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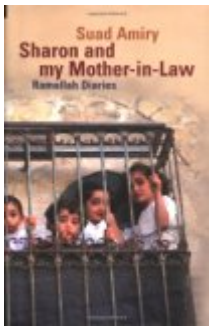
Suad Amiry. *Sharon and My Mother-in-Law: Ramallah Diaries.* London: Granta Books, 2005. xi + 194 pp. $12.99, cloth, ISBN 978-1-86207-721-8.



Reviewed by John Collins

Published on H-Gender-MidEast (June, 2005)

The tremendous international success enjoyed by Suad Amiry's *Sharon and My Mother-in-Law*, which has already been released in several languages, speaks to the reading public's desire for a more human account of the Palestinian predicament than is typically provided in the corporate media. Deceptive in its apparent simplicity, the book provides a fascinating window onto the daily complexities and absurdities of life under occupation.

Amiry's, of course, is not the only first-person account to treat these uniquely Palestinian realities. The first Palestinian intifada, for example, produced a wealth of accounts by Palestinians and "outsiders" alike. More recently, groups such as the International Solidarity Movement (ISM), aided by the explosion of internet technology, have generated an ever-growing body of eyewitness narratives in which the daily outrages, struggles, and triumphs of Palestinian life take center stage. Such texts effectively occupy the space that has been vacated by mainstream journalism.[1]

In its compelling mixture of the tragic, the ironic, and the comic and its focus on the everyday, *Sharon and My Mother-in-Law* recalls Jean Said Makdisi's 1990 memoir, *Beirut Fragments*.[2] Whereas Makdisi utilizes a number of formal devices (diary, chronology, autobiography), Amiry stays firmly within the realm of the diary. Spanning more than two decades (the earliest entries are from 1981, when she began living in Ramallah), her book constitutes a series of snapshots, each documenting a moment or an hour or a day in a life that has been spent oscillating between a range of experiences that are shared by many Palestinians: confinement, waiting, exile, danger, border crossings.

These snapshots are presented, sometimes but not always chronologically, with very little accompanying commentary. In her brief preface, the author notes that during the 2002 Israeli reinvasion of the West Bank, writing provided her with an opportunity to "release the tension" produced by the combination of Ariel Sharon's colonial brutality and the presence of Amiry's mother-in-law (p. x). Writing and publishing a diary was a conscious decision to "step out of the frame and observe the senselessness of the moment" and a

way to defend herself against what she calls "the Israeli occupation of our lives and souls" (p. xi).

Amiry, an architect and the founder and director of the RIWAQ Center for Architectural Conservation, returns repeatedly to the "senselessness of the moment." In one scene from 1991, she and her husband (Salim Tamari, a prominent Palestinian sociologist) join an anxious march to the military headquarters in Ramallah when the Israeli authorities suddenly announce, inexplicably, that gas masks will be made available to residents of their particular neighborhood (and to no one else). The sense of black comedy that permeates the crowd ("You think they're going to give us gas masks, ha? This is the ***Transfer*** Bus to Jordan," says one man as soldiers tell the group to get on a bus) is ultimately justified as the promised masks never materialize.

Elsewhere Amiry describes her efforts to vaccinate her two dogs, Antar and Nura. After taking Antar to a chauvinistic Palestinian veterinarian who asks her why she wants to "waste" her money on a "***baladi*** bitch" (p. 102), she takes Nura to an Israeli vet who proceeds to give the dog something that not even the owner is allowed to have: a Jerusalem "passport." Later she drives to Jerusalem with Nura, talking her way through an Israeli checkpoint by telling the soldier, "I am the dog's driver. As you can see, she is from Jerusalem, and she cannot possibly drive the car or go to Jerusalem all by herself" (p. 108).

How does one cope with such madness? For Amiry, one strategy is to take periodic refuge in fantasy. The book is peppered with examples of what the author refers to as her "hallucinations," when she drifts off in order to contemplate other possibilities that are sometimes more inviting, other times more troubling than "reality." These brief episodes function in a manner akin to the intifada legends that folklorist Sharif Kanaana has researched.[3] In both contexts, we find that when reality is senseless and fundamentally unacceptable, fantasy becomes a useful and "sensible" tool of survival.

Similarly, Amiry describes a number of scenes in which she throws caution to the wind and openly risks arrest, injury, or death simply because she is tired of living under the thumb of the occupation. Here she makes strategic and effective use of hegemonic gender constructions, playing the role of the "hysterical" or "crazy" woman in order to exert power in an interaction with (male) Israelis. In one memorable entry she describes her decision, inspired by the first intifada's spirit of independence, to "take control" of her life. Having waited seven years for a promised ***hawiyyeh*** (identity card) from the Israeli Civil Administration, she marches unannounced into the office of Captain Yossi (an officer who had been phoning her regularly and pressing her to inform on the political activities of her university colleagues) and demands that he give her the card. "I could see that he was capable of handling Palestinian demonstrators, rebels, stabbers, terrorists," she observes. "He was trained to handle them all. BUT NOT A CRYING WOMAN. NOT A WOMAN FREAKING OUT" (p. 43). The strategy works: she leaves the office with the ***hawiyyeh*** in hand.

Captain Yossi later returns in a 1993 entry, this time in his civilian role as a journalist for the Israeli newspaper ***Ha'aretz***, asking permission to interview Amiry for a story on the Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations. Amiry refuses the request, a gesture that demonstrates not only her own empowerment, but also the success of the occupation in closing off the possibility of uncoercive human contact between Israelis and Palestinians. Throughout the book, Amiry's claim that the occupation encompasses both "lives and souls" finds support in vignette after vignette. The overwhelming impression one gets is of an occupation that is objectionable not only for macropolitical reasons, but also because it makes a "normal" life impossible for individuals and distorts

the relationships they have with others. This perversion of the personal by the political is Amiry's primary message, whether she is discussing weeks and months spent apart from her husband ("What business does a military governor have to interfere in one's love affair?"), frustrating days endured under curfew with her mother-in-law, or her relationship with a young neighbor who is manipulated into working as a collaborator with the occupation.

To her credit, Amiry does not attempt to impose an artificial sense of order onto the events she is narrating. While some readers will undoubtedly view this as a shortcoming--the author's failure to sustain a coherent "story" amidst the chaos--it is nonetheless an accurate reflection of the frenzied, often anarchic nature of the way such events are experienced in everyday life.

Despite the book's episodic form, Amiry still manages to open up a series of interesting issues related to the overlapping structures of identity that shape the lives of Palestinians. These include structures of age, gender, and class, but also a range of legal and administrative categories that govern the ability (and inability) of individuals to move within and across particular spaces. With this matrix of identity out in the open, the reader is forced to recognize the specificity of Amiry's own life; it becomes impossible to speak confidently about a single "Palestinian experience."

Perhaps the greatest strength of *Sharon and My Mother-in-Law*, however, lies in its powerful economy of language. Through the briefest of stories, Amiry manages to evoke a range of intense emotional responses, from shock and anger to laughter and deep sadness. For this reason, the book would make a valuable addition not only to courses on contemporary Palestinian society, but also to other courses (e.g., in literature, history, or gender studies) that focus on narrative analysis and the production of identities through memory and storytelling.

Readers and teachers looking for a book that provides the deep historical and political context for recent events in Palestine will need to look elsewhere, for this is not Amiry's purpose. Given the nature of the diary form, this choice is entirely appropriate; for the narrator, after all, these things are taken for granted and don't need detailed explanation. In this sense, the book would be most effective in the classroom if used in conjunction with other texts that explain the major aspects of the conflict, thus allowing the beauty and power of Amiry's narrative to shine through in all its fullness.

Notes

[1]. Noteworthy examples of this "eyewitness" genre from the two intifadas include Dick Doughty, *Gaza: Legacy of Occupation: A Photographer's Journey* (Bloomfield: Kumarian Press, 1995); Janet Varner Gunn, *Second Life: A West Bank Memoir* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995); Muna Hamzeh, *Refugees In Our Own Land: Chronicles From a Palestinian Refugee Camp in Bethlehem* (London: Pluto Press, 2001); Josie Sandercock et al., eds., *Peace Under Fire: Israel, Palestine, and the International Solidarity Movement* (London: Verso, 2004); Raja Shehadeh, *The Sealed Room* (London: Quartet Books, 1992); and Nancy Stohlman and Laurieann Aladin, eds., *Live From Palestine: International and Palestinian Direction Action Against the Israeli Occupation* (Boston: South End Press, 2003).

[2]. Jean Said Makdisi, *Beirut Fragments: A War Memoir* (New York: Persea Books, 1990).

[3] See Sharif Kanaana, "Humor of the Palestinian Intifada," *Journal of Folklore Research* 27 (1990): pp. 231-240; and Kanaana, "The Role of Women in Intifada Legends," in *Discourse and Palestine: Power, Text and Context*, ed. Annelies Moors et al. (Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 1995), pp. 153-161.

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Citation: John Collins. Review of Amiry, Suad. ***Sharon and My Mother-in-Law: Ramallah Diaries.*** H-Gender-MidEast, H-Net Reviews. June, 2005.

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