risk my work. My own reaction to working in a society marked by conflict included nightmares as well as irritation over both Israeli soldiers and tourists who seemed unaware of the political reality.

Since this fieldwork is based mainly on interviews, and only to a limited extent on participant observation, it is important to heed Keesing’s (1981:266) distinction between ideal conceptual models and ideologies versus real behaviour. In interviews, people often express the norms of a society, which rarely fit with the complex web of actions and adjustments that are part of human life. This is perhaps particularly the case in a highly politicized environment such as a Palestinian refugee camp. Keesing’s remark was constantly on my mind during fieldwork among the Palestinians and should accordingly also be on the mind of the reader.

**CONTEXTUALIZING THE FIELD**

**DISPLACEMENT, CONFLICT AND NATION-BUILDING**

The UN Partition Plan of November 1947 suggested a two-state solution in the disputed British Mandate of Palestine. However, the two states, which were to be created, did by no means correspond to ethnically homogenous societies. Neither did they reflect the land ownership pattern. According to the Palestinians, as well as many scholars, the UN plan was clearly unfavourable to the Palestinians.

The creation of the state of Israel in 1948 and the subsequent war between Israel and its Arab neighbours had enormous consequences for the Palestinian people. The war was the

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3 According to the UN decision, a Jewish state was to be established on more than half of the total land area of Palestine, although Jewish land ownership did not exceed 9.38%. Half of the population of the UN-planned Jewish state would have been Arabic. Moreover, the Arab state would have had an Arab majority population and a Jewish minority of 10,000 inhabitants (Hadawi 1988:79).
beginning of the Palestinian exodus, in turn a result of what today might be called ethnic cleansing. The refugees’ attempts to return to their homes were later on prevented by the Israeli government, despite a temporary offer to let a minority of the refugees return (BADIL 2000:5).

These events are in Arabic called Al Nakba, the disaster. It is estimated that, during and after the war, four out of five Palestinians fled from their homes in the area which today is Israel (Heiberg et al 1994:37). Over four hundred villages were depopulated and many of them destroyed, while more than a dozen of major urban centres with an exclusive or majority Arabic population were ”cleansed” and taken over by Israelis (Khalidi ed. 1992). Al Nakba has come to serve as a key symbol in the creation of the Palestinian identity and nation-building. A Palestinian state was never established in the former British Mandate.

Even though the Palestinian refugees are spread over the world, the majority of the refugees stayed in the former British Mandate or in the neighbouring countries. According to figures provided by the PLO Department of Refugee Affairs (2000:8) there are over five million Palestinian refugees totally in the world, and four millions of these refugees are settled in the Near East. Therefore, the Palestinian pattern of dispersal is to a great extent constituted by internally displaced people and many refugees live just a few kilometres away from their former homes.

Until the war of 1967, the refugee population was divided mainly between three states; refugees living inside Israel with Israeli citizenship, stateless refugees on the West Bank and in East Jerusalem, governed by Jordan, and in Gaza, governed by Egypt. The war and the following Israeli occupation of the three last-mentioned areas created new refugees and, for many, a second exile.

The uprising, the Intifada, starting in the occupied territories in 1987, generated a range of formal and informal political structures. Much of the early leadership came from the younger generation which had recently had access to higher education and which imbued the uprising with values of democracy, self-help and empowerment. By 1990, however, these trends had been radically reversed due to direct political repression by the Israeli army, enormous economic and physical costs of sustaining the mass rebellion, and internal fighting for power within the Palestinian society (Sida 1999:12). Most violent clashes took place in

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4. The ethnic cleansing included expulsion by Jewish forces, abandonment by order of Arab leaders, fear of Jewish attack or accidental involvement in hostilities, military campaigns against the communities by armed forces, psychological warfare, as well as fear of massacres, especially after the killing of men, women and children in Deir Yasin in April 1948 (Morris 1991 referred by Benvenisti 2000).
refugee camps, villages and poorer neighbourhoods of towns (Strum 1998:65). The refugees and their right of return became important parts of both the political rhetoric and the national struggle.

Today almost a third of the Palestinian population of the West Bank and a majority of the population of Gaza are estimated to be refugees registered by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, UNRWA. In Gaza, half of these refugees are camp refugees, and in the West Bank one fifth, while the others are self-settled (PLO Department of Refugee Affairs 2000:7). The urban refugee camps are similar to urban slum districts in the so-called Third World. Rural refugee camps are, as the name indicates, situated in the countryside and offer, in contrast to urban camps, the possibility of some agricultural activity for their inhabitants.

The UNRWA was created late in 1949 to give acute relief to the Palestinian refugees. More than fifty years after its founding, the agency is still operating and embodies a unique international commitment: no other group of people has an international organization dedicated to its welfare. All other refugees fall under the protection of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). According to the Palestinian refugee organization BADIL (2000:6), the regime established especially for the Palestinian refugees to provide additional protection has in practice provided less. UNRWA has developed into the Near East’s largest public service employer, providing education, health, relief and social services to refugees registered by the Agency, but has faced difficulties in recent years in providing services due to stagnating donor contributions. Another problem has of course been the inability to find durable solutions to the refugee problem and to implement UN resolutions concerning the Palestinian refugees’ right of return.

For the Palestinians, the last century has been a complex process of nation-building and, since 1994, an even more complex process of state-formation. Today the Palestinians find themselves in a new stage, since the implementation of the Agreement on the Gaza Strip and the Jericho Area has given them limited self-government. The Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) is equally in transition from being a revolutionary organization to becoming a government or an authority. Lindholm-Schulz (1996) refers to this structure as a state-in-the-making.

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5 2.9 million Palestinians live on the West Bank, in the Gaza Strip and in East Jerusalem (The Europa World Year Book 2000:1956). Half of this population is under 15 years of age (Abu Libdeh et al, 1993:45).

6 The UN resolution concerned is primarily General Assembly Resolution 194.
The PLO assumed control of the Jericho area on the West Bank and of the Gaza Strip in May 1994. In late 1995, the Israeli forces withdrew from six West Bank towns, including Bethlehem where the fieldwork for this study was conducted. The Palestinians also gained civil administration in parts of Hebron. The Oslo accords divided the West Bank into three zones: Areas A, B and C. The Palestinian National Authority (PNA) has sole jurisdiction and security control in Area A, while Israeli security forces retain authority over movement in and out of the area. In Area B the PNA has some limited authority, but Israel maintains security forces. As for Area C, which constitutes the largest part of the West Bank, the Israeli occupation is continuing. The Palestinian self-governed areas are thus disconnected clusters surrounded by Israeli forces. (The Europa World Year Book 2000)

Elections to a Palestinian Legislative Council, as well as to an Executive President, were held in 1996. The participation in the elections was considerable. Ministers have been appointed, laws elaborated, police and security forces created. In short, the Palestinian state-building process has started. During this process two main interior problems have emerged: corruption and violation of human rights. The PNA’s dubious human rights record includes imprisonments on political ground, torture and press censorship. (The Europa World Year Book 2000)

There are great differences between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, and the solidarity between the populations in the two areas has sometimes been questioned. The West Bank has a better economic situation, less unemployment, fewer refugees, more Christians and is often regarded as more secular than the Gaza Strip.

Since 1993, Israel has imposed an overall closure of the occupied territories. Gradually, the Israeli government began to construct check-points at all major entrances from the West Bank to Jerusalem and to Israel. While Israeli citizens are free to travel between Israel and the West Bank, Palestinians must have permits, which are difficult to obtain. In practice, the Israeli goodwill influences how often Palestinians in fact are checked and the West Bank’s long border with Israel is impossible to fully control. Therefore, in 1998 the unofficial labour flow to Israel was estimated to be even larger than the number of workers holding Israeli permits. (BADIL 2000:14ff)

The situation during my fieldwork, the summer of 2000, was still hopeful.\textsuperscript{7}

Unemployment was going down and, thanks to the Year 2000 celebrations, Bethlehem had

\textsuperscript{7} Since Al Aksa Intifada started in September 2000 the political situation is of course different than during my fieldwork some months earlier.
been given donations for festivals as well as new buildings and a general face lift of the town. Even if there were some minor incidents between Israelis and Palestinians the situation was quite calm and peaceful. But, during the last weeks of my stay people in the camp began to talk about preparations for a new uprising. It became apparent that the Palestinian patience with negotiations and unfulfilled Israeli promises was running out.

Not surprisingly, the second Intifada or the *Al Aksa* Intifada started in September 2000 after the Israeli politician Ariel Sharon’s visit to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. This visit was seen as a provocation by the Palestinians. However, it has been observed that the frustrations among them were so great that they were only waiting for a reason to start a new uprising. For the first time in the conflict, the Palestinians actually have something to lose besides human beings: the emerging state-building process and a recovering economy.

**SELF AND OTHER: INTERTWINED AND SEPARATED**

The conflict between Palestinians and Israelis has deep implications for the national identity of both groups. In this case, there seems to be a dynamic interplay between conflict and identities. The conflict is intimately related to the formation of national identities, and identity politics and the politicized boundary between "us" and "them" provoke new outbursts of violence. The situation evokes Barth's familiar argument that ethnic identities and boundaries are not a result of the absence of contact but rather emerge from groups in interaction or competition (Barth 1969).

In turn, the ethnical stereotypes of Self and Other influence both the peace process and everyday life. According to Lindholm-Schulz (1996) the Palestinians often refer to themselves as inferior to Israelis and as vulnerable, suffering victims due to the Other’s assaults. The Israelis are seen as strong and intelligent and therefore superior to the Palestinians. Moreover, Israel cannot be trusted and is frequently seen as the cause of all the evils that Palestinians are exposed to. In contradiction to this victim identity, another part of the Palestinian self image is that of an active and proud fighter.

The Israelis also identify themselves as suffering victims due to the historical persecution of Jews with the Holocaust as the main trauma. This self image is however balanced by the idea of a strong and tough self. As we can see, the similarities between the Palestinian and the

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8 According to Palestinian authorities, the Israeli closure of Palestinian areas has meant great losses to the Palestinian economy after six months of hostilities. Furthermore, the UN estimates the unemployment rates to have risen to 60% in Gaza and 40% on the West Bank, compared with 11% before the new uprising (Göteborgs-Posten 9 April 2001: 26).
Israeli "double identity" are significant. The two groups see themselves both as victims and as "fighters". The Israelis’ stereotypes of Palestinians primarily reflect perceptions of Arabs’ bad intentions towards Israelis or Jews in general. Moreover, Palestinians are viewed as being part of the underdeveloped Orient, since they are said to be lazy, dirty, family-oriented, ignorant, poor etcetera (Rabinowitz 1997:135f).

The Israeli and the Palestinian communities are intertwined and their self images are dependent on the Other. Such mutual dependence in the creation of national discourses is not unique, especially in (post-) colonial societies or societies ridden by conflict based on identities. Henry (1993:3) notes, discussing France and Algeria:

"[...] the important role, sometimes implicit and sometimes explicit, sometimes spelt out and sometimes glossed over, which the other society has played in shaping the main collective self-representations [...]. This is a long-established and constantly renewed phenomenon.”

Contrary to the conditions in France and Algeria, Palestinian-Israeli mixed marriages are extremely rare (Katz 1996) and individuals of both nations seldom have personal relationships with someone of the other part. Still, on a community level, the two societies are dependent on each other. Importantly, the two societies are economically integrated. According to Kimmerling (1992) the Palestinians constitute both cheap labour and a dependent market to Israel.

The competing Palestinian and Israeli discourses are perhaps most visible when it comes to battles over land and language. The act of renaming places is, of course, crucial to the act of conquest: "Drawing a map and determining names are an act of taking possession" (Benvenisti 1988 in Slyomovics 1998). Hebreicization of Arab names by Israelis have been part of this strategy and are also fiercely contested. Slyomovics gives the example of the Arab village Ein Houd (meaning spring trough, the name of an everyday animal artefact) which, after taken over by an Israeli artist colony, was renamed by the Hebrew Ein Hod (spring of Glory); building on the Arabic sounds as well as its land, the new establishment and its name also echoed mockery (Slyomovics 1998:66). The Palestinians evicted from Ein Houd established a new village in a nearby area and demonstratively renamed it Ein Houd al-Jadidah (the new Ein Houd), a strategy Slyomovics refers to as a "twinning", or defiantly re-creating the conquered reality elsewhere.

Other naming practices, which have emerged as Palestinians resist such Israeli conquests, are to give name of the lost village as the first name of a daughter or as the surname of a family (Slyomovics 1998:200). The naming symbolically re-establishes the disrupted link
between families/clans and village of origin. The names of places are thus important as proof of belonging to both Israelis and Palestinians, connecting place to the group/the nation and its history, thus sustaining claims to the land. Moreover, there are two official languages in the state of Israel, Hebrew and Arabic, however, the use of Arabic script on signs and billboards in Israel are occasionally banned by local authorities (Rabinowitz 1997:5). To both Israelis and Palestinians, language appears to be a powerful marker of separate identities and the politicized boundary between them.

**POSITIONING WOMEN**

**KINSHIP AND GENDER RELATIONS**

An overwhelming majority of the Palestinians are Muslims and prejudices about oppressed Muslim women flourish in Western media and sometimes also among researchers. However, everyday life in "Palestine", as elsewhere, is marked by negotiations of gender roles and it is normally possible to transgress the boundaries of gender conventions in one way or the other. This is especially so in extreme situations. Women are social actors who do influence their own lives, and gender relations are complex as well as contradictory.

Furthermore, the stereotype of the secluded Arab woman, apolitical and private, fits few women on the West Bank. Rural women have, for example, always been working in the fields and building houses. While the sexes normally did not mix outside the house, it was mainly middle- and upper-class women who were secluded and segregated from the men. (Strum 1998:64)

Palestinian parents in general wish for sons, partly because a son is expected to inherit most of the family wealth, carry on the family name and secure his parents’ economical situation (Manasra 1993:8). But the concepts of honour and shame are also important in the understanding of the common Palestinian preference for sons, rather than daughters, as well as the restrictions posed on women and especially unmarried girls. The male honour, ‘ird or sharaf, is dependent on a man’s ability to control the behaviour of his kin-women. Therefore, girls are, from early childhood, taught the rules of moral behaviour and are considered to need more parental supervision.

For example, the concept of honour influences what kind of work a woman may perform since some jobs are considered less decent than others. Women’s work in Israel is especially controversial (Moors 1995:183f). Only one tenth of a sample of Palestinian women in the occupied territories claimed to participate in the labour force by working outside the home,
while a little more than another tenth claimed to do some kind of income-generating work within the home (Hammami 1993:305). In accordance with the code of honour and shame, a common reason for flight in 1967, and probably also in 1948, was fear of Israeli sexual assault and the powerlessness men felt not being able to protect their women (Haddad 1980:151).

The strict rules of the traditional arranged marriages have been modified over the years, but without affecting the general structure of matchmaking (Manasra 1993). Today, a young man who wishes to get married inquires about a potential wife and then sends someone to the chosen’s family to ask for her hand. Contrary to what was common in the past, the couple has the chance to get to know each other before the wedding these days, but love marriages in the Western style are rare. When getting married women are young by Western standards. At present, in about a fourth of the marriages, the women are 16 or younger (Sida 1999:16). The legal marriage age has recently been raised to the age of 18 for women and 21 for men, although these laws apparently often are circumvented (Pers. comm. with Hazboun). Moreover, the number of marriages between relatives, especially, patrilateral cousin marriages, which used to be a common practice among Palestinians, has become less frequent (Moors 1995:87ff). Girls are also allowed to have a say in choosing their husbands and the father’s role as the sole decision maker in general has diminished.

According to Moors (op. cit) a woman’s ability to leave her husband often depends more on her relation with her own kin than on her juridical position. Theoretically, a man can easily repudiate his wife and is as a Muslim allowed marrying more than one woman. However, both divorces and polygamous marriages are rare (Sida 1999:16) and especially divorces are socially condemned.

After marriage women tend to continue identifying with their own kin and feel a special closeness to their father’s household; they remain lifelong members of their own patrilineage, even if the conjugal relationship has become more accentuated over time. The hamula, the patrilineal descent group, bonds relatives to the fifth degree by descent from a common ancestor to ties of mutual solidarity. Today the hamula’s influence over individuals might have diminished, but it is still a significant system for support and help. Moreover, the

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9. For example a woman could return to her father’s house if she intends to leave her husband. Moreover, a series of overlapping legal systems exist reflecting the political history and the different regimes in ”Palestine”. With regard to family status laws the different laws used on the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip are both influenced by the Ottoman law. Islamic shari’a courts are entrusted to apply these laws for the Muslims (Sinoria 2000).

10. For further information about the hamula see for example Sayigh (1979) and Haddad (1980).
dispersal required greater flexibility in terms of kinship and family relations (Ghabra 1987). Other loyalties based on locality and political affiliation grew in importance, perhaps especially so for camp refugees. On the other hand, the changes in which the individual and the nuclear family became more pronounced might be the result of a general modernization.

The traditional virilocal residence is diminishing among the Palestinians. But, while nuclear families are becoming more and more common in towns, the extended family is stronger in camps and especially in villages, probably because of the vulnerable economic situation of the latter population. (Manasra op. cit)

During the Intifada and the severe economic situation which followed newly married couples found it more economical to continue living in the husband’s parents’ house where one person’s income could sustain the rest of the family. The extended family also provided protection and help to handicapped, imprisoned and widowed persons.

**WOMEN IN THE INTIFADA: HEROINES, TRESPASSERS AND EMERGENCY ACTIVISTS**

For women, especially the early period, the Intifada was an opportunity to extend and widen gender roles by active participation in the struggle. The rise of Islamic movements, later on, challenged both the Palestinian national movement and women’s expanding roles.

Researchers, observers and Israelis were surprised to see women participating politically to such an extent. They were even more surprised to see Palestinian women using others’ prejudices about them to fight against occupation. The stories about women treating unknown men in a “family-like” way to protect them from Israeli soldiers by, for example, giving them a bath or handing over a baby to a pretended husband are numerous, even if the truth of some stories may be questioned. Israeli soldiers also used their knowledge about the Palestinian gender relations to humiliate women. Traditionally, Palestinian women are not supposed to even hear men mentioning sexual acts, but during the Intifada Israeli soldiers used obscene language and exposed themselves to women. Put in this situation, Palestinian women answered by returning the soldiers’ sexual taunts and using explicitly sexual language to question soldiers’ manhood. (Strum 1998)

Sexual harassment and sexual abuse were not common during the Intifada according to Kevorkian (1993), but they did exist and created traumas and fear especially among young girls. The fear became almost as bad as an actual experience of abuse.

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11 See for example Augustin (ed 1993) and Sabbagh (ed 1998).
Legends of the Intifada show that “most often [...] the heroic feats carried out by courageous women consist of protecting the young shabab [youth] and saving them from being harmed by the Israeli soldiers” (Kanaana 1998:123). A mother and her son are frequently heroes in these stories. According to Haddad (1980) the relationship between mother and son is, in general, extremely close in Palestinian society. Moreover, it seems to be the adult women or mothers who are the strongest figures of these narratives, since they are portrayed as offering support to their sons and to all other members of the family, never needing protection from the others.

Women’s participation in the Intifada seems mostly to have been more or less spontaneous. Formal participation in, for example, women’s committees remained low (Sida 1999:48). Moreover, even if women were very important in the Intifada, their status was not automatically altered. Many phenomena, which seem to contradict each other, occurred simultaneously.

“There were women doing battle with Israeli soldiers but being ordered by their husbands or fathers not to work in local political committees. There were young people of both sexes planning demonstrations and enforcing commercial strike hours, but there were girls of fifteen or even younger being married off by their fathers. The Intifada involved a wide variety of women: elite women with professional degrees, knowledgeable about women’s liberation around the world; poorly educated women who would have been shocked by feminist theory but glorified in the belief that they and other ‘real women’ were the strongest ones of the family; women who saw the Intifada as a chance to gain gender equality; and those who, along with most men, viewed the participation of women in it as an emergency measure that would be unnecessary when independence was achieved [...]”

(Strum 1998:63)

The above quotation shows the complexity of gender relations and women’s participation in social and political life. It also illustrates how a situation as extreme as the Intifada may bring out these contradictions.
court-yard and some children were playing in the narrow alleys. From the houses under never-ending construction, aerials and unfinished walls sprung up towards the sunny sky.

Then there were the wall-paintings. On the naked concrete walls someone had portrayed Palestinian fighters, and Israeli soldiers tying young boys. The famous image of Che Guevara appeared here and there as a shadow from struggles in far-away places. Other paintings showed tents and refugees. And yet others; olive trees proudly anchored to the Palestinian soil. Next to the images words were written, most in Arabic, thus impossible for me to read. But some were in English: "No peace without the exercise of our right of return".

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The Dheisheh refugee camp, one of three in Bethlehem established by UNRWA in the early fifties, is situated on the Hebron road a couple of kilometres south of town. It houses around ten thousand registered refugees. The camp residents claim to originate from more than forty different villages south of Jerusalem, reckoning men’s original villages. However, as was clear to me during interviews, many women in the camp had been raised in other camps or villages or towns and moved to live with their husband’s family in Dheisheh after marriage. In accordance with the patrilineal structure among Palestinians, the children in the camp usually seem to identify with their fathers’ villages.

As elsewhere in the occupied territories, the majority of the population are children and youngsters; most families have many children. Reportedly, around 30% of the inhabitants of Dheisheh have a university degree, which agrees with my own observations, and a large number of these persons with higher education are women. It is mostly the younger generation which have had a chance to get an education as an effect of camp life with comparatively good schooling provided by UNRWA and nearby universities. Many older women, however, are illiterate, since few villages provided schools for girls. Higher education seems to be a question of different generations’ possibilities rather than a question of class.

The camp is situated on land owned by the UNRWA which also provides the services of the camp. There is a dental clinic, a maternity centre, a medical lab and a general clinic supervised by one doctor. During fieldwork one of the two UNRWA-headed schools was demolished due to its bad condition and the remaining school is therefore assumed to be used

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12. A Palestinian refugee who has the right to be formally registered by UNRWA is: "Any person whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period of 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948 and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict.” Included are as well the descendants of the male refugees and some non-refugees who lost their means of livelihood in 1947-1948 (PLO 2000:2).
by alternating schedules. Additionally, there are some associations in the camp. I was in
contact with two of them; \textit{Ibda’a}, a cultural centre for children with a dance troupe, a library
and a computer lab, that also runs a kindergarten, and the Women Association, originally
established by UNRWA, but now independent thanks to its reported success.

Many workers from Dheisheh are dependent on the Israeli labour market, since many
men are working as constructors in Israel. Due to this dependence, the unemployment rate
was especially high during the Intifada and is still affected by temporary closings of the West
Bank. In the summer of 2000, the UNRWA head of the camp estimated the unemployment to
be 40-50\%, placing the refugees in an extremely fragile economic situation.

Dheisheh is considered to be a very politically active refugee camp with strong
connections with the political left. The Islamic parties are said to be weak, even if conflicts
over \textit{Ibda’a}'s activities, which mix boys and girls, were heavily debated. Dheisheh was also
among the camps which took initiatives to form a new refugee movement in 1996 (BADIL
2000:17).

The people of Dheisheh and of neighbouring Bethlehem\textsuperscript{13} are constantly reminded of the
continuing occupation of the West Bank and the power of the Israeli government. The
fieldsite is indeed a contested place: from a hill in the camp you can spot a nearby Israeli
settlement and there are others, seemingly closing in on the camp. Moreover, on the road to
Jerusalem, in the outskirts of Bethlehem, there is an Israeli as well as a Palestinian check-
point\textsuperscript{14} on both sides of the holy site of Rachel’s tomb. In my experience, the Israeli check-
point makes the 15 minutes’ journey to Jerusalem a little more complicated and time-
consuming than it has to be. Since Palestinian-registered cars are not allowed to pass,
Palestinians have to change vehicle before the check-point. In addition they may be stopped
to have their papers checked by Israeli soldiers. During the beginning of my stay in
Bethlehem the Israeli soldiers seemed less ambitious, but after the interrupted Camp David
negotiations they appeared to become more severe, checking Palestinians more frequently.

The above mentioned Rachel’s tomb as well as the hill of \textit{Abu Ghunaim} is parts of the
land which belongs to the town of Bethlehem but has been confiscated by Israel in the last
years. On the hill, the Israelis have begun the construction of a new settlement, \textit{Har Homa},

\textsuperscript{13} Bethlehem has approximately 22.000 inhabitants. In the district of Bethlehem, including the towns of Beit Jala and Beit Sahour as well as the surrounding villages and camps, the population is estimated at over one hundred thousand (The Europa World Year Book 2000). The Christians have traditionally been in majority in Bethlehem, but are now outnumbered by the Muslims’ higher birth rates (Le Monde Diplomatique August 1999).

\textsuperscript{14} What function the Palestinian check-point actually has remains unclear to me. I never saw them stop anyone.
which will be part of what is called greater Jerusalem. The settlements between Jerusalem and Bethlehem are also connected by the construction of new roads (Le Monde Diplomatique August 1999). The Israeli land confiscations are continuing, despite the fact that Bethlehem is governed by the PNA, in violation of both the Palestinian self-governance and the Peace Agreement, and further complicating an already delicate dispute over territory.
PALESTINIAN REFUGEES AND THE POWER OF LOSS

Palestinian refugees are crucial in the Palestinian national struggle since most violent clashes against the Israeli army have taken place in refugee camps and other poor neighbourhoods. The refugees are also significant symbols in a political rhetoric which celebrates willing martyrs and which points out the refugees’ right of return as an indisputable condition for peace. But, at the same time refugees are, more than any other Palestinian, liminal both within their own society and in the world, and ignored or forgotten by most Israelis. The future of the refugees is probable one of the most difficult issues to be solved in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Both being liminal and part of a main issue in the conflict and in negotiations, Palestinian refugees have a contradictory status. As the fieldsite for this study is a contested place, so are its people.

According to Turner (1967) liminality indicates a transition to a new status. The liminal status of the refugees implies a transformative power in Palestinian political discourse. With the help of the refugees, the Palestinian losses will be transformed to gains; the dispersal will become a Palestinian nation. Apart from the power of liminality and loss, there is, as will be argued in this study, also a transformative power connected to motherhood.

Moreover, Palestinian nationalism obtains its affective power from notions of the lost village and the peasant which become "national signifiers" (Slyomovics 1998:xx). Nationalistic emotional force is also drawn from domesticity and the Palestinian peasant woman. The peasant woman of pre-1948 is symbolically still alive, but she is trapped in the body of a refugee woman in a camp. Thus, camp refugee women with their rural past and their political importance symbolize, more than any other Palestinian women, the lost land.

LOSS OF THE LAND: BEING NO ONE

The major aspect of loss for the Palestinian refugee women in Dheisheh, as for Palestinians in general, was being deprived of land. Paradoxically, it is with the exile and the loss of land that a Palestinian national identity developed. For this originally rural community the impact of the forced uprooting from the land can not be underestimated. Life in the camp was pointless to most people since there was no space to plant and harvest, even though most of my informants were born in the camp and had never lived in the original villages. Neither had they had the opportunity to learn how to cultivate the land nor how to breed livestock.

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15 See Sayigh (1979) and Peteet (1991) who both have written about Palestinian camp refugees in Lebanon.
It is often claimed that refugees live in two realities simultaneously, both of which are connected to time and place. As refugees, the Palestinians attempt to preserve the past and transmit the memory of the land. This becomes part of a political strategy which aims to end Israeli occupation, create a Palestinian state and obtain the refugees’ right of return.

Women also talked about how they had been deprived of rights. In a political and national sense they had been deprived of the right to citizenship, of nationality. The refugees had a feeling of being nobody, not having a passport or an identity card. This "nobodyness" was also related to the loss of land. The refugee women looked on themselves as being stigmatized in the political world order since they did not have a nation-state. In addition, they felt stigmatized by other Palestinians since they had lost their land and with their land their prosperity, honour and identity. To use Malkki’s (1995) words, they expressed that they were occupying a problematic, liminal position in the national order of things, since in the present conception of world order, having a nation-state and a nationality is supposed to be "natural". Moreover, they also had a liminal position within the Palestinian society. For example, a woman in a focus group claimed that "[...] people without a land will not be considered or respected by anyone, as if they don’t exist. No country can allow a person to enter without having an ID. Having a country is like having a special sign which identifies the person". Her colleague at the UNRWA Centre continued: "When we used to walk in groups in Al Khader people pointed at us and pitied us, because we are refugees. People don’t like the refugees. Others should know that we have a land and if they are thinking of giving us compensation and not letting us back [to the land] it is still the same, we still own nothing. As if there is a rich man in the society, but he is of no use because he’s an alcoholic or a gambler." Further on in their discussion a third woman claimed that: "Even ordinary Palestinians sometimes refuse to let their children marry a refugee."

Some of the older informants also had memories about how they were forced to leave or how they fled:

"I remember myself being put on a truck when we had to leave, I thought for a short period of time. But up till now I have never been there, but I am still hoping that one day my children or grandchildren will take the keys of the house and go there, I’ve still got them. I saw the scenes from Kosovo, the US tried to rescue Kosovo, but no one tried to rescue Palestine. And I

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16 See for example Eastmond (1993).
17 After 1988, West Bankers have been given Jordanian "temporary" passports valid for two years, and now for five years, which do not entitle them to Jordanian citizenship, but give them the possibility to travel abroad. (The Palestinian Refugees Factfile 2000) There is also an ID provided by the PNA.
remember my mother leaving the dough thinking that she would come back in a few days and 
bake the bread though we never came back.”

(Interviewee no 1)

Connected to this traumatic loss of land were the hardships during the first years after the 
flight when the refugees were living in tents, or sometimes in caves. This was an even more 
pronounced liminal position than today’s, and is remembered as filled with dangers. 
Moreover, the present depressing state of the camp was also connected to loss of land, a 
continued deprivation; it is easy to understand the longing for the countryside when living in 
a crowded and filthy refugee camp with narrow alleys and bad housing. Many of the 
informants complained about the lack of space to build new houses and the absence of for 
example areas for children to play. Some even compared the camp with a prison. One of the 
youngest of my informants, a fourteen year old girl, described her visit to the original land in 
her own vivid way:

"I visited [my original land] twice. The first time I cried, I couldn’t resist. I thought: why don’t 
we come back, the land needs us, why are we living in the camp? I saw the old trees from 1948 
in the village. I wanted to bring them, to put them in the camp. But I don’t think they could 
survive in the camp, you’ve seen the situation in the camp." (Child no 6)

The land was described as a lost paradise, as a beautiful and fertile land. For the refugees, it 
has almost a mythical connotation. As Malkki (1995:55) remarks, the anthropological use of 
the word mythical is not meant to imply that something is false or made up, but that it is 
concerned with order in a fundamental, cosmological sense. That order, remembered as 
perfect, was destroyed through Al Nakba. The memory of this land gave the refugees a reason 
to struggle to go back and served as a polar opposite to the camp.

"My dad is 60 years old, but recently he took us back to see our land. Once you reach there, you 
cannot return [to the camp], because it’s so beautiful. You see water sources, green pastures. 
Our village wasn’t sold like many others, nothing has changed there so far. People come to 
visit, it has a lot of green views and remains. There are great caves. We used to go there on 
Saturdays, but the other day we went on a Friday and it was full of Arabs having picnics. I was 
surprised!" (Focus group 4)

The land was important in a very practical sense, as well: with the high rates of 
unemployment among the refugees the possibility to farm would also have been a 
complementary source of income for the families. Discussing poverty, women sometimes
commented on the great help it would have been to have some land to cultivate. Talking about her low salary being a teacher, a woman explained that the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics took into account self-subsistence when estimating if a family is above the poverty line or not. She said laughingly, "But I have no land to plant. We have a limited area. Where do you expect us to plant? Each year I plant mint in a pot -this is my product!"

The word *balad* in Arabic both describes the country and the land you cultivate. The lost land is not only the lost village with the surrounding fields, the *soil*, but also the nation-state, a *national space*, they never had. According to my informants a *real* peace with Israel must include both the creation of a Palestinian state and the return of the refugees to their original land. This is the meaning of "getting our own land". Moreover, the loss of land implied loss of *place*, since social bonds in the villages were uprooted in *Al Nakba*. As will be clear further on, new social bonds had been created in the camp and especially younger generations sometimes had difficulty to imagine another *place* than the camp.

Although clans, lineages and family members were scattered in exile, families and villagers did attempt to reside together; people tried their best to reconstruct the lost village in the camp (Peteet 1991:24). Therefore, the loss of *place* was not complete. Paradoxically, the solidarity with the lost village seems to have been strengthened in the camp; the relationships among persons from the same original village became similar to clan (*hamula*) solidarity (Slyomovics 1998:201). According to Sayigh (1979:13f), the Palestinian village was always a fundamental social unit for identification. In the past, kinship and locality were closely intertwined as families of a village often belonged to the same clan, and ideally intermarried. Village solidarity in the camp was therefore also an expression of social continuity, reclaiming the close connection between kin and village.

The reinforced importance of locality is also confirmed in new naming traditions. Instead of the customary clan eponymic, a person from the destroyed village of Ruways, for example, would take the surname Ruwaysi, meaning someone from Ruways (Slyomovics, op. cit).

The meaning of land can, furthermore, be understood by using Turner’s (1967) concept of a dominant symbol. Such a symbol has both a sensory and an ideological pole and the Palestinians’ relation to their lost land includes both poles. What I have called *soil*, which is connected to farming and what you eat, and *place*, which is connected to your kin and friends, are related to the sensory pole. The *national space*, on the other hand, is connected to the

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18 According to Sayigh (1979) there is truth in such a statement since the village life, despite poverty, provided the peasants with all they needed and with strong social bonds.
ideological pole, being part of nationalism and what Anderson (1983) called “imagined community”.

A visible sign of the importance of balad was the embroidered map of Palestine in every single living room I was invited to in the camp. The embroidered map showed the old Palestine before 1948. The traditional embroidery seems to be part of a nationalistic "material" discourse, together with the traditional Palestinian dresses which are also embroidered. According to Seng and Wass (1995) a conscious revival of the traditions of embroidery has taken place among Palestinian women in the last thirty years. For example, embroidery co-operatives have been established. Furthermore, Seng and Wass claim that for the Palestinian diaspora in the US the traditional embroidered wedding dresses have become a symbol of national pride. I will come back to the embroideries below, seeing them as a means to transmit the memory of the land.

Moreover, Dabkeh, the Palestinian folk dance, performed in the camp by youngsters at Ibda’a, becomes a nationalistic “performative” or “expressive” discourse. This is especially so in the part of the performance which shows traditional, but lost, village life; through the dance, the lost land is visually enacted and thus reaffirmed as collective basis of belonging for both the audience and the young dancers.

The lost land has given birth to yet another naming practice. For those exiled outside Palestine it is common to name daughters after lost but not forgotten sites. Names like Yafa, formerly an Arabic town outside of Tel Aviv, and Jenin, a town on the occupied West Bank, are now also girls' names. In this way the name of a daughter becomes an active agent of memory, or as Slyomovics (1998:202) notes,

"Place possesses history and narrative. When place is gone, it is recuperated in two ways: naming the daughter and telling the story. When a father calls out to a daughter, pronouncing the name of the town or village he can no longer inhabit or visit, he conjoins a lost place and a vivid present in her person. She is a surrogate, a means of linking a place in time and in space, allowing an older, dispossessed generation to address simultaneously the biological daughter and the historical motherland."

Women do rarely become the principal narrators of the lost Palestinian history; rather it is inscribed onto their persons. Allegories about women’s bodies are also common when talking about the land. Feminizing and eroticizing the land as passive object of men’s active love and

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19 It is common cross-culturally to name children after close kin to ensure that something of the departed lives on. Place-names make the departed villages partly alive, but also expand on a traditional Palestinian principle of assigning a child’s name according to special circumstances surrounding the birth (Slyomovics 1998:201f).
sacrifice transformed the Palestinian people into real men (Katz 1996:89f). But when the feminized land is colonized and lost, it is like a woman possible to penetrate, rape or conquer by the colonizer (Slyomovics 1998:208). Women in themselves seem to be political statements about the lost land and the right of return.

**CHILDREN OF THE INTIFADA: THE LOSS OF CHILDHOOD**

Apart from *Al Nakba* with the loss of the land, the Intifada is another significant and symbolically charged event which is shaping the Palestinian refugee experience. Some of the women interviewed were for example very eager to talk about the Intifada. Especially older women managed to insert stories about this period in their answers whatever I asked about. I also remember a woman who did not talk much during the interview, she was apparently nervous in an unfamiliar situation. Nevertheless, when it came to questions about the Intifada she all of a sudden became vivid and talkative. *Al Nakba* and the Intifada were also connected with other important concepts which constituted women’s identity: motherhood, suffering and sacrifice.

To the refugee women, speaking of the Intifada mostly meant reminding them of the Israeli army’s terror. It is important to notice that instead of treating these experiences of violence and oppression as individual they should according to Kleinman (et al 1997) be understood as social suffering. Nonetheless, the uprising seemed to have restored much self-esteem and dignity to the Palestinians. It is not to be forgotten, however, that it also created new losses.

As for the younger women, who experienced the Intifada as children, they had a feeling of being deprived of their childhood. Being a child during the uprising meant of course to live in fear to an even greater extent than the adults. Children were afraid of the Israeli soldiers, of their weapons and of their yelling, and afraid of their parents getting hurt or killed. It often meant not seeing your father or your brother, or in some cases your mother or sister, for months when they were in prison or away working in Israel. It meant that you did not have the possibility to attend school since schools were closed by strikes or classes were interrupted by Israeli soldiers. It meant being afraid of the darkness when the electricity was cut or hiding under a table when the soldiers entered your home. It meant growing up in insecurity and lack of safety. Or it meant growing up too fast, since not only youth but also young children took part in the political struggle. The children of the Intifada are often described as a lost generation. A twenty year old girl talked about the Intifada as follows:
"We used to live in fear. At night the soldiers would enter the house, we had no comfort. My cousin was a martyr, but we weren’t allowed to hang his picture on the wall. Once we tried to hang it up, but it was smashed by a soldier with his weapon. Then my illiterate mother was asked to read what was written on the picture, but she couldn’t. I was a victim. I saw my mum being beaten by the soldier. How could we accept peace, when I saw my mum beaten by a stranger, despite the fact that he’s my enemy? They want us to forget the past, but how are we going to do this?” (Interviewee no 4)

A teenager recalled the Intifada like this:

"I was a small kid at that time [during the Intifada]. I remember my mum being afraid when my dad left the house, she covered the electricity wires, afraid they would explode. I remember myself sitting alone and thinking of myself going out to participate, getting killed or carrying a flag like they did outside. My dad was always in prison. The Jews entered our house all the time; they used to take money and my mum’s gold even though she didn’t have much. They used to eat our food.
And once I remember myself hiding a pan behind my back to hit his [a soldier’s] head with. (Laugh!) But all of a sudden I became paralyzed, because he had a gun with him, I put it back. [...] I regret this, that I didn’t hit him. I used to hide behind my mum’s back, crying and being afraid.” (Child no 6)

These young women had learnt being Palestinian "the hard way" and expressed victimization to a greater extent than the adults. Not yet being mothers during the Intifada the children’s suffering seemed to remain meaningless.

MOTHERS OF MARTYRS: THE LOSS OF SONS

In the living rooms in the camp there was not only a map of Palestine hanging on the wall but also very often a picture of a young man. The young man on the picture was a relative, a son or a brother or a cousin, who died as a martyr, a shahid, during the struggle against occupation. 20 A mother of a martyr described a dramatic visit at the hospital as follows:

"When [my son] came out [of surgery] he gave me the victory sign and said that he was OK. I talked to him and he seemed fine to me. He acted as if he wasn’t bleeding. He didn’t want to give me the impression that he was in a bad condition and I thought that in two days he would be out of the hospital. I started encouraging him, telling him that he should be strong. After a while I saw my husband fainting after talking to the doctor who had told him that [my son] had a serious wound and he would die in two minutes! He had nothing left in his stomach.”(Interviewee no 1)

20 Interesting enough, the concept of martyr was used for everyone who had been killed by Israeli soldiers or in Israeli prison, not only for the media-exposed image of a suicide-attacker. Since the PNA entered there have also been some martyrs mistakenly killed by the Palestinian police force.
The fact that her son became a martyr gave this woman a certain status in the camp. Her suffering made other people look at her with respect. The status derived from suffering and maternal sacrifices has been recognized by other researchers among Palestinians. Even if a mother had not experienced such an event as the woman above most older women had lived through the worries and fears of having a son in prison or taking part in demonstrations.

"They [the Israeli soldiers] came to take my son as well, he had injuries from an accident. My son used to live in another house near by, so at night they entered his house and took him. The next morning I went to see him, I knocked but no one answered. I thought he was dead, but then we opened and found no body. My neighbour told me to go and claim that he was missing, so I went to them with his medicine, but they didn’t even give him his medicine. I cried from my heart to the soldier but he refused [to take the medicine]. My son then spent forty days in hospital without us knowing where he was. How could he throw stones when he was sick?” (Interviewee no 6)

The loss of sons could also mean a loss of expected capability, a kind of disappointment with your son, because he did not live up to the image of the son you used to have. This could be because the son was still suffering from injuries of torture or other traumatic events which made him unable to complete his studies.

"I myself didn’t lose anything, my only wish was for my children to study and my oldest son went to prison and couldn’t finish his studies. Now he doesn’t want to. I feel that I lack something, so up till today I keep asking him to continue. But he doesn’t want to because of the prison.” (Interviewee no 9)

Having a son who does not finish his education means that the mother is deprived of the status deriving from an educated child, but also implies a loss of economic security.

**The Significance of Loss**

Loss is a common theme in the refugee experience, as well as in the writing about refugees. Malkki (1995:11) criticizes research and policy which define the refugees’ loss of for example culture, identity and “roots”. She argues that losses cannot be taken for granted and may be of different kinds. In addition, what losses that will come to define the experience and to be symbolically elaborated may also be very different for different groups of refugees. Neither is loss automatically followed by powerlessness, but may, on the contrary, provide a sense of empowerment. Furthermore, Malkki argues that refugee camps, in which

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collectivities of people become objectified and fixed as "the refugees", can be used as technologies of power since they may "become generative, productive sites for social and political invention and transformation" (1995:238). This view also concurs with that of the Palestinian leadership, which sees the refugee camps as centres of resistance (Hazboun 1999).

For the Palestinians, having an identity connected to loss to such a great extent could make them feel powerless. However, as Malkki claims, in the frequent politicization of the refugee experience, losses are made into sacrifices, transformed into political force.

The Palestinian writer Habibi in his novel *The Secret Adventures of Saeed the Pessoptimist* gives us a metaphor of how loss and dispossession are transformed. A Palestinian peasant woman and her child, assumed to be her son, are chased away by an Israeli military governor when they try to return to their village. But, strangely enough, instead of growing smaller the further they go, the woman and her child grow taller. The Israeli finally asks: "Will they never disappear?" Slyomovics (1998:200) interprets this as a response to exile and dispossession and the creation and aggrandization of cultural images about Palestinian women, often depicted as mother and motherland, home and homeland, lover and beloved in art, folklore and literature. In my view, another possible interpretation of Habibi’s story is seeing it as a prediction of the important roles the refugee mother and her son have come to play in the national struggle. The Israelis expected the refugees to diminish, to finally disappear, not to become the "greatest fighters" in the struggle against occupation.

**MOTHERHOOD: BEING IM**

For Palestinian refugee women, motherhood takes on a special significance. Unlike the part of their identity which is connected to loss, motherhood makes Palestinian refugee women active and capable, it offsets a sense of powerlessness. Besides its nationalistic connotations, motherhood implies social status and security.

"[...] it is important to recognize that among poor Palestinian refugee women, to become a mother is a mandate.[...] From the perspective of individuals, the motivations to have children involve desires to achieve reproductive normalcy, personal immortality, an enhanced quality of life. [...] From the perspective of social group, children ensure the reproduction of family structures, provide social security for the elderly, and are a form of social power, especially for women. The first child means security for the mother on the social and psychological levels. It reinforces her identity as a worthy social agent, who is capable of production. More than anything else, dignity and self-identity seem to be derived from having children.[...] The notion still prevails that "the children tie a husband to his wife"; in other words, that children are the source of love and bonding between spouses. Because marriage and family
building are perceived as inseparable objectives in adult life, marriages that are childless are deemed inherently insecure and ultimately unsuccessful.” (Hazboun, 1999:5f)

The study by Hazboun (1999) in the three refugee camps of the Bethlehem District (including Dheisheh) shows that the ideal number of children among women is between six and eight, which is very high also compared with other Palestinian women. A preference was as well shown for male children.

Accordingly, the importance of being Im; the mother of a son, is not to be underestimated. Palestinian mothers and fathers normally stop being called their given names after the birth of the family’s first son. Instead of being called for example Hanan and Ali the proud parents become Im Ziad and Abu Ziad after their son Ziad. A woman in the camp who ”ended up having ten girls, since I was waiting for a boy” as she explained herself, and whose husband married a second wife to finally get a son, told me her conclusion: ”It’s God’s decision if you’ll have a boy or a girl. I tell my daughters to have two or three, then it’s enough and [the children] will have equal rights [among the siblings].”

As this woman’s life shows, as well as the quotation from Hazboun, fatherhood and especially being Abu, the father of a son, is also important for Palestinian men. Sons make men become real men, worthy social beings. However, the Intifada and exile have undermined the father’s position in the family as well as the patrilineal solidarity.

The statement of the mother of ten girls as well as other similar ones might show that a growing number of women seem to prefer fewer children, even though the importance of children is not to be neglected. It might be a by-product of increasing economic and political security post-Intifada. In my opinion it is important to note that even if women expressed wanting fewer children in front of me, it might be a different thing expressing the same opinion in front of their husbands. Women do not automatically have control over their own fertility.

Moreover, women in a focus group got into an animated discussion when one of them claimed that she, as opposed to the others, wanted ten children. The other women accused her of asserting such an opinion because she badly wanted a son, since she ”only” had two daughters. However, she claimed that it was not true and that she just loved babies. These women were apparently negotiating the ideal number of children in an ambivalent social and political situation.

Motherhood was presented as the highest form of national service already in the early Palestinian nationalism (Katz 1996:91). ”A woman must first prove her success inside the
Motherhood and Loss in the Shadow of the Intifada

...house by raising her children to love their country. She must strengthen their national feeling and nurse them with the milk of nationalism.” wrote Muhammed Bindari in the 1940s.

According to Eriksen (1993:108) as well as a number of other scholars, nationalism may be understood as a form of metaphoric kinship. Kinship terms, such as mother-country, father land, mother tongue etcetera, are frequently used in nationalist discourses. National ideologies claim that the members of the nation are part of a large family; it is an abstract version of something concrete which every individual has strong feelings about, and nationalism tries to transfer this emotional power to the state level. When the nation is regarded as a metaphoric kin group, women’s roles are often to be mothers and to reproduce, to raise children and to provide domestic services (Eriksen 1993:156).

Palestinian Arab folklore is full of references linking women to the house. In Syria and Lebanon, for example, it is said that male peasants use the expression ”the house” to refer to their wives. To equate wife and house may, according to Slyomovics (1998), be interpreted as a way to identify spatial differences with gender differences by focusing on the separation between public and private spaces; in this way ”woman” is ”house”. Among my informants the word for house, beit, was used to refer to the family, an equally female concern. Historically, women not only built houses metaphorically speaking by raising a family, but also took part in the communal construction of the traditional stone houses. The stone house in the lost village is currently occupied by the Israeli colonizer, which renders Palestinians homeless and stateless. The Palestinian woman is made to stand for the lost house, the destroyed villages and the dispossessed land. In the words of Slyomovics (1998:208) ”[s]he represents the ‘national allegory’ of the lost Palestinian homeland”.

THE AMBIGUOUS SACRIFICE: FOR YOUR CHILDREN BUT ALSO FOR YOUR COUNTRY

The ideal Palestinian woman was frequently described as someone who takes care of her children, who knows how to raise them and is prepared to make sacrifices for her children as well as for her country. Even an unmarried working woman expressed it as follows:

”The ideal Palestinian woman is the one who sacrifices for the land and for the children and for her house [her family]. The married woman sacrifices her life for her children, in educating them, having a decent life at home and planning for her children’s future. The unmarried sacrifices for her work only (laughing), and for her home.[...] The ideal woman works inside and outside her house for her land. The best thing for a woman is to be educated.” (Interviewee no 11)
For women an important part of the political struggle during the Intifada was to protect their children. This woman told me several similar stories about herself trying to get back her sons from the soldiers:

"I had four girls and five boys in school and a sick boy [during the Intifada]. My husband was the only one who worked, so it was hard. We couldn’t afford a water-heater so we used to heat the water on the stove.

My son wanted to take a bath. It was so cold and rainy. It was a Saturday. There was a demonstration going on outside. I told him: "Don’t take your bath, they will arrest you.” "I only want to bathe" he said "I’m not doing anything wrong.”

But then the soldiers entered the house, as if they had left the demonstration and only saw us. My two boys were taken. They hit them and took them outside. I tried to look through the window, but then they smashed it. Then they left one of my sons, the one with the dry hair, and took the other, the one who took his bath, thinking that he was out since his hair was wet and it was raining outside. I swear that he didn’t participate in the demonstration. I ran after him, telling the soldiers that he did nothing, and that I could show them the water and the soap he used for his bath, but they pushed me away and told me to go home. I didn’t give up. I stood there telling them to give him back. And at one moment they said yes. But it seemed that they fooled me, because they took him anyway.” (Interviewee no 6)

Other important features of an ideal woman was to be well-mannered and strong, whether this meant being a fighter in the political struggle or being capable of going on with your life, despite your sufferings and sorrows. Many of the informants also pointed out the importance for women to educate themselves and to work.

The opposite to the ideal role-model of a woman, was frequently described as a "bad", often very young, mother who does not educate her children in the right way and who leaves them filthy and running in the streets of the camp.

As mentioned, Palestinian women had "patriotic wombs" already in the nationalist rhetoric of the first half of the twentieth century. In addition, Katz (1996) argues that both among Israelis and Palestinians there was a nationalization of sexuality, since women’s reproductive forces were restricted to sexual relations within their own ethnic group and inter-marriages still are extremely rare even today. Since the "halfies” are so few, there is at least seldom doubt about a person being Israeli or Palestinian.

To bear children is to struggle against the occupation in several ways; as part of a national and political discourse concentrated on slogans like "Mothers of Martyrs", "Man Makers" and "Feminine Honour"; as part of a "demographic bomb" which will make the Palestinian population outnumber the Israelis, meeting the increasing number of Jewish immigrants from Russia; and as producers of fighters, of what Hazboun calls "supplying political cadres". The
refugee camps are seen as centres of resistance by the Palestinian leadership, centres in which these slogans are being realized.

Sometimes women expressed a willingness to sacrifice their sons for the national struggle. This was of course more an expression of political ideology, than a genuine willingness to see their children dead. A woman who spent most part of the Intifada abroad put it as follows: "I wish I had lived here during the Intifada as to give. I wouldn’t have minded to sacrifice my kids for the country." Her extreme statement was probably connected to the fact that she did not spend the Intifada in Dheisheh, but it still implied that women not only sacrificed for their children, but also sacrificed their children for the land. That refugee women participated in the struggle by sacrificing their children must also have been encouraged by the high status of the mothers of martyrs in the society as well as by the political leadership. My informants often referred to Yassir Arafat who in his speeches in the camp had been repeating that the refugee families should have 12 children; ten for the struggle and two for the family. However, most women questioned Arafat’s statement.

To sacrifice was a central theme, not only when discussing the national struggle and the loss of sons, but also formed part of everyday life. For a woman to work in the labour force and to raise children, especially when managing both, implied a sacrifice of a different kind. The working mothers said they carried a "double burden".22 Women were sometimes said to work out of economical necessity, not because they wanted, even though the same woman who asserted such opinions could admit that she actually loved her work and thought her wage labour was an important part in the reconstruction of the Palestinian society. It was problematic for the working mothers to fulfil all their duties both at work and at home. According to my informants, men frequently reacted negatively against working female kin, forbidding women to work "outside" or opposing it. Working mothers could easily be blamed for not looking after their children, especially if something happened, for example the child having a bad fall while playing. Women themselves questioned their participation in the wage labour sector, since they felt they had to neglect both their children and their own health. Another topic during discussions about working mothers’ conditions was the low salaries and the lack of labour legislation, which often affected women more than men.

In conclusion, sons are for mothers a symbolic capital in several ways. First of all, sons make their mothers real women, worthy social beings. Secondly, they also secure women’s livelihood, since sons are supposed to care for their mothers in their old age, for example in

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22 This is a common statement among working mothers in Sweden and in other western countries as well.
the case of widowhood. Thirdly, sons becoming martyrs, *shahid*, provide their mothers with status and political force. The symbolic meaning of sons in this third sense will be explored further in the next section.

**THE SHAHID: THE RELEASE OF POLITICAL FORCE**

Sacrifice is a flexible symbol which can convey a rich variety of possible meanings. According to anthropologists, what is consecrated to sacrifice is made into a symbol (Beattie 1980). In the case of Palestinian sacrifice described here, human beings, normally young men, act as symbols when they die and become martyrs in confrontations with the Israeli army. This sacrifice has an ambiguous character since it includes both political and religious connotations.

According to Beattie (op. cit), the next question to ask when analyzing sacrifice is what the thing sacrificed stands for or symbolizes. The answer, supported by ethnography (for instance Evans-Pritchard 1956 ref ibid), seems to be that it stands for the person or persons who are making the sacrifice or upon whose behalf the sacrifice is being made. Young Palestinian men are sacrificing their lives on behalf of the Palestinian people. However, their families, and especially their mothers, are in fact the ones making the sacrifice since they are losing their sons. As sons provide social status, economic security and emotional ties to their mothers, being more dependent on them than their fathers are, the mothers can be seen as the ones making the most important sacrifice. Accordingly, martyrs, above all, represent their mothers and furthermore, the sacrifice is made to the political struggle. In addition, Beattie notes that people usually make sacrifices at times of personal or group crisis, a point which corresponds to the political situation during the Intifada, or, if you like, since *Al Nakba*.

Hubert and Mauss (ibid:34) claimed that “religious energy” is released by sacrifice. The immolation of the victim which occurs in a sacrifice is a crime, a kind of sacrilege which releases a new and ambiguous force. Death is in some sense an anomaly, a disruption, a breach of proper order, and as such it may become a source of power. For example, human sacrifices in East African kingdoms aimed to ”strengthen the king”. Beattie (1980:37) states ”almost always sacrifice is seen as being, mostly, about *power*, or *powers*.” This power or these powers may be of two kinds. There is one kind of power manifested in more or less

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personalized spiritual beings, for example in a High God or ancestral spirits. Another power may be conceived as an impersonal, diffused quality or force. The two types may be either evil or beneficent, or both. The aim of sacrifice is either to get in closer contact with one kind of power, or to separate from them.

The kind of power involved in Palestinian mothers’ sacrifices of sons is of an impersonal kind; political force is released by the sacrifice. Political force is a beneficent power which the Palestinians wish to draw closer to them. Sacrifice may also involve a change in the status of the participants either by an access to the desired power or by the removal of a dangerous power. Similarly, the sacrifice of sons alters the status of mothers and of all Palestinians in the struggle. This makes the sacrificing of sons meaningful.

An alternative interpretation, which may not exclude the former, is to see the sacrifice of sons as being made to the Israeli army, which is seen as an evil power. The aim is then to separate from this power. However, in practice, the immediate outcome of sacrifice of martyrs is not the withdrawal of the Israeli army. On the contrary, its oppression is reinforced. In the long term, however, such an interpretation is adequate if one considers that the Intifada did lead to a peace agreement.

The political force released by the sacrifice is used against the dominant Other, Israel. It aims to get the land back, but also to dignify the Palestinians. Their losses of land, of childhood and sons are, through sacrifice, changed from humiliation to dignity. Beattie (1980:41) writes that the breach of a prohibition may be interpreted as causing a significant loss of force which calls for sacrifice. In a similar way, loss of Palestinian land was a breach of a decree: to protect your land. This breach also demands sacrifice. Katz (1996) writes that no metaphorical phrase is more familiar to Palestinians than *ardi-‘irdi*, which means: my land is my womenfolk. This should be understood as: ”the land is as important to protect as the honour of my kin-women”.

The other sacrifices in women’s everyday life, such as protecting your children during the Intifada or managing to both work and raise your children, are of course not possible to interpret in such a context as sacrifice of the martyrs. And still it is important to note that women seemed to look at ”everyday sacrifices” as analogous to the sacrifice of sons, which will be made clear further on.

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24 Another possible option is of course that they are sacrificed to God, to Allah, since martyrdom also has religious connotations. In my material women did not elaborate this theme, however.
The Community of the Intifada: Everybody’s Son

There was a strong sense of community in the camp. I was told that during the Intifada a child was ”everybody’s son”, meaning that it was everybody’s concern to protect the shebab from the Israeli soldiers and that the grief when someone from the camp died was to a large extent shared.  

Motherhood was thus not a private, but a public concern. Another common statement was ”we used to be one hand” in the struggle against occupation, neglecting the different political affiliations. Since I had heard and read about the internal fighting for power between different political parties and factions, especially during the last days of the Intifada, I questioned these statements. However, the women said that everyone neglected these differences in the struggle and everybody participated equally, all except one woman who claimed that most martyrs in the camp had been affiliated with her own political party and therefore had been braver.

Moreover, people, working in the camp with social issues or doing research, told me about collaborators in Dheisheh. As far as I understood the collaborators and their families were still stigmatized. But during interviews the silence about collaborators was compact; no one was mentioning them freely. After some careful probing and finally a direct question one of my informants admitted that ”there are no clean societies” and told me a story from the Intifada from which she concluded that there had been collaborators in the camp. In a discussion in a focus group, because of the sensitivity of the issue, collaborators were mentioned only in passing. It was probably important to present the camp as having a strong sense of community, and therefore avoiding some of its more shameful parts.

Talking about the Intifada, I also asked if women of different ages took equal part in the uprising. Most informants claimed that they did. The informants below hinted that there actually were some differences between young girls and older women. These differences were connected to ”shame”, to the separation of the sexes. The first quotation is from an interview with a young unmarried woman and the second with a woman already a married mother during the Intifada.

"Female students stopped school to join the demonstrations and they picked stones for the guys. Despite being a girl I would carry a bleeding boy, even if I didn’t know him. I only wanted to save him.” (Interviewee no 4)

"They [the women] all worked neglecting the differences of ages or of political parties. But maybe there was a difference between young girls and women. Girls thought of not touching the

25 Mourning still seems to be the whole community’s concern and probably always was part of a cultural pattern.
wounded guys. There are still limits. But an old woman tried to help him and there’s nothing wrong with this. They used to participate equally more or less.

Nina: What do you mean? Was this because of what people would think of the girls and were they afraid of not getting married?

- The mentality deep inside still stopped them sometimes. But not marriage, couples met and got married during the Intifada. It has nothing to do with marriage.” (Interviewee no 14)

The concept of shame is indicated to be part of one’s mentality, an unreflected, automatic way of thinking which made young girls hesitate to touch wounded boys. The first young woman cited actually did touch boys, because she wanted to save them, and she thought it was necessary to inform me about this because it was something out of the ordinary in her social and cultural context. However, older women are, as mothers and wives, less vulnerable social beings and are therefore “more allowed” to transgress the boundaries of gender convention as described in the second quotation. Moreover, informants told me that marriage could be a kind of protection for women, since the Israelis often were unlikely to shoot at or imprison a married woman. Another kind of “protection” was that husbands could forbid their wives to participate in the struggle.

In conclusion: the struggle was said to be equal for all women and it made motherhood a public concern, since every woman tried to protect the shebab as if they were her own sons. But some differences were noticed, which were connected to motherhood, as well. Young girls who were neither married nor mothers hesitated to transgress gender boundaries. In the memories of the Intifada, there apparently was a gap between the official rhetoric about all women being equal in the struggle, even being “hand in hand with the men”, and gender relations in practice. The struggle could both facilitate the crossing of gender boundaries and reinforce gender-related restrictions on women.

For Palestinians, their personal losses of land and family members are made public and collective in the political struggle. Through ideology and political action, the individual’s experience becomes shared. This also applies to motherhood, which is made an important public concern in the political rhetoric of both the leadership and the women themselves. In a way, the Palestinian political activism can be related to certain rituals which Turner describes as ”process[es] of making public what is private or making social what is personal” (Turner 1967:50).

**TO SUFFER AND TO STRUGGLE: ”ONIONS ARE STRONGER THAN TEAR GAS”**
Women’s participation in the political struggle was not restricted to bearing children, sacrificing them or protecting them. The women in Dheisheh were to a high degree involved in demonstrations and the organization of the uprising. They related how they used to collect stones, help the shebab, give first aid to the wounded and hold courses for the illiterate.

"We used to pick stones for the guys, to give them water. We brought water to put out the bombs before they blew up. We used to carry the injured bodies. When there was a martyr, we would go out and meet him before the men.

We also got them onions to smell during the tear gas attacks. Onions are stronger than tear gas. A lot of women got injured by the tear gas." (Interviewee no 6)

Women also had their own individual suffering, being prisoners or attacked by Israeli soldiers. Accounts about personal suffering, because you are you, not as the mother of, are rare in the field material. Maybe women did not want to tell me too much, to protect my feelings or because they did not trust me. Moreover, both in Palestinian culture and in the political ideology of the struggle, the individual is subordinated to the collective.

"Once there was a demonstration in the camp and the soldiers came and hit me, one [of them] on my thigh, one on my shoulder. They were really bad. He also hit my little girl and then she ran to her grandma, crying, and I ran out in the street. And the soldier said: "I will show you." It was around noon. They entered the house, they destroyed the radio, the TV, the windows. [...] [My son] heard about this event, about the house, and he came across the fence to make sure that I was OK. I denied that I was injured, but his friends brought me a doctor. They asked me what I wanted, but I didn’t want anything from them. I was hit with sticks, very thick sticks. I am fat so it’s difficult for me to defend myself and my body went blue.” (Interviewee no 1)

"When my husband was put in prison, my son was eleven months old. The Jews came to arrest me, they didn’t allow me to keep him with me, so I asked [a friend] to keep him in Caritas’ child hospital. I was kept 18 days in prison. For three days I couldn’t sleep because my breasts hurt. The soldiers took me to the hospital, they gave me medicine and injections that dried my milk. And my other kids were put in a children’s home until I was out. And the next time I stayed for eight months in prison, my oldest daughter was 12, so imagine the hard times they’ve gone through. They weren’t allowed to visit me. Then all my children were arrested, not all at one time, when they grew older. The soldiers didn’t leave us alone. (While she is talking vividly she touches her breasts.) ” (Focus group 5)

"Four of my sons are still alive. Two of them take medicine, because they [the Israelis] destroyed them. I am also taking pills; because of what I saw, I take pills against depression and tranquilizers. They destroyed our family.” (Interviewee no 6)

Interestingly, these women, even when talking about their personal suffering, refer to their children. The children had the leading part in stories concerning the intifada. In the last quotation the woman’s own suffering is mentioned, but en passant. This shows how intimately, in their conception, the struggle and the sufferings of women are connected to
motherhood. Their own suffering is not as important as the sufferings of their children. Moreover, the suffering of grown-up men, these women’s husbands, is hardly mentioned in the interviews, though young women sometimes talked about their fathers’ sufferings.

In the women’s stories, as well as in Kanaana (1998), the national imagery is gendered. The leading parts in the national struggle are played by the mother and her male counter-part, the young fighter, in its extreme the shahid. As has already been stated, the Palestinian national Self is constituted by two contradictionary actors: the suffering victim and the proud fighter. Both the mother and her son seem to embody the fighter as well as the victim. Husbands and daughters are in comparison mere shadows in the background. That older men played little, if any, role in the uprising is also confirmed by Peteet’s (1994:39) observations of resistance activities.

One could be tempted to believe that in the Palestinian case the differences within the imagined national Self are informed by classical gender differences; the weak victim is a woman and the strong fighter is a man. This imagery is frequently exploited by the international media. When talking about Palestinians, the media seems to alternate between pictures of the poor Palestinian refugee woman with a hungry child in her arms and the nasty Palestinian suicide-killer with clenched fist and covered face. But in the eyes of the women interviewed, even sons in their early twenties became children, suffering defenceless victims, that women had to fight for. The weakness of a woman is in consequence counterbalanced by the strength of the caring mother whose primary concern is her children’s well-being.

During the Intifada, the Israeli military announcements did not use the Hebrew word for child when reporting injuries or deaths of Palestinian children in confrontations with the Israeli army (Peteet 1994:37). A ten year-old boy was for example reported to be a ”young man of ten”. Therefore, by seeing even young men as children, women were also contesting the Israeli neglect of Palestinian childhood.

**The Significance of Motherhood and Loss**

Motherhood becomes a cure to the sufferings and powerlessness of these Palestinian refugee women. It seems to create meaning in a hopeless situation. As Eastmond (1996:245) notes about women in some Latin American contexts: ”Suffering provides moral merit, it must be made visible. As socially visible and recognised, it provides strength, a kind of life-regenerating force, and constitutes a central dimension of what makes life meaningful to these...
women.” For Palestinian refugee women, sacrifices and suffering are morally ennobling; connected to motherhood they confer social status to women.

Through the politicization of loss, motherhood, suffering and sacrifices, women in the camp experienced a sense of empowerment. Women were not only creating meaning and a positive identity for themselves through these cultural tools, but also gaining political force. Or, following the discussion about sacrifice, the sacrifice of sons released political force, through which women felt empowered. Interpreting their losses of land, childhood and sons as sacrifice, these are transformed from experiences of humiliation to dignity.

According to Turner (1967:51), the meaning of a symbol derives from its relationship to other symbols in a totality, a Gestalt, whose elements acquire their significance from the system as a whole. I argue that the leading themes in the Palestinian identity formation, motherhood and loss, are in a similar way connected to each other and to other semantic themes such as suffering, sacrifice and struggle. These themes are crystallized out of the Palestinian refugee experience and elaborated to form a complicated web, a totality, which has to do with what it means being a Palestinian refugee woman.

**AFTER THE INTIFADA: CREATING CONTINUITY**

The fieldwork was conducted seven years after the Oslo agreement, and four and a half years after Bethlehem became part of the PNA-ruled areas. Apart from political and economic changes, there was also proof of social change; people talked about the mahr, the dower, going up, the divorces were increasing, and many Palestinians had returned to the West Bank from exile. The summer of 2000 was not a period when nothing happened. And still, women in the camp maintained that there was no major change after the Intifada and the establishment of the PNA. They claimed their situation was more or less the same. This was said to be due to the failure of the peace process; there was no real peace, the Palestinians did not have their own country, the refugees had not returned to their land, their suffering had not ended; Israel was still not to be trusted. The women’s expectations were clearly not fulfilled. Furthermore, women somehow missed the intensity of the struggle, or rather the meaningfulness connected to it and their own importance in it. In a sense they were of course right when they repeated that “things were still the same”: they were still liminal in the

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26 Compare for example the ex-guerrilla soldier’s restlessness and the longing back to his important years in the political struggle, in Eastmond (1996).
national order of things (Malkki 1995) and the discrimination against them continued, although in less violent ways.

However, probing the issue further, women did perceive some changes related to the political struggle and their position as Palestinian refugee women. First, the stable political situation had a direct impact on their lives, since the Peace Agreement gave them the possibility “to sleep in peace”. Nevertheless, this admitted change was perceived as false; they only felt safer, not safe, and they said that the Israeli soldiers could enter any day. The soldiers were even said to still operate in the PNA areas wearing civilian clothes. Accordingly, women claimed not feeling safe deep inside.

The lack of safety was, as the events some months later would show, a present and real threat that the conflict with Israel would restart due to the stagnated peace process. During my last weeks at the fieldsite a growing number of people talked about the possibility of a new Intifada coming up. Some people were said to ”be preparing”. But the insecurity may also have signified a loss of confidence, of faith in life in general, which may be frequent in the refugee experience or among others who experienced violent political events. ”Of course I move around freely [these days], but deep inside I am not secure, because I will always remember the injustice we lived in,” said a young woman in the camp.

A second change was the loss of sense of community after the Intifada. Comparing the present with the uprising, selfishness and individualism were perceived to be growing stronger in the camp. Some how this change was regretted, but accepted. An extreme situation forces people to stick together. I think this change was seen as just another loss, as the cost of relative stability.

A third perceived change was that there were no longer any direct forms of political activitism for women, as well as for ”ordinary” people in general. However, women still claimed that there were other ways to be politically active and to participate in the state-building process. The young woman quoted below used to be politically active during the Intifada, although she was only about thirteen years old when it ended. Her way of coping with change was to lean on a well-known role for women, motherhood, and she was by no means the only one.

”The PNA would like to see women in jobs such as being a lawyer, or in the media, because these two could help them to become politically active or to enter in politics. I don’t think [women] will be able to reach higher levels, to participate in higher political things. During the Intifada there were a lot of women activists, for example in demonstrations. Now her political role is more or less stopped.[...]

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Women are the base of the society. If she raises her children the right way she will help in this way, she will rise the status of the country.” (Interviewee no 4)

However, not only women’s reproductive role was pointed out, but also their importance in economic activities. Regardless of kind of wage work, whether unskilled or professional, this was, as they saw it, yet another way for women to participate in the reconstruction of society. In general, working out of home was seen as a way to participate in the society and considered to be a kind of political activity.

The young woman quoted is an example of how my informants were renegotiating their political position. Since their participation in the political struggle had always been connected to motherhood, it was logical to reinforce this theme, in response to change. Palestinian refugee women were supposed to be politically active through being primarily mothers. Thus, changes related to the struggle and to women’s position were incorporated into a well-known system of meaning for them, i.e. a system of meaning which defined them as Palestinian refugee women.

FROM POLITICAL ACTIVISM TO MOTHERHOOD: RAISING GOOD PALESTINIANS

Given the participation of women during the Intifada, it is remarkable that there were for instance only five women among the 672 members in the Palestinian Legislative Council (Sida 1999:21). Some of the women interviewed experienced a conflict between how they would like women to participate and the view of the society/the family on political participation of women. Women had difficulties to be politically active in new ways. They had a number of different explanations for this which included the fight for power within the PNA or that the PNA “came ready-made”, implying the political organization which now had returned from exile. Some claimed it was because the families did not like to see their female members politically involved. What they called ”the traditions” were still strong and made some families ”marry off” their daughters at early ages or refuse them higher education.

Formal education was frequently outlined as a necessity for women participating in politics these days, which is not strange in a society where illiteracy is a present problem in many people’s lives. Others said people did not trust women to lead them or that women were educated to be a weaker sex which among other things made them too shy to speak in public. In addition, the Israeli occupation with the following political and economic chaos was given as a reason for women’s non-involvement in politics. The bad economic situation made families concentrate on their sons’ education since they were supposed to care for their
parents, while daughters were "married off". The Israeli occupation also made people fear that politically active women would be imprisoned and sexually abused. None of these suggested reasons need to exclude the others.

To these women, political activism was part of everyday life rather than demonstrating and joining a political party, even though these were also included in the concept. A woman in a focus group put it as follows: "Being politically active doesn’t only mean throwing stones; all people, whether young or old, have politics in their blood. All Palestinians around the world care about Palestine." 27

Political activism was being aware of the political situation, following the news reports or having knowledge about historical injustice. It was being part of the society as opposed to the ideal secluded woman of the past. It was about suffering and oppression. The daily oppression from the Israeli army had more or less forced women in the camp to take active part in the uprising. You do not always have a choice to be involved or not; if the soldiers come to arrest your children you would most likely try to stop them. Many of the political activities during the Intifada also focused on keeping daily life functioning, by organizing lessons for children when the schools were closed or by distributing milk.

"Many people who participated in the Intifada had nothing to do with politics. They only participated because they are Palestinians, not because they are 'politicians'. The Intifada collected all types of people, whether educated or not. But under the title of Palestinians with one blood and one goal. But other stages in life don’t require all types to participate. It depends on the profession." (Focus group 5)

Moreover, women’s concern was about the reconstruction of society rather than the state-building process. In the reconstruction of society, the future as well as the past, seemed to be more important than the present. Mothers were said to be the base of the society raising the future generation. To raise "good Palestinians" was dependent on the transmission of knowledge, of social memory forged in the national narrative. As mentioned, the traditional embroidery had clear national connotations; to embroider a map of Palestine was to "introduce the Palestinian map to the new generation, whereas Israelis neglect the fact that there is a Palestine" as a woman in a focus group claimed, and thus, also a way to contest the Israeli version of history. The embroidery was, together with songs and stories about village life of previous generations, about the loss of the land and the Intifada, part of the knowledge created by the Palestinian refugee experience. Women told me how they, during their
childhood, had come to love their country by listening to songs and stories about the old days, or by seeing their parents crying when recalling the flight. A woman in a focus group, though, reminded the others that "no one sings [these kind of nationalistic songs for their children] nowadays." Another woman answered her that children today were affected by the media instead, exemplifying with Arafat not signing an agreement in Camp David, which she explained sent the message to children to be determined and not to give up the struggle.

There were both indirect and direct ways to transmit knowledge. A great deal of this knowledge was about the loss of land. As a woman said when asked about how she talked about the land with her children: "Well, I don’t sit down and give them a lesson exactly, but when we go to their grand-parents’ house they hear about the land.” TV programs about the past, the reading of newspapers and discussions about politics at home were also part of this national instruction of children. School was as well claimed to be important, teaching about historical events and discussing the refugee children’s family history in class. Others said ”the way we live, teaches them [...] the milk they drink is mixed with our suffering”. Life in the camp was a continuous suffering, accordingly children learnt being Palestinian the hard way.

Inevitably, you come to think of the Jewish suffering and the Jews’ wish to remember and transmit their painful history to future generations, when hearing these Palestinian refugee women. Some women were not unaware of these similarities and meant that it was not necessary to tell the children all the frightening details from the Intifada, because each generation had its own problems. A woman also claimed that ”it’s not necessary to repeat like the Jews do about their sufferings -it becomes boring”, while another thought the children had the right to know about the sufferings of their family.

Thus, political activism was a wide concept and part of everyday life. By working and by raising ”good Palestinians” women still had an important political role. As in the early stages of Palestinian nationalism, motherhood was still considered as the highest form of national service for a woman (Katz 1996), even if the women also suggested another form of national service; the economic activities of women. The raising of the future generation was dependent on transmission of knowledge, on a social memory being part of the national discourse. This knowledge was, according to the women, transmitted in both direct and indirect ways. It was not only the task of mothers, but also of other relatives, school and the media. The experience of continuous suffering as refugees also taught children how to be Palestinians.

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27 Blood clearly has a politico-symbolic significance to this Palestinian refugee woman, and not only to her, Malkki (1992) writes that blood is a frequently used metaphor for national communities in general.
It was actually not so self-evident to teach children about their past as it might appear. I sometimes got the impression that the children of today who had experienced neither the Intifada nor the flight, nor the previous village life, did not always know the things that women said were important to know. The longing to the village was not evident. If a possibility appears for the refugees to return to the original villages the children may prefer to stay in the camp where they grew up and where they have their friends, their space. Some women were well aware of this scenario and expressed their hopes for their children still to be willing to return.

Women seemed to console themselves in a depressing situation, missing their changed political role, by referring to professional life and the mother’s important role in the transmission of knowledge. I am not saying that women did not have such a role in the raising of “good” Palestinians, which of course they did, but I think that this role was over-estimated.

On the other hand, Palestinian women embody the traditional stone house, the destroyed villages and the lost land or are agents of memory by their names which recall the lost site as Slyomovics (1998) writes. If women by their mere existence narrate the Palestinian history, the social memory, they do not necessarily need to act to transmit knowledge. Palestinian women may not be the principal narrators of the Palestinian history, rather, it is inscribed on their person.

**CONCLUDING DISCUSSION**

This study seeks to illuminate the Palestinian political struggle as well as the process of national identity formation. Exploring the experience of the women in Dheisheh, we may conclude that Palestinian refugee women’s role and involvement in the political struggle were primarily to be mothers in a number of different ways. ”Motherhood” in the highly politicized context of Palestinian refugees and nation-building, consequently condensed several related meanings. First, in a very concrete sense, women in their reproductive role supplied Palestinian children, and raised these children to become good Palestinians, ”national beings”. This was partly done by a transmission of the collective knowledge of the camp refugees, securing the continuation of social memory. Also women’s everyday domestic concerns, maintaining daily life, were seen by themselves as a kind of political activity. In their daily plight, women suffered and sacrificed to make a good life for their children.

Considering women’s expanding roles in the Palestinian society, there was also a consensus among women that working ”outside”, whether professionally or in the unskilled
labour sector, was a way to be politically active under new circumstances, to participate in the
reconstruction of the Palestinian society. Being part of this public and therefore political
world women opposed the ideal of the secluded woman.

As participants in political activities, primarily the Intifada, the role of women was
concentrated on the protection of the Palestinian children and youth. This was also seen to
strengthen the solidarity of the camp, since all youth were seen as "everybody’s son”.
Importantly, by sacrificing their sons, women released political force to the benefit of all
Palestinians and the national struggle. To cope with such loss, it was given the meaning of
necessary sacrifices in the struggle.

The political struggle was gendered and so was, to some extent, its discourse. Women and
men (also dependent on age) assumed different roles as political actors in the struggle. As
discursive figures, women’s role was prominent, not at least as agents of symbolic
transformation. In the women’s stories, as well as in the legends of the Intifada (Kanaana
1998), the leading parts in the struggle were played by the mother and her son, the young
fighter, in its extreme the shahid. To their own kin, these women were the base of the family
in both practical and symbolic ways. Playing an important role in the national struggle,
women became protectors and fighters in relation to their children, and especially to their
sons. As mothers of martyrs, their identity was founded on sacrifice and provision of political
force, to the benefit of all Palestinians. To all their children, women were as well "national
instructors”. In the process of national identity formation, women became symbols of lost
land, abandoned villages as well as destroyed houses and they were "national signifiers” in
the form of the peasant woman of 1948.

In relation to other Palestinians, as camp refugees, women elaborated an identity based on
loss, poverty and stigmatization. Nevertheless, as in Malkki’s research, "refugee-ness” was
not a wasted identity. On the contrary, and despite the Palestinian refugees’ position within
the Palestinian society, the refugee status was valued and meaningful, as a politically fertile
category in the transformation of loss. The Palestinian refugee woman stands for ”Palestinian-
ness” both in the struggle, in political rhetoric and in national imagery. As among the Hutu
refugees in a Tanzanian camp described by Malkki, displaced people are still seen as an
important part of the nation and are, thus, not refuting but rather reaffirming the national
order of things, through their nationalist metaphysic concentrated on uprooting, homelessness
and loss of land (Malkki 1992).
This study distinguishes the dominant themes in the experience of Palestinian refugee women: loss and motherhood are connected to one another and to other concepts such as suffering, sacrifices and the political struggle. These themes are elaborated to form a complicated web, acquiring their significance from the system as a whole, or in Turner’s word, a Gestalt. This system not only structures the refugee experience, but also helps women create meaning out of lived experience.

As mentioned, the main aspect of loss, recurrent in the refugee experience, was the loss of land which implied that the refugees occupied a liminal position both within their own society and in the global order of nation states. The loss of the land becomes clearer through Turner’s concept of a dominant symbol, showing how land is connected both to a sensory pole, related to social relations (place) and livelihood (soil), as well as an ideological pole, related to nationalism (national space).

Dominant symbolic themes can also be elucidated in a comparison with the Hutu camp refugees in Tanzania studied by Malkki. She analyses their narratives as a mythico-history of their past in their homeland Burundi. The mythico-history was a shared body of knowledge: formulaic historical accounts from people’s own lives melted into the general themes of a collective narrative, a common voice. The dominant themes of the mythico-history were possible "to place [...] in the contemporary sociopolitical context of the refugee camp where they were being remembered and produced, consolidated and transformed" (Malkki 1995:105). The present in the Hutu refugee camp was in a way lived in historical terms: the past did not only explain aspects of contemporary life, it also contributed to structuring social action.

In a similar way, the symbolically charged events which could be said to order themes in the mythico-history of Dheisheh are Al Nakba and the Intifada. The mythical land was one such theme which opposed the present with a beautiful past, and tied the refugees to their "ancestral land". This period was an ideal state, a golden age of harmony, when the refugees were in their rightful place. The dispersal of the people in 1948 with the dangers and the poverty of the first years as refugees was another theme. It described the most unrighteous act committed by the Israelis and the beginning of "refugee-ness". The peasants were "put out of place". Moreover, the refugees were neophytes (Turner 1967) as refugees these first years, not yet real refugees, and more liminal than ever after. Al Nakba may also be described as the shameful event, implying the dishonourable breach of the decree to protect your land (Katz
1996), as well as the Palestinians’ inability to properly defend themselves against Israeli assaults.

On the contrary, the Intifada seemed to be incorporated in the mythico-history as a *dignifying act*. The Palestinians were, despite new losses, gaining back their honour, finally defending their land. Other themes were the *sacrifice of martyrs* which released political force and the *community of the Intifada* which made everybody protect the *shebab* and neglect political differences in the struggle. These two themes elaborated an idea of the morality of the Palestinians, since they were said to be strong and fearless and willing to feel compassion with one another. The Palestinians were also ideal ”national beings”, willing to sacrifice for their country. Furthermore, women became ideal ”national mothers”, both protecting their children and making sacrifices for their country, even though this implied an ambiguous sacrifice of children. In the extreme situation of the Intifada, grown-up women seemed to be more likely to transgress certain gender conventions, while young girls, not yet fully accepted social beings, were more restricted. By this, the Palestinians were both contesting and confirming the Israelis’ prejudices about oppressed Arab women, and showed a cultural flexibility as opposed to Israeli ideas about Palestinian culture as stable, archaic and Oriental (Rabinowitz 1997).

Yet another theme in the mythico-history could be called *the Jews as violators*. In the women’s stories of how Israeli soldiers beat Palestinian children or women, entered and destroyed people’s houses, ate their food, took their family members to prison etcetera, it is possible to distinguish a Palestinian disgust for the Other’s lack of morality. Contrary to the Palestinians who often consider themselves polite to others and reserved in public (Peteet 1994:42), the Israeli soldiers were brutal, rude and without compassion. With all their military force, soldiers attacked unarmed youngsters, which were seen as an apparent sign of cowardice. In this way, clear and defining distinctions were drawn between Palestinian behaviour and that of the occupiers.

As Peteet (op. cit) argues, discussing Israeli public beating of young male Palestinians, the creation of meaning is a matter of Palestinian control. In this process, the audience of the violent act, often women, are revealers and witnesses of Israeli lack of morality. Women often interfered in public beatings by, for example, mocking and questioning the soldiers’ morale and manhood. Palestinians were re-constituting themselves in a moral sense, their moral qualities juxtaposed with those of the occupier. The killing of young Palestinians are of course even more morally dubious.
Moreover, when Palestinian houses were demolished during the Intifada, and continued to be demolished even after, this was interpreted as a continued violation of the land/the house/the woman. This was a mythico-historical act repeating the loss of land, already symbolically meaningful, probably also to Israelis.

In Dheisheh, the mythico-history had clear political significance and dealt centrally with the moral right of Palestinian actors, while opposing the official Israeli version of history. As Slyomovics (1998:207) remarks, the authoritative version of history in "Palestine" is defined by Israeli versions and the Palestinian production of history is still only in process. To have their own version of history is seen as a source of power, knowledge and purity to the Palestinians.

Surprisingly, the entry of the PNA was not added to the mythico-history. Instead, the Intifada was regarded as the present, a struggle with a temporary cease-fire. The mythico-history remained open-ended, cumulative, and dynamic, because in it, "the past" was articulated with the present and framed the understanding of contemporary experiences. Thus, the refugee women were as always deprived, suffering and sacrificing mothers in a political struggle. For example, when the UNRWA cut down their expenses, the refugees interpreted this as another deprivation and denial of the refugees’ rights, just as they had been deprived of their land and their rights of nationality. Furthermore, when women had difficulties combining domestic duties with wage labour, they tended to interpret this as yet another way of sacrificing their children for the country as they did during the Intifada, since having a professional life was to participate in the society’s reconstruction. When the Israeli government confiscated more land in Bethlehem, the Israelis acted as they had done since Al Nakba, without morals and compassion.

In this way, "[c]onflicts are mediated by a society’s cultural perception that gives specific meaning to the situation, evaluating it on the basis of the experience of past conflicts, stored as objectified knowledge in a group’s social memory" (Schmidt et al 2001:4). To narrate a mythico-history is also a process of providing social legitimation to violence; it made the Palestinians think of their political struggle as justified, even though it implied victims and sufferings. Moreover, violence is never completely devoid of sense or meaningless to the actors in a conflict. Or rather, in the Palestinian case, to stand violence and avoid a complete victimization, people have to give violence cultural significance. The violence Palestinians used against Israelis was also justified, since the Palestinians, according to the mythico-history, rightfully defended their land.
Peteet (op. cit) also claims that the Israeli army’s beating and torturing of young male Palestinians becomes a kind of *rite de passage* to manhood. By courageously enduring violence, the Palestinian oppressed male under occupation is reconstituted. The violent act created with the intent to humiliate has been reversed into one of honour, manhood and moral superiority as well as political agency. This violence may be seen as a kind of ritual purification, the Palestinians were trying to "wash off their shame” or the impurity of liminality. Or, rather, "shaking off", since the term Intifada literally means a shaking, as in ”shaking the dust from” (Peteet 1994:40).

Drawing this analysis a bit further, the Intifada in its totality could be understood as a ritual in which the Palestinians reconstitute a moral superiority, a kind of purity; it is a kind of *rite de passage* to dignity. By the Peace Agreement the Palestinians’ impure liminality was supposed to be over, they would finally acquire a "real” national identity and their own nation-state. Instead, their liminality continued; living in a state-in-the making, there was no incorporation in the "national” world.

In accordance with this interpretation, the new uprising, *Al Aksa* Intifada, starting only weeks after I had left the fieldsite, becomes a logical outcome of the events since the Oslo accords. The peace had, according to the Palestinians, been a continuous humiliation and the time had come for another dignifying act. Moreover, even if there were a number of other reasons to start a new uprising, the new Intifada may as well be seen as a solution to the difficulty in transmitting knowledge to a new generation. The knowledge of the camp, or the social memory, was in many ways connected with suffering, and with the new Intifada a new generation has lost their childhood or their fathers and brothers and learnt how to struggle, "throwing stones and hiding guys”.

The political struggle is a way to affirm “Palestinian-ness” and reconstitute Palestinian dignity. Together with everyday life in the camp, embedded in the social memory of the past, the struggle becomes the teacher of young Palestinians. Their mothers are their protectors like the soils of the "promised land” that, in the trembling heat, tries to protect the fragile seeds of peace, of hope.
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