Gendering the Palestinian Political Cartoon*

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Abstract
This paper examines the representation of the distribution of agency and responsibility across gender roles in Palestinian political cartoons. Cartoons are read to discover the nature of family dynamics, the relationship between the home and what lies outside it, and public and private sources of culture and Palestinian identity. Included are the work of Naji al-Ali whose widely-read cartoons appeared in Arabic language newspapers from the 1960’s until his assassination in 1987, and that of six contemporary cartoonists: Baha Boukhari, Khalil Abu Arafeh, Omayya Joha, Muhammed Sabuaneh, Naser al-Jafari, and Emad Hajjaj. In al-Ali’s cartoons, Palestinian men and their families are deeply affected by the pressures of dispossession, violence, and exploitation by elites. However, because the disruption affects mainly the public sphere of military action, politics, and wage labor, it is men who are most negatively affected by those pressures. They are often at a loss as to how to respond, and do not always make wise choices. On the other hand, al-Ali locates the idea of Palestine squarely in the private sphere, in women’s roles in biological and social reproduction. Because this idea is intact, women are able to perform their roles even in states of extreme violence and dispossession. The cartoons of later artists differ in that masculinity is divorced from military action, and although politics is largely ineffectual, men are endowed with agency in the public sphere. Women in the later cartoons continue to be defined chiefly, though not exclusively, by the domestic sphere, but Palestinian motherhood is in crisis and women in grave danger in many of these cartoons, a reflection of the crisis of the idea of Palestine as a whole and sound homeland.

Keywords
Palestinian; political cartoons; gender; representation; masculinity; Naji al-Ali

Introduction
As a rule political cartoons do not explore social relationships and identities. Rather, they rely heavily on stereotypes and widely understood norms as a shorthand in their commentaries on current events. Nonetheless, it is precisely

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because the social norms they convey are so recognizable that cartoons can provide a window into anxieties surrounding those norms for a given society, as well as their change over time. Political cartoons do not depict actual behaviors and environments, but rather stylized fantasies that nonetheless reflect expectations and ideals. As a result, they can offer an articulation of a public’s self-image by contributing to the creation of a national imaginary (Edwards and Ware 2001). In this paper I examine contemporary Palestinian political cartoons to uncover the messages regarding the distribution of agency and responsibility across gender roles in both the domestic and political spheres.

I read the cartoons to discover the nature of family dynamics, the relationship between the home and what lies outside it, and public and private sources of culture and Palestinian identity. As Judith Butler has argued, gender is embodied through action, dramatization, and reproduction; it is culturally conceived in part through tacit conventions; and repetition is integral to its construction (Butler 1988). While on this last point Butler is primarily referring to the repetition of acts, a link can be made between repetitive acts and the repetition of representation that characterizes the political cartoon, not only because cartoons are produced and read daily, but also because they depict many of the easily recognizable repetitive acts that are constitutive of gender.

I begin from the perspective of gender norms (shaped by global, regional, and local forces) that are characterized by patriarchy and gendered divisions of labor, space, and sources of knowledge (Connell 2005, Gerami 2005, Joseph and Slyomovics 2000). Within these norms, men’s roles are broadly defined by wage labor, national politics, and the military, while women’s roles are defined by the home and both biological and cultural reproduction. How the cartoons included in this study repeatedly conform and deviate from these norms will, I suggest, reflect and help shape a Palestinian conception of gender roles.

Any analysis of Palestinian political cartoons must begin with the work of Naji al-Ali whose work was widely read in Arabic-language newspapers from the 1960s until his assassination in 1987. Al-Ali drew at a time when many of what developed into iconic images in post-1948 Palestinian popular culture were coming into being, and his work was instrumental in investing these images with meaning and popularity. Because of his stature in the Arab World as an unflinching critic of corruption, exploitation, and political expediency, Abu Arafeh, Baha Boukhari, Emad Hajjaj, Naser al-Jafari, and Muhammad Sabaaneh for granting me interviews and permission to reprint examples of their cartoons in this article. The work of Naji al-Ali appears with the permission of the al-Ali family who retains the copyright of the late artist’s work. I thank Khalid al-Ali for providing me with the images and facilitating the permission process.