

Palestinian Diaspora and Feminine Identity in Suheir Hammad's Poetry As Reflected in the Conflict between Alienation and Integration

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Abstract

Suheir Hammad is a Palestinian American poet, playwright, actor, and political activist. Though Hammad has been raised and educated in America, she has retained her Arabic identity. This dual life brings about a conflict between a feeling of alienation, on the one hand, and a powerful sense of integration, on the other. Hammad articulates this conflict in her writings from a feminist perspective by zeroing in on the misery of Palestinian women, black women, and women of ethnic minorities in general. The present paper highlights the conflict between alienation and integration on the level of Suheir Hammad the woman using as evidence her views and opinions expressed in some of her interviews, essays, and other prose writings, besides the views of various critics and scholars. On the level of Suheir Hammad the woman poet, the study traces her feminist approach to the conflict through her poetry.

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الشتات الفلسطيني و هوية المرأة فى شعر سهير حماد كما يتمثلان فى الصراع بين الغربية و الإنتماء

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ملخص

تعتبر سهير حماد شاعرة و كاتبة مسرحية و ممثلة و ناشطة سياسية و هى مواطنة أمريكية من أصل فلسطينى. و رغم أنها نشأت و تعلمت فى أمريكا فقد احتفظت بهويتها العربية و يرجع الفضل فى هذا إلى والديها. كم أنها لم تقطع صلتها يوماً بوطنها الأصلي أو تتشغل عن أزماته و مشكلاته. و قد أدت هذه الحياة المزدوجة إلى نشأة صراع بين الإحساس الشديد بالغربة، و الرغبة القوية فى الإنتماء. و قد عبرت حماد عن هذا الصراع فى كتاباتها من منظور نسائي حيث أنها سلطت الضوء على معاناة و بؤس كل من المرأة الفلسطينية، و المرأة العربية، و المرأة السوداء، و المرأة فى مجتمعات الأقلية بوجه عام. و يهدف البحث الحالى إلى توضيح الصراع بين الغربية و الإنتماء أولاً على مستوى سهير حماد المرأة مستندلاً على ذلك من خلال أرائها الموجودة فى مقالاتها، و لقاءاتها الشخصية، و كتاباتها النظرية بوجه عام، ثم على مستوى سهير حماد المرأة الشاعرة من خلال رصد تناولها النسائي لهذا الصراع فى أشعارها.

Suheir Hammad is a Palestinian American poet, playwright, actor, and political activist. She was born in a refugee camp in Amman, Jordan on October 25, 1973. Her parents immigrated to Brooklyn, NY when she was five years old. At the age of sixteen, while she was in high school, her family moved to Staten Island. She attended Hunter College where she majored in Cross-Cultural Literature and Women's Studies. There she won the Audre Lorde Writing Award for poetry. At the age of twenty-three she published her first two works, namely a memoir entitled *Drop of This Story* (Harlem River Press, 1996) and a book of poetry called *Born Palestinian, Born Black* (Harlem River Press, 1996). In addition to these two works, she has to her credit two books of poetry, two produced plays, and four films. The books of poetry are: *Zaatar Diva* (Cypher Books, 2005) and *Breaking Poems* (Cypher Books, 2008). The plays produced include *Blood Trinity* (2002) and *ReOrientalism* (2003). As for her films, she plays the part of the narrator in *Lest We Forget* (2003) and *The Fourth World War* (2004), stars in *Salt of This Sea* (2008), and writes the verses of *When I Stretch Forth Mine Hand* (2009). She has performed her poems on Brooklyn's street corners, on college campuses of the Ivy League Universities, at spoken word poetry venues, with musical groups as well as at rap concerts. Suheir Hammad is the first Palestinian to perform on Broadway. When hip-hop entrepreneur Russel Simmons read her poem "first writing since," he offered her to join the cast of his famous Tony-award-winning Broadway show "Russel Simmons Presents Def Poetry Jam." She won a Tony Award (2003) for her performance in the show and received a Peabody Award (2003) for the HBO series of the same show. Likewise, she is the recipient of the Morris Center for Healing Poetry Award (1996), a New York Mills Artist Residency (1998), a Van Lier Fellowship (1999), the 2001 Emerging Artist Award from the Asian/Pacific/American Studies Institute at New York University, and the 2009 American Book Awards. Her film *The Salt of This Sea* was also nominated for 2008 Academy Awards Best Foreign Language Film category as Palestine's entry. Hammad's work has appeared in scores of prestigious anthologies such as *In Defense of Mumia* (Writers and Readers), *New to North America* (Burning Bush Press), *The Space Between Our Footsteps* (Simon & Shuster), *Identity lessons*

(Penguin), *Listen Up!* (Ballantine), *Post Gibran: Anthology of New Arab-American Writing* (Jusoor Press), *Becoming American* (Hyperion), *Bum Rush the Page* (Three Rivers Press), *The Poetry of Arab Women* (Interlink Books), *Voices for Peace* (Scribner), *Sing, Whisper, Shout, Pray!; Feminist Visions for a Just World* (Edge Work), and *Short Fuse, The Global Anthology of New Fusion Poetry*, edited by Swift & Norton; (Rattapallax Press) as well as many famous internet and print periodical and magazines worldwide such as *The Amsterdam News*, *Black Renaissance/Renaissance Noire*, *Brilliant Corners*, *Clique*, *Drum Voices Revue*, *Essence*, *Long Shot*, *Atlanta Review*, *Bomb*, *Brooklyn Bridge*, *Fierce*, *STRESS Hip-Hop Magazine*, *Quarterly Black Review of Books*, *The Olive Tree Review*, *Meridians*, and *Sign*. She also has her own official website that can be accessed through the following address :<http://suheirhammas.com/>.⁽¹⁾

Though Hammad has been raised and educated in America, she has retained her Arabic identity thanks to her parents who still speak Arabic, eat Middle Eastern food, recite the holy Koran, listen to the melodious sounds of the great icons of Arabic song Om-Kulthoum and Abdel-Haleem, and dream that one day they will go home, i.e., to Palestine. Besides, Hammad has never lost contact with her homeland nor has lost sight of its crises and suffering. The fact of the matter is that she puts the culture of her homeland on an equal footing with the culture of her host land. She is nourished on the stories of her parents' and grandparents' idyllic lives in Palestine before the 1948 exodus and the suffering they had to put up with afterward, first in the Gaza Strip and then in Jordan. Besides, the poet keeps track of the Israeli-Palestinian struggle, while adapting easily to the American community of New York. Considering the disparity between the life of her original home and that of her exile home, it is natural that leading this dual life should bring about a kind of schizophrenia or, rather, a conflict between a strong feeling of alienation and a deep sense of integration. On the one hand, her cultural and religious upbringing and her family history of dispossession as a Palestinian diaspora make her feel displaced or exiled. On the other hand, her integration into the Black and Hispanic community of Brooklyn helps alleviate her alienation as a Palestinian immigrant. Nevertheless, her very same integration turns out to be another form of alienation since she

experiences all the grievances an ethnic minority encounters, which are by no means dissimilar to those the Palestinian diaspora have. Hammad articulates this psychological conflict in her writings, whether her poetry or her prose, from a feminist perspective. She describes her feelings of alienation and integration not as a Palestinian American writer but, rather, as a Palestinian American woman writer by expressing the suffering and misery of Palestinian women, Arab women, black women, and women of ethnic minorities in general. Therefore, the present study seeks to elucidate the conflict between alienation and integration from the perspective of Suheir Hammad the woman referring to her views and opinions cited in some of her interviews, essays, and other prose writings, along with the views of various critics and scholars. Then it will tackle the conflict from the perspective of Suheir Hammad the woman poet by tracing her feminist approach to the conflict through her poetry.

Suheir Hammad has been aware of the conflict between her sense of alienation and that of integration since her early childhood. In an essay entitled "In My Mother's Hands," she explains that back then she knew she was different from her equals taking advantage of this difference, i.e., alienation, as an incentive to integrate into minority groups, particularly African American:

I just knew I was different from my peers, that I didn't fit easily into categories of Black and White. My response was to challenge the world around me, taking as my own the realities of all those groups historically excluded from the mainstream. In particular, I found myself drawn to African and African-American culture. . . .

Hammad is particularly attracted to and deeply associated with the hip hop movement that appeared in the South Bronx in the early 1970s. When she is asked to define herself in an e-mail interview, she responds: "In Hip Hop culture we use the term Afro-Asiatic to define the mix of cultures I consider to form my own identity," which shows the deep influence that hip hop culture has on her (qtd. in Hoyt 102). Hammad's integration backfires on her as it deepens her feeling of alienation rather than doing away with or, at least, relieving it. This shows that the relationship between her alienation and her integration is proportional, that is, the more she integrates into her host culture the

more she is alienated not only from it, but also from her home culture, and vice versa. Thus, she is shocked at the fact that Americans do not "politically" identify Palestinians as "proper refugees," which means that "the dominant narrative that I received as a child in public education completely cancelled out the narrative my parents told me at home. And so this idea that my parents gave me this entire history of displacement and the refugee crisis around the world" Moreover, much to her resentment, she, finds out that she "would go to school in Brooklyn and not only would this narrative not exist, the narrative that was put in place was the opposite of it - the idea that the Palestinians were inherently violent and that they were inherently anti-Jewish" (Hammad, "Interview with Suheir Hammad," Brown). She also begins to show a dislike for her mother's Middle Eastern food in favor of American food, if only to break her daily dietary routine: "Why couldn't we just eat pancakes and bacon like everybody else? We had to have olives at every meal and pita bread with everything. I know now that I always loved that food. It's just hard to be different all the time" (Hammad, *Drops of This Story* 51). Another factor that helps alienate Hammad from her own culture besides her integration into American culture is the fact that she has not learned her native tongue until she is seventeen years old, which makes it a foreign language (4). In addition, she apparently has little or no command of the language since she acknowledges in an e-mail interview that "the Arabic language" is "a language I still cannot read or write" (qtd. in Hoyt 105).

There is, in fact, a third kind of alienation imbedded in Hammad's very incorporation into American culture; namely the alienation of African American minority and other American ethnic minorities in general. Accordingly, Hammad's remedy for alienation, i.e., her integration into American culture, turns out to be nothing but another form of alienation, which once more underlines the aforementioned proportional relation between her alienation and her integration. Hammad, however, points out that this ethnic alienation is actually her real incentive to integration after all. In his interview with her, Christopher Brown confronts her with this reality: "You often write about the similarities of people of color in relation to the power structure. One might say you derive this from a Black Consciousness

perspective, a shared philosophy of suffering that unites all people of color under the same oppressive yoke." Hammad endorses Brown's statement entirely: "Yes, absolutely! I think all of us (People of color) live under White male supremacy. . . . There is definitely a cap. There is definitely a roof for your participation in the dominant narrative, for your participation in the rule making of the world" ("Interview with Suheir Hammad," Brown). This racial alienation only adds to Hammad's diasporic alienation leading her to a dead-end. She feels at a loss, not knowing where to go or what do since America, the supposed home of democracy and liberty, proves to be nothing more than a second version of Palestine: "Our civil liberties here [in America] are being chipped away. So many people are being monitored - their personal and public lives are being monitored and you feel like: Where do I go? Where do I go to fully live and fully realize? . . . What is it I do?" ("Interview with Suheir Hammad," Brown). Again Hammad resorts to integration as the answer to her dilemma, believing that she can set things right if she joins her fellow American citizens with whom she shares the same language, experience, as well as responsibilities:

I keep coming back to the idea that you have to stay here, you have to talk to American people who are just like me who were raised just like me, or not, who speak a similar English, or not, but the thing that we have in common is our tax dollars. And that is where our shared responsibility is - how this government spends these shared tax dollars, where they go, who uses them, who benefits from them. It's really important for me to stay as long as I possibly can, living the majority of my time in America trying to get American citizens to make the connections we so often don't make. ("Interview with Suheir Hammad," Brown)

Predictably, this integration will lead to more alienation in a never-ending cycle of conflict that makes a hell of Hammad's life. To give vent to this hell and heal the rift in her identity, Hammad turns to poetry or, rather, her identity as a poet: "Well, . . . poetry tries to make a connection between the absences and the losses that I feel in my person, and make the connection to the body feeling detached or feeling displaced, and the reality of land and shelter and the idea of the

continuity of citizenship and the idea of ancestry" ("Interview with Suheir Hammad," Brown). In like manner, she states: "Within me are the East and the West and all points in between. I want to find within these lines an inherent poetics of survival" ("Directing My Pen Inwards" 82).

Underpinning the conflict between Hammad's alienation and her integration is her deep concern with a woman's identity. Whether she deals with her alienation or her integration, she addresses the issue from the feminist perspective of a woman. In the end, she herself is a woman, and she expresses herself in her poetry as such, hence identifying herself not as a poet but, rather, as a woman poet. Thus, she translates the conflict between alienation and integration into feminist terms when she declares to the feminist icon Gloria Steinem the discrepancy between her native culture's notion of a woman (the culture that brings about her alienation) and that of hip-hop culture (the culture into which she integrates):

So I have this huge dichotomy between my traditional Muslim parents' idea of a woman's strength being modesty, and your body being a gift—no pearls to swine, literally. And the extreme opposite, which was the girls I grew up with, in hip-hop and on TV, wearing the tightest jeans, the big booty shorts, low cut. I grew up, like every other girl, between these two polar—what do you call them? I mean, they're not ideals. ("In Conversation: Gloria Steinem and Suheir Hammad")

Likewise, when the conflict pertains to the sort of education she desires and the kind of career she would like to choose, it is again the disparity between her homeland's traditions and those of her host land, particularly with regard to gender, that determines how she should go about her education and what career is appropriate for her. So, her conservative parents expect that she would become a doctor or a lawyer in the manner of their tradition. However, being integrated into American culture, she does not live up to her parents' expectations, nor does she even look up to her mother as a role model in terms of a housewife as traditional daughters of her family would usually do. When she breaks the news that she plans to become an author to her mother, her mother panics and does her best to dissuade her from

pursuing such a career. Hammad thus tells Steinem: "I came from a traditional immigrant family where education meant there were only a few valid paths: doctor or lawyer, and I didn't want to be either one" ("In Conversation: Gloria Steinem and Suheir Hammad"). She also reflects:

And yet I never thought to look to my own mother as I tried to figure out who I was. Instead I embraced my otherness as a kind of liberation from my parents' expectations. They told me often that I was to become a doctor, and indeed as a child I was taken with the idea of saving lives. But during a hip-hop adolescence in which I explored my otherness among mostly Black and Latina girlfriends, I began to understand that what I wanted to do most was write our stories.

I tried to explain this to Mama. She wasn't convinced. "What kind of life does a woman writer live?" she admonished. "Traveling, meeting strangers, no stability." Mama didn't realize that those things tempted rather than discouraged me; I saw them as opportunities to explore who I was. Mama and I continued to be at odds, and relations between us were strained. ("In My Mother's Hands")

Even when the conflict between alienation and integration is embodied in Hammad's decision to live on her own and leave her parents' home in her twenties, it takes on a feminist tinge. First, it has to do with a woman not a man, i.e., Hammad herself; and second, it is approached from the standpoint of a patriarchal society, specifically an Arab one, that will not tolerate a decent woman leaving her parents' home unless she goes to the groom's home or the grave: "I am so old-fashioned. I've never lived with a man. I am completely about the independence of paying my own rent. It was really important for me in my twenties. Because when I left school and my parents' home—I was raised that when you leave, it's to your husband's home, or a coffin" ("In Conversation: Gloria Steinem and Suheir Hammad").

The conflict between Hammad's alienation and her integration has been traced and attested to by many reviewers, critics, as well as scholars. Thus, in his review of *Zaatar Diva*, David Mura remarks how the East and West meet in Hammad: "This is a book of love poems for the world, Suheir Hammad's world and our world — the streets of Palestine and Brooklyn; her father's shop and her lover's skin; baklava, prisons and poetry." Reviewing the same book of poetry, Bob Holman underscores Hammad's integration when he compares her to America's popular culture icons, declaring that "Suheir Hammad is the first Palestinian-American poet to emerge, like an emergency, bringing the full Otherness to USA panoply. . . . She's the jazz of Brooks, the hiphop of Tupac, the humor of Hagedorn." In line with Holman, a review of the book by *Publishers Weekly* identifies Hammad's integration into American culture by connecting her to the famous American woman poet and activist Nikki Giovanni: "Inspired both by her links to the Arab world and by the styles and stances of such earlier poet-performers as Nikki Giovanni, Hammad celebrates and defends her heritage . . . and can be equally passionate about daily life in her home borough" (*Zataar Diva*). Similarly, Stephanie Apollon, commenting on Hammad's *Breaking Poems*, depicts the conflict between her alienation and her integration in terms of a search for identity:

Suheir Hammad is a poet whose life and culture is reflected in her poetry book *breaking poems*. . . . The progression of her poems is all a matter of figuring out what she wants to be and who she is meant to be. She explores the possibilities of sticking with either being an American, Muslim, or embracing both cultures.

Besides, she adds,

When Suheir Hammad was in her twenties, she began her search for her self identity. She wanted to bridge the gap between who she was as a woman of New York and who she was as a Muslim. In her poems she tries to find a connection with her heritage and discover her self identity.

In her essay "Where Do We Go from Here? Reading 'Arab Women's Writing' Today," Tara Mendola defines the conflict as a sort of

"transnationalism" or "communal identity" explaining their mechanism as follows: "Transnationalism helps us to trace the varied paths of bodies in the new global economy—where have we come from, and where are we going. Yet communal identity roots us in a way that does not necessarily spring from nation" (224). Carol Bardenstein endorses Mendola's point of view, particularly with respect to "transnationalism" since she affirms in her paper "Beyond Univocal Baklava: Deconstructing Food-as-Ethnicity and the Ideology of Homeland in Diana Abu Jaber's *The Language of Baklava*" that Arab American writers such as Abu Jaber and Hammad have "tended to portray similarly complex articulations of transnational identities and affiliations in unsettled flux" (162). In line with Mendola's and Bardenstein's approach, Michael W. Suleiman in his article "The Arab Community in the United States: A Review and an Assessment of the State of Research and Writing on Arab Americans" discovers that Arab American writers including Hammad are subject to either of two processes, namely "acculturation" or "assimilation," i.e., integration, elaborating: "[A]cculturation leads to the acceptance by Arab immigrants of American cultural values, without necessarily rejecting their own. Assimilation, however, implies that Arabs completely fuse their culture into that of the host American culture" (49). Monica Angelique Alfaro in her MA thesis *Writing Oneself into Existence: Four Literary Artists and Their Perspectives on Exile* also refers to Hammad's conflict when she describes her integration into the ethnic minorities of New York as fulfilling the criteria of exile:

For Suheir Hammad, the forced displacement of Palestinians, among other refugee populations, is exile as well. For those who have been born of these exiled refugees, many times there is great internal conflict over their identity. If exile would never have occurred to their families, these products of exile may have had very different lives. As in the case of Suheir Hammad, having lived a life in Brooklyn, New York yet being raised by displaced Palestinian parents has had a significant impact on her version of exile. (119)

By the same token, in her article "'this sweet / sweet music': Jazz, Sam Cooke, and Reading Arab American Literary Identities," Michelle Hartman argues that Arab Americans, being defined as alien by

America's mainstream, seek affiliation with African Americans through incorporating such black symbols as jazz. She cites as examples the three Arab American authors Diana Abu-Jaber, Etel Adnan, and Suheir Hammad. Thus, she points out that the three authors' texts under discussion "use a strategy of identity building as Arabs/Arab Americans which affiliates and aligns the authors with African Americans . . . by employing specific symbols in their texts that represent black America. Specifically, . . . all three texts invoke African American music . . ." (145-46). Seeing eye to eye with Hartman, Heather Marie Hoyt remarks in her PhD dissertation *An "I" for Intimacy: Rhetorical Appeal in Arab American Women's Literature*: "Hammad identifies strongly with both her Palestinian roots and her affiliation with black culture in America, particularly with the hip hop that had a direct impact on her Brooklyn childhood" (101).

In her "Teaching Diaspora Literature: Muslim American Literature as an Emerging Field," Mohja Kahf even goes beyond the facts of Arab Americans' affiliation with and integration into African American community cited by both Hartman and Hoyt to the extent that she claims that "Muslim American literature" "begins with the Black Arts Movement (1965-75)," whose authors she labels "the Prophets of Dissent," believing Hammad to follow in their steps and hence categorizing her under "Later Prophets of Dissent": "Suheir Hammad, Palestinian New Yorker, . . . establishes her line of descent from the BAM, at least as one (major) influence on her work" (163, 164). The above-mentioned fact that Hammad's integration into African American minority backfires, bringing about her alienation the more has been implicated by some scholars as well. For example, Adrienne Colette Carthon explains in her PhD dissertation *Popular Culture and African-Americans' (Literary) Social Consciousness* that Hammad follows a poetical technique that is so challenging that it results in her isolation from the American mainstream of thinking: "[T]he primary strategy through which she [Hammad] engages the reader of the page is confrontation. Hammad's poetry and her delivery sharply present images that break the silence of denial within American political memory in a manner that is ideologically

oppositional to hegemonic strictures" (91). Carthon's argument is in keeping with Dick Hebdige's definition of subculture in his essay "From Culture to Hetemony; Subculture: The Unnatural Break" where he declares: "Subcultures represent 'noise' (as opposed to sound): interference in the orderly sequence which leads from real events and phenomena to their representation in the media" (207).

Equally, many critics and scholars have spotted the feminist aspect underlying the conflict between Hammad's alienation and her integration. So, in her above-mentioned dissertation, Hoyt comes to the conclusion that a number of "Hammad's poems address the issues that women of color encounter from men both inside and outside their communities. Her subjects confront the ways in which women's identities are essentialized by patriarchal perceptions of their bodies" (126). Likewise, Andreana Clay concludes her essay "Like an Old Soul Record: Black Feminism, Queer Sexuality, and the Hip-Hop Generation," by drawing the reader's attention to her goal to "provide an opening . . . for the work of queer hip-hop artists like Hanifah Walidah and Queen Pen, for ongoing feminist work of third-wave organizations like Sista II Sista, and for the work of spoken-word artists like Sarah Jones and Suheir Hammad," emphasizing the fact that all of the foregoing artists "continue to articulate a feminist politics and to challenge popular representations of women of color" (69). In her PhD dissertation *Racially White but Culturally Colored: Defining Contemporary Arab-American Literature and Its Transnational Connections*, Carol N. Fadda-Conrey also contends that contemporary Arab American women writers such as Hammad take advantage of their autobiographies so as to find close affinities with, and hence identify themselves with other ethnic minorities. This, Fadda-Conrey believes, has reshaped the feminine identity of Arab American women:

By drawing on their individual repertoire of experiences . . . , these two poets [Mohja Kahf & Suheir Hammad] bring about an important development in the shaping of Arab-American subjectivity. In doing so, they effect a reconfiguration in the identity(ies) and portrayal of Arab and Arab-American women in particular and Arab-Americans

in general by mixing their poetry with an autobiographical element that strongly encompasses communal relations. (71)

To explore the diasporic conflict between Hammad's feeling of alienation and her feeling of integration with its feminist dimensions, it is interesting to go through her views as well as those of various critics and scholars. However, it is more relevant to trace the conflict in her poetry.

The first poem that attracts one's attention with regard to this conflict is "Born Palestinian, Born Black." The poem's title is inspired by a poem by the famous African American woman poet June Jordan called "Moving Towards Home" where she writes "I was born a Black woman / and now / I become a Palestinian" (70-72). Jordan wrote her poem in support of Palestinian people who had been massacred at Sabra and Shatila refugee camps on September 16, 1982, subsequent to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. Not only does Hammad's indebtedness to Jordan demonstrate the conflict between her alienation and her integration, but it offers Hammad a chance to pay a tribute to Jordan as well: "Hammad's poetry collection Born Palestinian, Born Black is in many ways an homage to the poet June Jordan" (sic) (Hartman 147). Besides, Hammad's identification with Jordan highlights both the feminine layout of her conflict and the proportional relationship between her alienation and integration. Hammad's integration into an ethnic minority like African American community turns out to be another form of alienation:

raised to fetch slippers and brew tea
kill chickens and roast lambs
you scrubbed floors raw
on knees bleeding exhaustion
fed babies and watered plants
you embroidered your dreams
into scarves and veils

married to men you did not know
so how could you love
you learned to love though
your children

their baby whimpers and
nipple sucking

when your land is raped you
thank god you still have husbands
when your husbands are jailed
you thank god for your sons
when your sons are murdered execution style
you hide your daughters and
when they are found and jailed
you fast til (sic) they return
and pray some more and
when they are as their land raped
you prepare bandages and some
more prayer and when your family
loses all faith you
pray for their souls

half your sons leave crazy
to be with the enemy's woman
the other half stray to take out their hunger
on your daughters

and when we your
daughters say we are
about more than chickens and tea
you ask who (sic) do
we think we no better than you
and you are right

we take your smoldering strength and
maternal love to throw as
stones at mercenaries
use your patience as shields in the nights
your womb our shelter
your heart where we bury our dead

you softly recite our poetry
in songs sad and true
fast for our return and
pray for our souls

we mistake your strength
for acquiescence
cause it's brown and quiet
remind us mothers
how you are the ones who
converse daily with ancestors
dialogue with angels
and through your exile
still cook the best okra though
force us to eat it

we your daughters
and our men
honor our mothers
and the lives
they survived

we follow the sun each day
it rises in the east
as you once did
and warms us
as you once did

Peace be upon you (1-68)

"Born Palestinian, Born black" inventories the appalling atrocities a Palestinian mother has to put up with under the Israeli occupation and in her exile, i.e., host home, implying that African American mothers are not immune from similar atrocities and hence showing the double alienation a Palestinian immigrant feels on account of his/her integration into black community. Hammad chooses the mother in particular perhaps because a mother can stand for the archetype of feminine identity since she can fulfill all the social roles a woman can play such as that of a daughter, a sister, a wife, etc. A number of these atrocities have to do with the patriarchy of Middle Eastern society as exemplified in stanzas 1 and 2. Others are attributed to the Israelis' brutality towards Palestinians, as cited in stanzas 3 and 4.

Among the transgressions committed by the patriarchal society against women are confining their education to household chores and restricting their roles in life to marrying and giving birth to children. Even with respect to marriage, they are not allowed the luxury of choosing their husbands, let alone sex outside marriage, but they have to settle for prearranged marriages. Thus, Hammad sarcastically protests that it is not her duty to find the slippers for her father or husband, prepare tea, slaughter chickens, cook meat, feel tired beyond exhaustion cleaning filthy floors, feed her infants, water plants, and hide her beauty behind scarves and veils even in her dream, which indicates the kind of repression they live under. Nor is it her duty to love a man she has not met before merely because he has become her husband. Nevertheless, she feels innate love for her innocent helpless babies. As for the Israeli transgressions, they constitute an endless list that begins with raping the land of the Palestinian mother and ends with raping her daughters, after sending her husband and sons to prison and executing them brutally. The mother endures all these atrocities whether they are domestic or political by resorting to perseverance and faith as she prays to God. Even when all her family lose their faith in God, "you / pray for their souls" (26-27). The repercussions of these assaults have been far-reaching in connection with the Palestinian family. Since her sons have lost faith in God and seemingly in morality as well, half of them have gone mad enough to sleep with the enemy's women while the other half have gone astray to inflict their pain on the mother's daughters, i.e., their own fellow female citizens, by violating them. This highlights the fact that women have to suffer all the way either due to the assaults of their enemy or those of their fellow men. In response to this suffering and humiliation, Hammad stands up for her feminine identity telling her mother that her daughters are more than just housewives, mistaking her mother for one of them. To her surprise, however, her mother puts her to shame when she answers that she is as feminist and rebellious as her daughters yet in her own way: "you ask who do / we think we no better than you" (35-36). At this moment, Hammad begins to understand the reality that her mother's perseverance and survival are simply her own version of a silent or passive resistance. To be exact, it is a defense mechanism which enables her not only to fight back

against the enemy, but also to help her daughters fight back, while protecting them from the enemy. Thus, her daughters can make use of her "smoldering strength and / maternal love" as weapons, just as "stones" thrown at their enemy in the Palestinian uprising. The daughters follow their mother's example in patience to guard themselves against the despair of long nights, take shelter at her "womb," i.e., home, to save themselves from the atrocities of war, and "bury" the memory of the dead in her heart so as to keep it from sinking into oblivion (38-39, 40, 42, 43).

The mother's silent resistance can take other forms such as gently singing sad songs for the sake of solace and comfort, fasting so that God may bring her children home safe and sound, and praying to God to protect their souls from blasphemy and corruption. This strength in terms of resistance, Hammad argues, is sometimes mistaken for weakness in terms of "acquiescence" because of two reasons (49). First, it comes from a colored colonized, i.e., a slave, who, according to the colonial viewpoint of a white colonizer, i.e., a master, is supposed to be weak, submissive, and compliant. This is Hammad's postcolonial comment on the Palestinian diaspora who embrace the colonizer's perspective. Second, it is silent and passive. Shedding light on the Israeli colonizing policy and its double standards, Hammad remarks in an interview with Marcy Knopf-Newman that "there was no representation of a human Palestinian society. . . . there's acknowledgement that these people exist, . . . that we have to deal with them, but the idea that these people are writers and lovers and painters and dancers or complicated people does not exist for them" ("Interview with Suheir Hammad," Knopf-Newman). Hammad then stresses the fact that her mother's resistance never stops or wanes even when she moves to her second or host home, i.e., her "exile" (55). The word "exile" underlines not only the mother's alienation but also Hammad's. Nonetheless, while Hammad's feelings vacillate between alienation and integration due to her partial assimilation into American society, her mother's feeling of alienation is profound and permanent. Hammad remembers how her grandfather "for forty years, refused to buy a home, 'cause he just knew he was gonna go home tomorrow.'" (Drops of This Story 41). "As people

from a particular history," Alfaro reasons, "for Hammad, the soil of a place creates a human. The lack of soil is a denial of a people's history, of their culture, their language, their custom, cuisine, and very essence. Exile from Palestine is at the heart of Suheir Hammad's work. . . ." (55-56). Hammad concludes the poem with a reference to the conflict between her alienation and her integration when she points out that she is forced to eat her mother's Middle Eastern food (a reference to her inclination towards Western culture) and that she follows up the sunrise in the east in hope of returning home one day (a reference to her alienation). Not knowing to which she should give herself up her alienation or her integration, she, however, knows what she wants: "Peace," be it international peace or peace of mind. This is her ultimate wish in the final line of the poem which may be her way out of this chronic conflict (68).

The second poem of interest pertaining to the theme of the conflict between Hammad's alienation and her integration is "a prayer band." The poem is written in support of the New Orleanian victims of Hurricane Katrina and is an expression of sympathy for their suffering in the aftermath. Hammad is inspired by the work of Brenda Marie Osbey, Louisiana Poet Laureate (Horton). She seizes the opportunity of Americans' horror at the disaster to draw their attention to the fact that people live in one world and hence are connected, and that one country's plight is not far from another's. The Palestinian refugees, who are forced to leave their homes on account of the Israeli occupation, are no different from the American refugees, who lost their homes because of Hurricane Katrina. Both suffer and are in bad need of solace and care. That is to say, the catastrophe brought about by Hurricane Katrina is, for Hammad, a message to Americans that they are not alone in the world and that other people are actually sharing the same suffering and are worthy of the same attention. "Well how many Americas do you think exist?" wonders Hammad, "When you read . . . this conversation over and over again about how America is hated, you know we have to refine that conversation and ask, what characteristics and what consistently is it that people resent in the world" ("Interview with Suheir Hammad," Brown).

every thing

you ever paid for
you ever worked on
you ever received

every thing

you ever gave away
you ever held on to
you ever forgot about

every single thing is one
of every single thing and all
things are gone

every thing i can think to do
to say i feel
is buoyant

every thing is below water
every thing is eroding
everything is hungry

there is no thing to eat
there is water every where
and there is no thing clean to drink

the children aren't talking

the nurses have stopped believing
anyone is conning for us

the parish fire chief will never again tell
anyone that help is
coming

now is the time of rags
now is the indigo of loss
now is the need for cavalry

Palestinian Diaspora and Feminine Identity

new Orleans
i fell in love with your fine ass poor
boys sweating frying
catfish blackened life thick women
glossy seasoning bourbon
indians (sic) beads grit history of races
and losers who still won

new Orleans
i dreamt of living lush within your
shuttered eyes
a closet of yellow dresses a breeze
on my neck
writing poems for do right men and
a daughter of refugees

i have known of displacement
and the tides pulling every thing
that could not be carried within
and some of that too

a Jamaican man sings
those who can afford to run will run
what about those who can't
they will have to stay

end of the month tropical depression
turned storm

someone whose beloved has drowned
knows what water can do
what water will do to once animated
things

a new Orleans man pleads
we have to steal from each other to eat
another gun in hand says we will protect what we have
what belongs to us

i have known of fleeing desperate
with children on hips in arms on backs

of house keys strung on necks
of water weighed shoes
disintegrated official papers
leases certificates births deaths
taxes

i have known of high ways which lead
nowhere
of aches in teeth in heads in hands
tied
i have known of women raped by
strangers by neighbors
of a hunger in human

i have known of promises to return
to where you come from
but first any bus going any where

tonight the tigris and the mississippi
moan
for each other as sisters
full of unnatural things
flooded with predators and prayers

all language bankrupt

how long before hope begins to eat
itself?
how many flags must be waved?
when does a man let go of his wife's
hand in order to hold his child?

who says this is not the america they
know?
what america do they know?

were the poor people so poor they
could not be seen?

were the black people so many they
could not be counted?

Palestinian Diaspora and Feminine Identity

this is not a charge
this is a conviction

if death levels us all
then life plays favorites

and life it seems is constructed
of budgets contracts deployments
of wards
and automobiles of superstition and
tourism
and gasoline but mostly insurance

and insurance it seems is only bought
and only with what cannot be carried
within
and some of that too

a city of slave bricked streets
a city of chapel rooms
a city of saints

a crescent city

where will the jazz funeral be held?

when will the children talk?
tonight it is the dead
and dying who are left
and those who would rather not
promise themselves they will return

they will be there
after everything is gone
and when the saints come
marching like spring
to save us all (1-125)

Hammad begins the poem declaring that Hurricane Katrina has reduced the once-happy inhabitants of New Orleans to mere homeless vagrants with nothing to live in, to live on, to own, to cherish, or even

to hope for. Everything they used to do, to say, or to feel, that is, their work, their habits, their good and bad times, and their lifestyle all together are either afloat or sinking along with their houses and property. As water erodes their lifetime savings and cherished possessions, the homeless New Orleanians fall prey to hunger and thirst, and their children are mute out of shock. Nevertheless, the New Orleanians are not as much the victims of the Hurricane as they are the victims of their government's and media's neglect and lack of support. Nurses and firefighters, having lost all hope of rescue, no longer try to deceive people into the belief that help is on the way: "now is the time of rags / now is the indigo of loss / now is the need for cavalry" (27-29). Hammad then expresses her infatuation with New Orleans and its people, reminiscing about their food and drinking habits but most of all about the fact that today's victims share the same fate of Native Americans, the helpless people they have once oppressed and wronged. She used to dream of leading a life of luxury, wearing stylish clothes, and composing poems for righteous men and "a daughter of refugees" (43). She mentions righteous men because such men can help prevent catastrophes and set things right when catastrophes take place. She specifies a refugees' daughter because she herself is one and, hence, aware of what it is like to be a refugee. Thereupon, in the following stanzas, she aligns herself as a Palestinian and a woman of ethnic minority with the people of New Orleans, particularly the poor African Americans who cannot afford evacuation: "i have known of displacement / and the tides pulling every thing" (44-45). The word "tides" can be interpreted literally as torrents of water or figuratively as life's hardships. She maintains that only people of the same fate can have empathy for one another, pointing out that only a man who has been bereft of his/her loved one as a result of drowning can know the deadly power of water. Thus, she repeats the clause "i have known" as she enumerates the harmful social consequences of the government's failure to cope with the disaster.

During such crises, the rate of crime escalates as people tend "to steal from each other to eat" while other people arm themselves to "protect what we have / what belongs to us" (60-61). She then reflects

on similar scenes in Palestinian refugee camps where weary mothers carry their infants "on hips in arms on backs" (63), refugees wear their house keys around their necks in hope of returning home one day, people soak their shoes in the rain, and official documents such as birth certificates and leases are decomposed in evacuation. She is familiar with the feeling of being at a loss, of not knowing where to go, as well as with the accompanying pain "in teeth in heads in hands / tied" (71-72). The phrase "hands tied" can be explained literally in terms of handcuffs or figuratively in terms of being helpless and powerless. Hammad is also aware of the atrocities refugee women are exposed to such as being raped not only by "strangers" but also by "neighbors" and of the hunger that afflicts all refugees (74). However, the hardship that hurts refugees like Hammad the most is the broken promises that they will return to their homes under the condition that they leave these homes immediately for whatever place there is. She concludes the similarities between the New Orleanian and the Palestinian refugees with the affirmation that both groups, being afflicted with the same torments and suffering the same losses and cruelties, can grieve for one another's plight as sisters do. This underlines the Palestinians' affiliation with American ethnic minorities: "tonight the tigris and the mississippi / moan / for each other as sisters" (79-81).

Hammad acknowledges that such intolerable calamities leave her speechless as language becomes nonfunctional. She is unable to express the intensity of the pain felt or the immensity of the damage caused: "all language bankrupt" (84). This is why she uses lower case in all the poem to indicate that all matters dwindle in view of horrendous crises including language itself, which malfunctions. This malfunction of language also accounts for the recurrent use of repetition and parallelism in sentences that begin with similar structures such as "every thing," "you ever ...," and "there is" Hammad tries in vain to express her pain and point out her suffering. Then resorting to rhetorical questions, she wonders how long people should wait for help before they give up all hope in their government. She asks what appalling suffering they still have to undergo more than the situation where a husband has to "let go of his wife's / hand in

order to hold his child" (88-89). She directs the attention of the people who excuse America's failure to take care of its minorities and poor citizens on grounds of transient negligence to the fact that this is always the way it is. She accuses America of prejudice and discrimination pinpointing that people there lead a materialistic life where only money counts: "life it seems is constructed / of budgets contracts deployments / . . . / and gasoline but mostly insurance" (101-2, 106). Hammad ends the poem on a pessimistic note, announcing that tonight a funeral will be held in "a city of slave bricked streets / a city of chapel rooms / a city of saints," i.e. New Orleans, where only "the dead / and dying who are left" will pray to God that "the saints come /marching like spring / to save us all" (111-13, 117-18, 123-25). It is worth mentioning that, following the composition of "a prayer band," Hammad organized a fund-raising event under the title "Refugees for Refugees" in New York where she performed the poem and managed to raise \$ 5000 for the relief efforts (Hammad, "a prayer band"). The event once more testifies to the Palestinians' identification with the poor ethnic minority of New Orleans. Hammad even goes as far as generalizing the refugee situation in such a way as to accommodate humanity at large. In her speech at the 2004 Khalil Gibran Spirit of Humanity Awards, she contends: "After all, being a refugee is no longer unique. This is what humanity often looks like in our time, hungry, thirsty, war ravaged, sick, and homeless. More and more people in our world live at the effects of our privileges. We are all connected" (qtd. in Hoyt 151).

Another poem that addresses the conflict between Hammad's alienation and her integration is "What I Will." The poem throws light on the repercussions of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center in terms of Bush's war on terrorism. The spread of Islamophobia in America subsequent to the September 11 attacks helps to deepen the feeling of alienation among Muslim minorities. Islamophobia, as Alfaro makes clear, "serves to isolate Muslim communities in which many identify with their ancestry and with being Americans. If there is a demonization of an entire group it is easier to close one's eyes to their plight. In the denials and misunderstandings, cultures become lost in translation" (60). Not only

does the Bush administration generate Islamophobia, Hammad believes, but it has also taken advantage of the al Qaeda attacks to export its feelings of insecurity outside its borders to countries it accuses of terrorism. Thus, it brings the same feelings of alienation and dispossession of Muslim American minorities to the innocent civil people of these countries. So, Anna M. Agathangelou and Kyle D. Killian remark in their research "Epistemologies of Peace: Poetics, Globalization, and the Social Justice Movement" that "Hammad's poetry moves to show how these feelings of insecurity are becoming transnationalized" (467). Hammad calls America's policy in this respect "death choices" or "the empire's pedagogy of necropolitics that generates transnational insecurities" (468). Such pedagogies, Agathangelou and Killian proceed, "require bodies simultaneously constituted as those that are killers and those to be killed. . . . In the killing of those . . . bodies one can feel secure in the reproduction of a world order . . . that allows the state and those who desire power to kill anytime, anywhere in the protection of their interests" (467, 469). In the present poem, Hammad endorses the spirit of resistance to violence and the condemnation of retaliation as the only possible means of achieving justice and peace whether on America's part or on its enemies'. She distances herself from this ongoing war preferring the life of exile and alienation whereby she can conform to her own beliefs and principles, as well as preserve her self-esteem:

I will not
dance to your war
drum. I will
not lend my soul nor
my bones to your war
drum. I will
not dance to your
beating. I know that beat.
It is lifeless. I know
intimately that skin
you are hitting. It
was alive once
hunted stolen
stretched. I will
not dance to your drummed
up war. I will not pop

spin beak for you. I
will not hate for you or
even hate you. I will
not kill for you. Especially
I will not die
for you. I will not mourn
the dead with murder nor
suicide. I will not side
with you nor dance to bombs
because everyone else is
dancing. Everyone can be
wrong. Life is a right not
collateral or casual. I
will not forget where
I come from. I
will craft my own drum. Gather my beloved
near and our chanting
will be dancing. Our
humming will be drumming. I
will not be played. I
will not lend my name
nor my rhythm to your
beat. I will dance
and resist and dance and
persist and dance. This heartbeat is louder than
death. Your war drum ain't
louder than this breath. (1-43)

Hammad's repeated use of the modal auxiliary "will" both in the title and in the text highlights her determination and perseverance. She begins the poem on a note of defiance and self-confidence reflected in the employment of negation which recurs throughout the poem. She tells Bush outright that she will not endorse his vindictive policy of war even though she is an American citizen hence integrating herself into American community. Hammad's choice of the word "dance" to express consent hints at the hypocrisy and fanaticism accompanying Bush's supporters and advocates. Her repetition of the auditory image "war drum" points out Bush's manipulative tactics in falsifying public consciousness by deceiving Americans into the belief that war is their sole alternative and in their best interest. She assures the reader that

she will not approve of Bush's war on terrorism either emotionally or physically: "I will / not lend my soul nor / my bones to your war" (3-5). She justifies her disapproval of war on account of death. War never gives life but only takes it away. Death is the be-all and end-all of war, and Hammad affirms the value of life: "I know that beat. / It is lifeless" (8-9). Then reflecting on the fate of the victims of war, she associates herself with her fellow citizens back home in her homeland, which underscores her alienation as a member of Arab American minority: "I know / intimately that skin / you are hitting" (9-11).

This national nostalgia provides Hammad with another reason not join Bush in his war. She does not only refuse to join Bush in his war, but she also refuses to respond to the normal reactions a peacemaker or, even, a warmonger normally feels such as hatred, either for Bush or for his own sake, anger, revenge, or a desire to kill, either the other or oneself. These are all legitimate feelings experienced by victims of war like her fellow citizens in the Middle East, and which themselves are simultaneous forms of spiritual and emotional distortion of man brought about by war:

I

will not hate for you or
even hate you. I will
not kill for you. Especially
I will not die
for you. I will not mourn
the dead with murder nor
suicide. (17-24)

Hammad then emphasizes the fact that public opinion is not always right. It can be easily manipulated and tailored to a particular end through propaganda and mass media. That every American believes in war as the right policy to achieve peace and stability does not make war right. Life is not a subsidiary or trivial matter to give it away recklessly. It is man's worthiest and most unalienable right. Therefore, Hammad makes up her mind to keep aloof from this war mania and to abide by her own beliefs and ideas both as a peacemaker and as an Arab American, i.e., as one who never forgets one's roots, whereupon she can dance. Thus, she shares her opinions, with her loved ones

whom she struggles to guard against Bush's fatal impact by humming not the drumming of war but, rather, the rhythm of peace. She then determines that she will not allow herself to be manipulated or her principles to be used for someone's advantage. She concludes her poem on an optimistic note underpinning the fact that the heartbeat of a living person is far louder than all the drums of war and that she will keep up dancing to her own beat in terms of resistance and persistence:

I will dance
and resist and dance and
persist and dance. This heartbeat is louder than
death. Your war drum ain't
louder than this breath. (39-43)

In their essay "Power, Borders, Security, Wealth: Lessons of Violence and Desire from September 11," Agathangelou and L. H. M. Ling illustrate how Hammad fights for the world's welfare by undermining the parallel policy of violence adopted by both Bush and Bin Laden and which they term "elite privilege":

Suheir Hammad calls for peace and justice by highlighting our common suffering under violence. As this article has shown, it is elite privilege—whether in the interest of neoliberal global capitalism or radical conservative Islam—that underpins such violence. Privilege does so by narrating a particular set of social relations into power. In the case of Bush and bin Laden, we find a commodification of social life ("shopping" for Bush, "suicide bombers" for bin Laden), militarization of public space ("war on terror" for Bush, "jihad" for bin Laden) colonization of male and female bodies ("citizen-soldiers" for men, "liberator-breeders" for women), and displacement of grass-root visions of democratic life (cross-cutting interests, coalitions, and alliances). (533)

Hammad's unusual style of writing embodied in the use of short, broken lines is in keeping with the atmosphere of tension and anxiety concomitant with war. Besides, it is representative of the Hip Hop music and spoken poetry tradition under whose influence Hammad has come: "Hammad's style and setup of the poem is different from the traditional written poem. Instead of stanzas, she uses broken

sentences for each line and uses periods to end each thought. Her style is very appropriate for spoken word poetry because it follows a certain rhythm." In fact, the content and form of poem prove Hammad's postmodernist approach to poetry. Thus, in her analysis of "What I Will," Breanna Berry, calling Hammad "a postmodernist," argues: "Hammad's poem, 'What I Will' is a powerful piece that expresses resistance to a society broken by turmoil. 'What I Will' demonstrates Hammad's political ideas and how she desires to go against the grain without forgetting where she came from."

In "mike check," Hammad picks up the thread of argument of "What I Will" by shedding light on one of the setbacks of embracing Bush's retaliatory policy; namely the racial profiling of Middle Easterners, Arabs, and Muslims at large displayed in the random search of passengers at American airport checkpoints. The random check turns out to be predetermined and, even worse, prejudiced since it always targets people stereotypically fitting the descriptions of any of the aforementioned races. These races have become a pending threat through their association with evil and terrorism. This racial discrimination helps deepen the sense of alienation which minorities such as Arab Americans including Hammad and American Muslims in general feel. Here, taking into consideration that they are Americans in the first place seems beside the point from the mainstream, white American perspective. The title is a play on the routine sound test of a microphone as well as the routine searching of suspicious-looking passengers by an airport security guard with the name of Mike, who is supposed to represent the stereotypical white American mainstream. The goal that Hammad's parallel serves is to turn the security guard Mike's attention to the fact that what he is doing, that is, to punish an entire race for a crime committed by a handful of them, is legally unfair, morally wrong, spiritually devastating, and humanly despicable:

one two one two can you
hear me mic check one two

mike checked
my bags at the air

port in a random
routine check

i understand mike i do
you too were altered
that day and most days
most folks operate on
fear often hate this
is mic check your
job and i am
always random

i understand it was
folks who looked smelled
maybe prayed like me

can you hear me mike
ruddy blonde buzz
cut with corn flower
eyes and a cross
round your neck

mike check
folks who looked like
you stank so bad the
indians smelled them
mic check before they landed
they murdered one two
one two as they prayed
spread small pox as alms

mic check yes i
packed my own
bags can you hear
me no they have not
been out of my possession

thanks mike you
have a good day too one
two mike check mike
check mike

a-yo mike
whose gonna
check you? (1-42)

Hammad begins the poem by performing a routine sound check of a microphone repeating the numbers one and two aloud after the social custom of testing microphones. What Hammad is actually checking is not the microphone as much as the ideological stance and human attitude of Mike, the airport security officer, as representative of white American grassroots. In her afore-mentioned dissertation, Hoyt points out: "The opening lines read like a ritual microphone check, . . . which sets up the following lines about the security check by 'mike,' asking if he is listening to her, seeing her not as a threatening Arab, but as a fellow American" (143). Hammad feels empathy with Americans such as Mike. She has an insight into their fear and hatred in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks because she is aware of the traumatic effect these attacks have on them. She herself has been no exception in coming under the influence of the events: "i understand mike i do / you too were altered / that day and most days" (7-9). It is not, therefore, unexpected that Mike's random search for terrorists among passengers is narrowed down to only persons fitting stereotypes of Middle Easterners, Arabs, and Muslims such as Hammad: "i understand it was / folks who looked smelled / maybe prayed like me" (15-17). Sarcastically, Hammad turns the tables on Mike as she explains that his racial profiling can backfire on him. She, thus, gives a detailed description of his traits pinpointing that these traits fit the stereotypes of his early white ancestors who founded America and who killed the innocent Red Indians in the name of Christianity. In line with his racial profiling policy, Mike had better check people who bear resemblance to him: "folks who looked like / you stank so bad the / indians smelled them" (24-26). The message Hammad is trying to get across lies in the argument that since Americans condemn the crimes their forefathers have committed against Native Americans without condemning their own race for these crimes, they might just as well condone Middle Easterners, Arabs, and Muslims even though condemning the crimes committed by the perpetrators of the September 11 attacks. To enhance her message, Hammad resumes the scene of racial discrimination in terms of checking passengers at

airports, in this case herself, by answering the two common questions concerning whether she has packed up the contents of her bags herself and whether her bags have not happened to be out of her possession. The fact that Hammad tolerantly answers Mike's questions and even expresses her gratitude for his doing his duty as a security officer, finishing their conversation by wishing him to have a good day, highlights the empathy referred to before, as well as her hope that Mike might change his prejudiced attitude some day. As a step in this direction, she ends the poem by inviting Mike, and hence the white American grassroots, to reconsider their preconceived ideas and biased actions, warning them of their malicious feedback: "a-yo mike / whose gonna / check you?" (40-42). Hammad's use of conversational English and slang in this poem demonstrates her deep integration into and close association with the hip-hop generation, and hence, ethnic minorities such as African Americans and Hispanics. It also underlines the fact that such ethnic minorities are the people who are most likely subjected to racial discrimination and prejudice in America.

In like manner, "This Is to Certify That My Mother Is Now Natural" addresses the issue of racial profiling to which a Palestinian mother is subjected while filling out the application forms for immigration. The poem paints a vivid picture of the conflict between alienation and integration experienced by the Palestinian diaspora in America, particularly women. Here, the bottom line is that the INS (Immigration and Naturalization Service) can certify an alien's physical features and traits but can never fathom his/her "dreams," "aspirations," and "heartbreaks":

Complexion Medium Certified
not too sweet not quite hot not too black not quite white
what was so middle about her
hands detangled parted and quilted
thick black waves
into braids rolled
grape leaves with style and speed
scrubbed ovens knees and backs of ears
clean with love nails always looked neat

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but on closer inspection chipped and tugged tired
her voice singing um kolthom to foreign raised ears
Certified Citizen Natural Complexion Medium
how would hips be categorized
childbearing
or nose semitic
would your butt be your
african trait eyes indian hair mulatto tongue arab
mama you natural woman
of sun water air
given a nation though no land
palestinian woman loss embroidered on your forehead
more than thin -ass pieces of paper which
never certify your aspirations
dreams heartbreaks
you can make vegans eat your lamb with relish
rip your heart out to feed your man
you who makes rhinestones
sparkle diamonds sequin your daughters? ears with your
laugh
memorized (but didn't have) dead presidents backwards
and forwards for citizenship a place to lay your head
but always told us
take me home when i'm dead
woman natural medium middle to nothing
never can they certify
what they don't
understand (1-36)

Hammad begins the poem by harshly mocking the racial terms used by the INS to describe her mother such as "Complexion Medium Certified" (1). She, thus, humorously wonders what the implications of the word medium might be with respect to her mother's color. Does it mean that her mother is "not too sweet not quite hot not too black not quite white" (2)? She is kept in the dark about "what was so middle about her" (3). Hammad then interprets the epithet "middle" in her own Middle Eastern terms through presenting a compassionate picture of her mother as a devoted housewife who is keen on her household chores. Though modest and humble in appearance with "hands detangled parted and quilted / thick black waves / into braids,"

she is a clever and experienced cook who "rolled / grape leaves with style and speed" (4-7). She is also skillful in cleaning her kitchen like when she "scrubbed ovens knees" as well as in watching over her own hygiene through, for example, cleaning the back of her ears and nails, which looked "neat / but on closer inspection chipped and tugged tired" seemingly due to fulfilling the household duties laid on her (8, 9-10). The phrase "back of ears / clean with love" implies Hammad's mother's moral purity in abstaining from listening to evil talk such as hearsays and backbiting (8-9).

Next, Hammad delineates the conflict between alienation and integration her mother experiences in a brilliant scene that portrays her mother singing an Arabic song by Um Kolthom to Americans that do not understand a word of what she is saying. Read politically, the scene discloses the paradox that though Hammad's mother finds security in her exile, i.e., host, home, the only place she can enjoy her peace of mind is in her original homeland where she can find people who understand what she is singing and share her feelings. Hammad intensifies the sense of alienation by repeating the ISN phrase profiling her mother: "Certified Citizen Natural Complexion Medium" (12). She condemns the profiling process that manages to categorize man's features according to his/her race and age as if s/he is a dead sign regardless of his/her own personality or personal life: "would your butt be your" (16). Therefore, she pokes fun at the epithet "natural" in reference to her mother's complexion pointing out that as a human being, her mother comes from a place that shares the same natural objects "of sun water air" which America possesses. However, unlike American people, she, as a Palestinian woman, is "given a nation though no land" and hence has "loss embroidered on your forehead," which is a distinctive feature the "thin -ass" ISN workers fail to certify (20, 21, 22). Neither can they certify her hopes, ambitions, and failures. For example, they do not know that she is a good cook who "can make vegans eat your lamb with relish," that she is a dedicated wife who could "rip your heart out to feed your man," and that she is a caring mother who "makes rhinestones / sparkle diamonds sequin your daughters" (25, 26, 27-28). They are not also aware of her cheerfulness or her retentive memory whereby she

"memorized (but didn't have) dead presidents backwards / and forwards for citizenship," an ironical, sharp line that sums up the conflict of alienation and integration by bringing Hammad's both host and native homes together (29-30). Hammad herself does not find out that her mother has once been a writer and that she has given up her gift for her family until she is a young woman: "Mama a writer? I was stunned. I had never considered that Mama might once have harbored dreams that had nothing to do with me" (70). If this is the case with one's own daughter how would one expect an ISN worker, a total stranger, to know anything at all about oneself simply through identifying one's racial features?! Despite Hammad's mother's attempt at integration through her application for citizenship, her new home America will always be merely "a place to lay your head" since she "always told us / take me home when i'm dead" (30, 31-32). Hammad concludes the poem affirming that such personal matters an ISN officer would never be conscious of and thus could not understand, let alone certify, them: "never can they certify / what they don't / understand" (34-36). The ISN categorization deals with people as type characters not as real characters with life and personality. Ethnic and racial differences are, in fact, physical differences such as those of weight, size, length, color, etc., that can tell one what a body a man has but can never tell one what kind of man s/he is. Accordingly, when the ISN officer describes her mother's complexion as medium in comparison to other races, namely white people and black people, the comparison along with the description is meaningless as well as unfair: "woman natural medium middle to nothing" (33).

Hammad's subtle and sharp use of diction distinguishes her style in this poem. It illustrates how far she is conversant with the terms and expressions employed by the ISN workers such as "Certified Citizen Natural Complexion Medium," "nose semitic," and "african trait eyes indian hair mulatto tongue arab" (12, 15, 17). On the other hand, she is also quite familiar with a housewife's jargon, utilizing words that underline her mother's domestic background as when she describes how her mother "quilted / thick black waves / into braids," "rolled / grape leaves / with style and speed," and "scrubbed ovens" (4-7). The pictorial image of "nails always looked neat / but on

closer inspection chipped and tugged tired" is so expressive of the taxing impact of the household chores on a housewife (9-10). Likewise, Hammad draws on concrete and effective metaphors. Thus, the metaphor that compares the Palestinian woman's "loss" to an embroidery on her forehead is by far patriotic, while the metaphor that compares the ISN workers to "thin -ass pieces of paper" is completely ironical (21, 22).

Another poem that tackles the issue of racial discrimination with respect to women is "exotic." The poem exemplifies the conflict between alienation and integration. On the one hand, it shows the strong feeling of alienation women of color, particularly Arab American women like Hammad, as members of ethnic minority go through on account of the white man's stereotyping of them as exotic and erotic. On the other hand, it illustrates Hammad's integration into another ethnic minority; namely African American women. As a result, the poem has an Orientalist signification since it is through Orientalism, as Edward Said makes clear, that "women are usually the creatures of a male power-fantasy" (207). Seeing eye to eye with Said, Hammad thus argues in her above-mentioned interview with Brown that not only women of color but also white women themselves are subject to the same kind of stereotyping that treats women as objects or type characters, thus detaching them from their individuality, hence reality:

So that means, if you are a woman or man of color, you are at a disadvantage under White male supremacy. . . . So you think of India, and bleaching creams in India; you think of Kenya and bleaching creams - all around the world, or you think of White women starlets here in America in Hollywood and people who are on magazines all the time and how they too are living under this aesthetic of a perceived White beauty. Even within their own cultures there is a new idea of a certain body type, a certain created face as a beauty ideal - creating faces on White women now that are not natural to White women and then telling White women, this is what you look like. ("Interview with Suheir Hammad")

This is why Vanessa Fatima, reviewing the poem on the internet, remarks: "She[Hammad]'s discussing the sexual exploitation

of women of color. The concept of 'orientalism' is very strong in this poem too It's along the lines of how the West views everyone from the East as 'the other' or 'them' as inferiors . . . this is where being 'exotic' and all that steps in." Hammad's argument, however, turns one's attention to the fact that women's oppression might be originally attributed to the white man's patriarchal conception of women, along with his Orientalist or Colonialist stance. In patriarchy, men refuse to accept women as their peers, denying them their social and, even, human roles and viewing them only as sex objects. In her essay, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," Gayle Rubin, trying to trace the genesis of women's oppression, comes to the conclusion that a gender system within a certain society is the product of the various systematic social apparatuses that ideologically interpellate individuals as subjects. These apparatuses take up biological females as raw material and shape them into socially accepted beings, i.e., domesticated women. Rubin calls this part of social life the "sex/gender system" and defines it as "the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied" (534).

don't wanna be your exotic
some delicate fragile colorful bird
imprisoned caged
in a land foreign to the stretch of her wings
don't wanna be your exotic
women everywhere are just like me
some taller darker nicer than me
but like me but just the same
women everywhere carry my nose on their faces
my name on their spirits
don't wanna
don't seduce yourself with
my otherness my hair
wasn't put on top of my head to entice
you into some mysterious black voodoo
the beat of my lashes against each other
ain't some dark desert beat
it's just a blink
get over it

don't wanna be your exotic
your lovin of my beauty ain't more than
funky fornication plain pink perversion
in fact nasty necrophilia
cause my beauty is dead to you
I am dead to you
not your
harem girl geisha doll banana picker
pom pom girl pum pum shorts coffee maker
town whore belly dancer private dancer
la malinche venus hottentot laundry girl
your immaculate vessel emasculating princess
don't wanna be
your erotic
not your exotic (1-34)

Hammad begins the poem by declaring her rejection of the white man's false, preconceived assumptions about her being exotic. She asserts that these assumptions are as false as granting that a cage is a bird's natural habitat. The comparison brings to light not only Hammad's emotional alienation as a woman of color, but also her exile as a member of Arab American minority: "some delicate fragile colorful bird / imprisoned caged / in a land foreign to the stretch of her wings" (2-4). Throughout the poem, the frequent drawing on negatives and repetition as exemplified in the recurrence of the line "don't wanna be your exotic" emphasizes Hammad's persistent, unswerving stance with regard to racial stereotypes of women of color. Hammad then explains that women are corporeally all the same regardless of their different features and that it is man's fantasizing about copulating that makes them look mistakenly different from one another: "women everywhere are just like me / some taller darker nicer than me / but like me but just the same" (6-8). She also reminds the white man that women are more than just fantasized bodies and that these bodies do have spirits: a reference to women's individuality: "women everywhere carry my nose on their faces / my name on their spirits" (9-10). These erotic fantasies that represent an unrealistic picture of women, and exist merely in the white man's head, are described by Hammad as "my otherness": "don't seduce yourself with / my otherness my hair / wasn't put on top of my head to entice" (12-14).

The temptation these fantasies conjure up is nothing but an illusion. A woman's physical beauty is not some "mysterious black voodoo" luring men into sexual intercourse. Hammad, therefore, invites the white man to give up his exotic illusion and see things as they really are instead of investing her beauty with meanings it does not possess: "the beat of my lashes against each other / ain't some dark desert beat / . . . / get over it" (16-17, 19). She interprets these sexual fantasies in terms of "funky fornication" and "plain pink perversion," but then she settles on the term "nasty necrophilia" indicating that her "beauty is dead" to the white man either because it is just an illusion or because it has to do with her body alone irrespective of soul, i.e., her personality (22, 23, 24). So, as a person, Hammad is dead to the white man or, in fact, nonexistent: "I am dead to you" (25). Hammad provides conclusive proof of the white man's fantasies through citing some of the familiar stereotypes of women of color as "harem girl geisha doll banana picker / pom pom girl pum pum shorts coffee maker / town whore belly dancer private dancer" etc. (27-29). She ends the poem on a note of defiance and resistance, reaffirming that she does not "wanna be / your erotic / not your exotic" (32-34). In a response to one of her e-mails concerning her poem "exotic," Hammad comments:

It is specifically speaking from a woman of color's perspective on how she does not want to be viewed. . . . White women face their own stereotypes, men do as well. I believe that each of us should claim that we don't want to be identified with what [we are] as much as [by what] we do. Esp[ecially] those whose voices are most marginalized (you do the math). All women are in danger of sexism, as are all men, cause it retards the entire society. (Interpolations are Hoyt's) (qtd. in Hoyt 136)

In conclusion, one can positively affirm that the conflict between Hammad's sense of alienation and that of integration permeates her life both as a Palestinian American, that is, as a representative of Palestinian diaspora, and as a woman who tries to assert the feminine identity within this conflict. The dilemma is evident in Hammad's views and opinions expressed in some of her interviews, essays, and other prose writings, as well as in those of various critics and scholars. Likewise, this conflict has its feminist

bearing on her poetry. Thus, the conflict can be traced as far back as her childhood when she feels herself different from her equals in Brooklyn whether in the street or in school. This sense of alienation motivates her to identify with other ethnic minorities in New York such as the African American and Hispanic communities. Hence, she finds herself deeply attracted to and closely identified with the hip hop movement that appeared in the South Bronx in the early 1970s. However, her integration backfires on her since it increases her feeling of alienation rather than disposing of or, at least, alleviating it. This highlights the proportional relation between her alienation and integration, i.e., the more she integrates into her host culture, the more she is alienated not only from it but also from her home culture, and vice versa. For example, she is shocked to find out that Americans at school do not consider Palestinians refugees. She also shows a dislike for Middle Eastern food in favor of American food. Nevertheless, the most crucial factor that helps deepen her alienation upon her association with African Americans and Hispanics is the estrangement such ethnic minorities feel due to racial discrimination and other grievances they are exposed to in America. This racial alienation only adds to Hammad's diasporic alienation, leading her to a dead-end. She feels at a loss, not knowing where to go or what to do since America, the supposed home of democracy and liberty, proves to be nothing more than a second version of Palestine. Hammad addresses this conflict between alienation and integration from a feminist perspective as she traces its impact on and its relation to woman and woman's identity. For instance, she explains how she struggles to deal with the dichotomy between her parents' traditional Muslim idea of a woman as a modest being, and its opposite hip hop and TV ideals of a woman with tight jeans, booty shorts, and low cut. This struggle is exemplified in her choice of education and career, which is in defiance of her parents' conservative choices. Besides, her decision to live on her own and leave the family home does not conform with her Eastern patriarchal conventions. Many reviewers, critics, and scholars have attested to Hammad's conflict and her feminist approach such as Mura, Holman, Apollon, Mendola, Bardenstein, Suleiman, Alfaro, Hartman, Hoyt, Clay, and Fadda-Conrey. The conflict between alienation and integration in terms of Palestinian diaspora and feminine identity is

also reflected in Hammad's poetry. In "Born Palestinian, Born black," for example, Hammad inventories the appalling atrocities a Palestinian mother has to put up with under the Israeli occupation and in her exile, i.e., host home, implying that African American mothers are not immune from similar atrocities and hence showing the double alienation a Palestinian immigrant feels on account of his/her integration into black community. In "What I Will," Hammad throws light on the repercussions of the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center in terms of Bush's war on terrorism. She argues that, though the spread of Islamophobia in America subsequent to the September 11 attacks helps deepen the feeling of alienation among Muslim minorities, she chooses to advocate the spirit of resistance to violence and condemn retaliation as the only possible means of achieving justice and peace whether on the part of America or that of its enemies. Equally, "mike check" turns one's attention to the racial profiling of Middle Easterners, Arabs, and Muslims at large displayed in the random search of passengers at American airport checkpoints. This racial discrimination intensifies the sense of alienation experienced by minorities such as Arab Americans including Hammad and American Muslims in general. "exotic", on the other hand, criticizes the patriarchal view of woman as a sex object and a filthy, evil being, namely the abject in Julia Kristeva's terms. She shows the strong feeling of alienation characterizing women of color, particularly Arab American women like Hammad, as members of ethnic minority on account of the white man's stereotyping of them as exotic and erotic. Hammad's stylistic habits of using lower case letters, unconventional, and even conversational English, and repetition thread her poems together. This unusual style, apart from serving her ideas and themes, pinpoints her indebtedness to American ethnic minorities not only at the level of language, but also at the level of suffering. Her imagery is also characteristically graphical and vivid since it stems from the actual life of people she is depicting in her poems. This exploration of the struggle between Hammad's deep feeling of alienation and that of integration raises a question with regard to whether this struggle is peculiar to Hammad alone or prevalent among all Palestinian diaspora or, even, Arab Americans en bloc, especially women, not to mention other ethnic minorities.

End Note

1. ¹ For the information on Hammad's life and biography, one is indebted to the following sources: Hammad, "Interview with Suheir Hammad," Brown; Hammad, "Interview with Suheir Hammad," Knopf-Newman; Horton; Joseph et al; "Suheir Hammad," *Famous Poets and Poems . com*; "Suheir Hammad," *Wikipedia*; and "Suheir Hammad: Poet and Author."

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