CHAPTER FIVE

WOMEN AND PLACES OUTSIDE

A girl who stayed in the kitchen, drawing water from the tap, would never get married.
—Hassan Fathy, Architecture for the Poor

In this chapter the attention shifts from the social construction of women, to what stories tell us more specifically about water. We will look more closely at water with regard to how women experience changes in water use. Activities involved in fetching water are connected to their notions of places outside their house. In Chapter Three they told us about the nature surrounding their village, and they have described various water points in the valley below. The narratives reveal various metaphorical levels in which ‘places outside’ figure. First there is the scenery as a symbol of the Palestinian nation and heritage, hence their own positioning within that nation. These women spoke of Divinity in the landscape and their place in the scheme of things. But let me start with water itself.

Clean Water is a Good Thing

Um Muhammad and the others talked about piped water as a “good thing.” They all know about hygiene, the connections between dirt and sickness. They also know that piped water is what rich people have. They also know that, had the economic and political situation been different, perhaps piped water would have contributed to a more harmonious old age. But life took an unexpected turn. Since the installation of water they are faced with more and more unrest. In the stories women tell us about the price of piped water. In contrast to the spring water, which was free, women are obliged to pay for piped water which they either cannot afford to use or is not accessible during the long months of summer. The accessibility of water in the pipes is mirrored in the rising prices of fruits and vegetables. The social and health worker’s insistence on a diet based on more vegetables and fruits provokes them: “They think we have nothing in the head to think with. We are peasants. We know that vegetables and fruits are good for the health.”
Um Muhammad was not the only one sceptical of the young experts who come from donor offices to carry out appraisals in Musharafah. They all agree that non-contaminated water is “a good thing.” This is usually followed with “We are illiterate, but not stupid.” The trouble is that there are concerns which “those people from Ramallah” don’t know about. Water in taps is of no help if women continue to live alone most of the years with only sporadic financial help from kin or charity from neighbours.

For Um Khaled water bills make following a healthy diet very difficult: “We cannot grow vegetables without worrying about the bill. Today we cannot use tap water from the Shirka (company) to water the garden, so we go to the market. But in the market the vegetables and fruits are not always good and they cost money. In years when there is little water in the tap, the vegetables are too expensive to buy, and I feel sick from lack of vegetables. You know vegetables and fruits watered with water from the jebel are healthy—it is the best thing for you.” Giving me cup of tap water, Um Khaled asks me to smell it “It smells like medicine, you know like when you visit the doctor in Ramallah.”

Several women, like Um Khaled try hard to keep up small patches by their house where they grow enough vegetables to feed their family. They water them with ‘winter’ water. Until recently, some women still went down to the ‘AYN, but the homes are not close to the springs, and it is difficult to ask the younger women to fetch water. As I was sitting outside with Um Khaled she pointed to a young woman who passed us “Young women think they are too important to fetch water. Look how fat she is.” She is surprised that the health workers are not more concerned with the growing obesity among young Palestinians.

One of the first families to move out of the old village and to the ‘new’ Musharafah was Abu Ali’s family. They moved before the installation of water. Other families followed when it was finally decided that the village was going to have piped water. Within a couple of years a Jewish settlement was built on the highest point above the village, so women fetching water in jars faced the risks of confronting settlers who patrol the areas close to the water springs. Irrigation is a different matter; it is still much easier to use the overflow of water in winter and spring to water olive trees and vegetables which are still cultivated by a couple of families.

Fetching water involved more than just daily work; it involved ‘being with the world,’ goodness, adversities, triumphs and joy. Furthermore fetching water involved negotiations between women about how to cope